

Real Estate

# Tips for upgrading your newly built home



Builders often don't offer all the amenities buyers of newly constructed homes want. So many people opt to upgrade their new homes after buying. (Sergio Flores/Bloomberg News)

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If you've never purchased a newly built home, it may surprise you to learn that buyers sometimes begin improvement projects as soon as they move in.

While custom home purchasers typically make all the decisions and upgrades they want before their home is complete, many buyers of homes in new communities have more limited options or available upgrades. Other homeowners may not realize what they want until after they move into their new residence.

We asked two interior designers with recent experience updating newly built homes to share their insights into the process. Tracy Morris of [Tracy Morris Design](#) in McLean, Va., and Melissa Sanabria, owner of [Sanabria & Co.](#) and Sanabria & Co. The Shop in D.C., both responded via email.

Please describe the update you did to a recent new build.

**Morris:** We updated our primary bathroom in our newly built home shortly after we bought it. The main reason we decided to do a bit of a main bathroom upgrade in our new home was because of the lack of storage. The vanities that were installed looked great but were just open boxes; they didn't have any drawers. For as many bath products as I own, I needed space to stash all my items. That was when I called Lobkovich Kitchen Design to help me rethink the space.

**Sanabria:** The third floor of the new build we worked on served as our client’s private family space, so their toddler’s room is on the third level as well. There was a small transition room between the family room and primary bedroom that opened to the stairwell, which got lots of natural light. But the opening overlooking the stairs was a half wall that was very low and dangerous — easy for a toddler to climb over.

The first order of business was to raise the height of the wall to make it safer for their young family. To add visual interest, we installed four-inch v-groove paneling up to the top of the new wall and carried the paneling around the room. We painted it in Farrow & Ball “Pigeon” to make the room feel cozy. We selected a vintage Italian brass mirror for above the vanity to add some patina.

Should you talk to the builder beforehand if you think you’ll make changes to your new home so the space is prepped for customization?

**Morris:** When working with a builder, it is best to catch the items you know you want to change beforehand. Since our house was a spec house, I was not able to correct this item. (A spec house refers to a house designed and built by a developer without a specific buyer in mind.)

**Sanabria:** In this case, where we updated the third floor of a new build, the builder was not open to making any changes prior to delivering the project. So we had to work with the selections already made. It is a good idea in general, though, to talk to the builder beforehand if possible.

What are the pros and cons of updating a new build before or after moving in?

**Morris:** If you update the home before moving in, all the construction mess is finished by the time you move in. If you do the update after moving in, you have to deal with the construction while living there. However, completing the work after you move in allows you to live in the space and assess exactly what is needed.

**Sanabria:** One of the benefits of doing the upgrade after move-in is that the family had a chance to live in the space and see what they really needed in terms of functionality. We were able to customize the space to suit their needs specifically. The downside is that because we did add some architectural details and electrical items, the work was disruptive. If you buy a new build, the hope is that it’s turnkey and folks usually don’t want to deal with even small renovations and for good reason.

How much does upgrading a new build cost? Whom do you hire to do the upgrades?

**Morris:** This bathroom update cost us between \$10,000 and \$15,000, including the light fixtures, mirrors and cabinets. This has a huge range depending on what type of work and the size of your space. I always like to work with the original builder of the house if possible. In this case, Artisan Builders in McLean built the house and made our update super easy.

**Sanabria:** We hired both a general contractor and a carpenter for this third-floor new build update. The scope required building a wall on the stairwell three stories up with scaffolding and overall was very tricky. We also added v-groove paneling and electrical details, such as sconces and extra outlets for his-and-her charging stations. A carpenter made the custom white-oak desk and vanity and matching trim around the paneling.

[Sanabria did not provide information about costs.]

Is updating a newly built home a common practice or the first time you’ve done this?

**Morris:** This is common practice with a spec house. Even if the home is new, that doesn’t mean you are going to have everything you need in each space. There may be some assembly or updates required.

**Sanabria:** We don’t often get to enhance new builds, but we are starting to do more and more of this work. On this project, for example, we are now working on the downstairs to make it feel cozier and less “builder grade.”