

VANCOUVER CONSTRUCTION NETWORK

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# Before You Start

What to know before starting a renovation project

4 Expert Answers from Construction Brain

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# Table of Contents

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1. What environmental hazards should I test for before renovating a home built before 1990?  
.....
2. What should I know before adding a second storey to my Vancouver bungalow?  
.....
3. What should I know before buying a fixer-upper in Vancouver?  
.....
4. What should I know before replacing kitchen plumbing in an older home?  
.....

## What environmental hazards should I test for before renovating a home built before 1990?

**Homes built before 1990 in Metro Vancouver may contain several serious environmental hazards that require professional testing before any renovation work begins.** The most critical concerns are asbestos and lead, both of which were commonly used in construction materials until the late 1980s and can pose significant health risks if disturbed improperly.

**Asbestos** is the most dangerous hazard you'll likely encounter. Before 1990, asbestos was widely used in insulation, drywall compounds, vinyl flooring, ceiling tiles, and exterior siding. In Vancouver's older homes, you'll commonly find it in popcorn ceilings (textured ceilings from the 1960s-80s), vermiculite insulation in attics, and linoleum flooring. Disturbing asbestos-containing materials releases microscopic fibers that cause mesothelioma and lung cancer. Professional asbestos testing costs \$300-600 per sample, but it's essential before any demolition or renovation work.

**Lead paint** was standard in homes built before 1978, but continued to be used sporadically into the 1980s. Lead is particularly dangerous for children and pregnant women, causing developmental delays and neurological damage. You'll find lead paint on interior walls, trim, windows, and exterior siding. Professional lead testing runs \$200-400 per room, and if lead is present, special containment and removal procedures are required under WorkSafeBC regulations.

**Other hazards to test for** include vermiculite insulation (which often contains asbestos), old electrical systems with cloth-wrapped wiring, and in some cases, radon gas. Vancouver's older homes may also have galvanized plumbing that could contain lead solder, and oil tanks buried in yards (common in East Vancouver and Burnaby homes from the 1940s-70s).

**BC regulations are strict** about hazardous material handling. Under WorkSafeBC requirements, any contractor working with asbestos must be certified, and homeowners cannot legally remove asbestos themselves. Lead paint removal also requires certified contractors using proper containment methods. The BC Building Code requires disclosure of known hazardous materials during permit applications.

**Professional testing is mandatory** - never assume materials are safe based on age or appearance. Hire certified environmental consultants who follow WorkSafeBC protocols. Testing typically costs \$800-1,500 for a comprehensive assessment, but this prevents potential health risks and costly remediation delays mid-project. Many Vancouver-area contractors won't begin work without current hazmat reports for pre-1990 homes.

**Next steps:** Schedule professional environmental testing before any demolition, and budget an additional 15-25% for potential hazardous material abatement. This upfront investment protects your family's health and ensures your

renovation proceeds safely and legally.

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Q2

## What should I know before adding a second storey to my Vancouver bungalow?

**Adding a second storey to your Vancouver bungalow is a major structural renovation that requires careful planning, significant investment, and compliance with multiple regulations.** You'll need a structural engineer, architect, and Licensed Residential Builder, plus permits that can take 4-6 months to obtain in Vancouver.

### Structural and Foundation Considerations

Your existing foundation and structure must be evaluated by a structural engineer to determine if they can support the additional load. Many Vancouver bungalows built before 1980 have shallow foundations or unreinforced concrete that may need upgrading. Under BCBC 2024's updated seismic requirements (effective March 10, 2025), you'll likely need significant structural reinforcement including proper bracing to resist lateral loads from wind and earthquakes. Vancouver sits in a high seismic zone, making this particularly important.

The foundation may need underpinning or complete replacement, which can add \$50,000-\$150,000 to your project. If your home has a crawl space, converting to a full basement during the addition often makes financial sense. You'll also need to verify that your lot coverage and height restrictions allow for the addition — Vancouver's zoning bylaws limit building height and require setbacks from property lines.

### Regulatory Requirements and Permits

This project requires a full building permit from the City of Vancouver (604-873-7000 or [vancouver.ca](http://vancouver.ca)). You'll need architectural drawings, structural engineering plans, and compliance with BCBC 2024, including the new Energy Step Code requirements (currently Step 3, moving to Step 5 by 2032). The permit process typically takes 4-6 months and costs \$15,000-\$30,000 depending on project size.

Since you're substantially altering the structure, you must use a Licensed Residential Builder registered with BC Housing, and the work will be covered by 2-5-10 home warranty insurance. All electrical work must be done by a TSBC-licensed electrician, plumbing by a licensed plumber, and gas work by a TSBC-licensed gas contractor. Each trade requires separate inspections.

### Costs and Timeline

**Budget \$200-\$400 per square foot** for a quality second-storey addition in Vancouver — significantly higher than the national average due to local construction costs, seismic requirements, and permit complexity. A typical 800-

square-foot addition ranges from \$160,000-\$320,000, not including foundation work, temporary housing, or cost overruns.

Total project timeline is typically 12-18 months from design to completion. You'll likely need temporary accommodation for 3-6 months during construction, especially when the roof is removed. Factor this into your budget — rental costs in Vancouver can easily add \$3,000-\$5,000 monthly.

### **Key Planning Steps**

Start with a structural assessment and architectural consultation to determine feasibility. Consider whether you want to stay in the home during construction (usually not possible) and explore financing options early — construction loans have different requirements than traditional mortgages. Review your property's zoning, heritage designation status, and any view protection covenants that might restrict height.

### **Professional Team Assembly**

You'll need an architect for design and permit drawings, a structural engineer for foundation and framing analysis, and a Licensed Residential Builder for construction. Get multiple quotes and verify all licensing through BC Housing and Technical Safety BC. This is not a DIY project — the structural, electrical, and permit requirements make professional expertise essential for safety and legal compliance.

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### **Find a General Contractors Contractor**

Vancouver Construction Network connects you with experienced contractors in the directory:

- [Theraluxe Home Wellness ?](#)
- [Luciuk Driveway Sealing ?](#)
- [Vancouver Closets®? Ltd. ?](#)

[Browse all contractors ?](#)

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**Q3**

### **What should I know before buying a fixer-upper in Vancouver?**

Buying a fixer-upper in Vancouver requires careful financial planning and realistic timelines — renovation costs here are 15-25% above national averages, and permits can take 4-8 weeks minimum. Before you fall in love with that character home's potential, understand what you're truly getting into.

## Financial Reality Check

Vancouver's renovation costs will shock newcomers. A basic kitchen renovation starts around \$30,000 and easily reaches \$60,000-\$100,000 for quality finishes. Bathroom renovations run \$18,000-\$60,000 depending on size and scope. If you're looking at a 1920s Craftsman bungalow in Kitsilano or a Vancouver Special in East Van, budget significantly more than your initial estimates.

Get a pre-purchase inspection from a qualified home inspector, but also bring in specialists for older homes. Many pre-1980 Vancouver homes have seismic vulnerabilities like unreinforced cripple walls or soft-story construction. The new **BCBC 2024** seismic requirements mean any substantial renovation may trigger upgraded bracing requirements. Foundation issues, knob-and-tube wiring, and galvanized plumbing are common in character homes and can add \$15,000-\$50,000+ to your renovation budget.

## Permit Reality in Vancouver

Vancouver's permitting process is notoriously slow and expensive. Simple permits take 4-8 weeks, while complex renovations can wait 3-6+ months for approval. Building permit fees range from \$500 for minor work to \$8,000+ for major renovations. If you're buying in a heritage area like Shaughnessy or Kitsilano, expect additional heritage review processes that can add months to your timeline.

## Strata Considerations

If you're buying a fixer-upper condo or townhouse (about 50% of Vancouver's housing stock), review the strata bylaws and depreciation report carefully. Some stratas restrict renovation hours to weekdays only, require damage deposits up to \$2,000, and mandate \$2M+ contractor insurance. Check for upcoming special levies — a new roof or plumbing replacement can cost \$10,000-\$50,000+ per unit.

## Vancouver-Specific Challenges

Moisture management is critical in Vancouver's 1200mm+ annual rainfall climate. Many older homes have inadequate vapor barriers, poor drainage, or failing building envelopes. Budget for proper rain screen assemblies and waterproofing — this isn't optional in our climate.

Many East Vancouver and Burnaby neighborhoods still have combined sewers that municipalities are requiring homeowners to separate during major renovations. This "hidden" cost can add \$5,000-\$15,000 to your project budget.

## Realistic Timeline Planning

Plan renovations around Vancouver's weather. Exterior work is best done May through September. Interior renovations can happen year-round, but material delivery and contractor availability fluctuates seasonally. Book

HVAC installations (especially heat pumps) in spring before summer demand peaks.

#### Professional Guidance

For any electrical, gas, or plumbing work, you'll need licensed contractors inspected by **Technical Safety BC** — not a DIY situation. **Structural changes** require engineered drawings and building permits. Even "simple" projects like adding a bathroom or finishing a basement require permits and professional trades.

Before making an offer, get rough renovation quotes from 2-3 contractors to reality-check your budget. Factor in 20-30% contingency for surprises — they're guaranteed in older Vancouver homes.

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### Find a General Contractors Contractor

Vancouver Construction Network connects you with experienced contractors in the directory:

- [Awnings West ?](#)
- [Yu+ME Design ?](#)
- [Ideal Sundecks Ltd. ?](#)

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## What should I know before replacing kitchen plumbing in an older home?

Replacing kitchen plumbing in an older Metro Vancouver home requires careful planning around outdated systems, permit requirements, and potential code upgrades. Most homes built before 1980 will have galvanized steel or cast iron pipes that need complete replacement, not just repairs.

### Understanding Your Existing System

Older Vancouver homes typically have galvanized steel supply lines and cast iron drain lines that are likely corroded after 40+ years. Vancouver Specials (1965-1985) and character homes in Kitsilano or Commercial Drive often have original plumbing that's reached end-of-life. When you open walls for kitchen work, you'll frequently discover leaking joints, reduced water pressure from mineral buildup, and drain lines with root intrusion or bellied sections.

The biggest surprise for homeowners is discovering that a "simple" kitchen renovation triggers much larger plumbing upgrades. Once you're into the walls, it often makes financial sense to repipe the entire house rather than patching old systems. In Metro Vancouver's market, expect \$8,000-\$15,000 for whole-house repiping versus \$3,000-\$6,000 for kitchen-only work.

### Permit and Code Requirements

Any plumbing work beyond simple fixture swaps requires a licensed plumber and permits through your municipal building department. In Vancouver, call 311 or visit [vancouver.ca/home-property-development/building-permits](https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/building-permits). Surrey, Burnaby, and other municipalities have their own processes — expect 2-4 weeks for simple plumbing permits.

Under the **BC Building Code (BCBC 2024)**, your new plumbing must meet current standards even in older homes. This means proper venting, appropriate pipe sizing, and seismic restraints for water heaters. If you're in a strata building, get written approval from your strata council before starting — most require proof of contractor insurance and restrict work hours to weekdays 8am-5pm.

### What to Expect During the Project

Plan for 3-7 days of kitchen downtime depending on scope. Your contractor will need to shut off water to sections of the house, which affects other fixtures. In older homes, expect some drywall repair as accessing pipes often requires opening walls. Budget an extra 20-30% for unforeseen issues — it's rare to open walls in a 50+ year old home without discovering something that needs attention.

### Professional Requirements and Safety

This is absolutely not DIY work. All plumbing rough-in must be done by a licensed plumber and inspected by your municipality. Improper installation can cause flooding, mold, or insurance claim denials. Licensed plumbers carry **WorkSafeBC** coverage and liability insurance — verify both before hiring.

Get quotes from at least three licensed plumbers who can assess your entire system, not just the kitchen.

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## Find a Kitchen Renovations Contractor

Vancouver Construction Network connects you with experienced contractors in the directory:

- Terra Siteworks LTD. ?
- A&B Tool Rentals ?
- Art in stone co ?

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