

RENOVATE SMART

The Dubai Homeowner's Guide to Getting It Right

Everything a developer knows — now available to you.

A Free Guide by Aule Renovation Consultancy
A Solomon & Co. Venture · Dubai, UAE · aule.ae

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Before You Begin

Most Dubai renovations don't fail because of bad taste. They fail because of avoidable decisions made at the wrong time, with the wrong people, without the right knowledge.

This guide exists to close that gap. Whether you have just received the keys to a shell-and-core apartment, or you are planning to transform a property you have owned for years, the Dubai renovation market has its own rules, its own rhythms, and its own risks. Understanding them before you begin is the difference between a project you are proud of and one you are still paying for.

What you will not find here is generic advice recycled from a Western renovation handbook. This guide is written specifically for Dubai — its contractors, its sourcing landscape, its building regulations, and the particular challenges that come with renovating in one of the most fast-moving real estate environments in the world.

By the end of this guide you will know how to define your project with clarity, choose the right people, read a quote intelligently, manage the process without losing your mind, and make decisions that hold their value long after the last tile is laid.

A N O T E O N P E R S P E C T I V E

This guide is written from the viewpoint of an independent consultant — someone with no contractor relationships, no supplier commissions, and no interest in upselling you anything. The goal is to give you the same knowledge an expert would apply to their own home.

CHAPTER 01

Understanding the Dubai Renovation Landscape

Before you make a single decision, you need to understand the market you are operating in. Dubai's renovation sector is unlike anywhere else — and that is not a compliment or a criticism. It is simply a fact you need to work with.

How the Market Works

The Dubai renovation ecosystem is made up of several overlapping layers: developers, main contractors, specialist subcontractors, interior design studios, fit-out firms, material suppliers, and — still relatively rare — independent consultants. Each has a different agenda, a different margin, and a different definition of quality.

Most homeowners enter this ecosystem through one of two doors: they either call a fit-out company they found on Instagram, or they hire an interior designer who then manages contractor relationships on their behalf. Both approaches can work. Both carry risks. The fit-out company has a built-in conflict of interest — their margin grows when your specification does. The interior designer may have design excellence but limited construction knowledge.

Understanding who is looking out for whom is the first and most important thing a homeowner can do.

The Shell and Core Reality

A significant portion of Dubai's renovation pipeline is driven by developer handovers. Many properties — particularly apartments in newer developments — are delivered in a shell-and-core or semi-finished state. This means the structure is complete, the major MEP infrastructure is roughed in, and the finishes are either absent or of a basic developer-grade standard.

This creates an enormous renovation opportunity — and an enormous trap for the unprepared. Homeowners receive a unit that looks close to finished but requires significant investment to become liveable at the standard they expect.

COMMON MISCONCEPTION

Many buyers assume that 'semi-finished' means only cosmetic work is needed. In reality, semi-finished units often require a full fit-out of kitchens, bathrooms, flooring, lighting, and joinery — all of which add up quickly.

The Players — and Who They Represent

The Developer

Delivers the structure. Their obligation ends at handover, subject to the defects liability period. After that, you are on your own.

The Fit-Out Contractor

Executes the physical work. Their incentive is to win the job, deliver within their cost base, and move on. Quality varies enormously — the same company can produce excellent and poor work depending on site supervision.

The Interior Designer

Defines the aesthetic. Strong designers bring vision and material knowledge. The best ones understand construction; many do not — and some earn commissions on the materials they specify.

The Independent Consultant

Represents you. Has no financial relationship with the contractor or supplier. Charges a fixed fee for impartial advice. This role is underutilised in the residential Dubai market — which is precisely why this guide exists.

Before You Begin

The decisions made before a single contractor sets foot on your property will determine the success of your renovation more than anything that happens afterwards.

Define Your Brief — Properly

A brief is not a Pinterest board. It is a document that answers the following questions with specificity: What spaces are being renovated? What is the function of each space after renovation? What is the quality level you are targeting? What is non-negotiable, and what is aspirational? What is your timeline?

Without a proper brief, you will receive quotes that are incomparable, contractors who interpret things their own way, and a project that drifts in scope — always upward in cost, rarely downward.

THE BRIEF CHECKLIST

Room-by-room scope · Quality benchmark with reference projects · Must-haves vs. nice-to-haves · Budget range (honest) · Move-in deadline · Building management restrictions

Budget Reality in Dubai

The single most common source of renovation distress in Dubai is the gap between what homeowners expect to spend and what a quality renovation actually costs. As a general orientation for 2024–2025:

- Basic cosmetic renovation (paint, flooring, minor fixtures): AED 300 – 600 per sqft
- Mid-market full fit-out: AED 700 – 1,100 per sqft
- High-end finishes with bespoke joinery: AED 1,500+ per sqft

These are orientation figures, not quotes. Every project is different. But if a contractor is quoting you significantly below these ranges, ask why — because the answer will matter.

The 15% Contingency Rule

Every renovation budget should include a contingency of at least 15% for variations, unforeseen conditions, and the decisions you will inevitably change your mind about. This is not pessimism. It is professional practice.

⚠ WATCH OUT FOR THIS

If a contractor promises you a completion date that sounds too fast, or a price that sounds too low — treat it as a red flag, not a benefit. Speed and price that seem impossible usually are.

Timeline Realities

Dubai renovation timelines are routinely underestimated by both homeowners and contractors. A standard apartment fit-out of 100–150 sqm should be planned over 10–14 weeks minimum. Larger villas or bespoke projects routinely run 4–6 months. Factors that extend timelines include material lead times, building NOC approvals, and coordination between specialist trades.

When Do You Need a Consultant?

You need independent consultancy advice if: your renovation budget exceeds AED 200,000; you have never managed a renovation in Dubai before; you are based outside Dubai and cannot be on-site regularly; you are undertaking structural or major MEP changes; or you simply want an expert who has no interest in your project other than your success.

Reading Your Space

Your property has constraints you may not be aware of — and possibilities your contractor may not tell you about. Understanding your space before you design it is foundational.

Structural vs. Cosmetic Changes

The most important distinction a homeowner can make is between cosmetic work — finishes, fixtures, paint, flooring — and structural work, which involves walls, slabs, columns, or beams. Cosmetic work is largely reversible and rarely requires regulatory approval. Structural work requires engineering input, building management approval, and sometimes Dubai Municipality permits.

The danger zone is the grey area: non-structural partition walls, bathroom wet areas, kitchen layout changes. These interact with MEP systems in ways that need to be managed correctly.

ASK BEFORE YOU DEMOLISH

Before agreeing to any demolition, ask your contractor to confirm what is behind every wall being opened. A simple sounding test and a basic as-built drawing review can save thousands in remedial costs.

MEP Basics Every Homeowner Should Know

Mechanical — AC and Ventilation

Dubai's climate makes AC non-negotiable. Understand your AC system type — central chiller (common in apartments), split units, or VRF systems. Layout changes that affect AC distribution can require re-engineering. Always confirm AC zoning aligns with your new layout before finalising the design.

Electrical

Check your distribution board capacity before adding circuits. Kitchen appliances, home automation, and high-wattage lighting all draw power. Overloaded boards are a safety risk. Always use a licensed electrician registered with DEWA.

Plumbing

Wet areas are governed by fall gradients that cannot be changed without structural intervention. Moving a toilet or shower significantly from its existing location is far more complex than moving it slightly. Understand your wet area boundaries before designing.

Common Layout Mistakes

- Opening up a living space without adequate AC provision for the larger volume
- Relocating a kitchen without budgeting for the MEP re-routing
- Installing flooring without waterproofing membranes in wet areas — a defect that only reveals itself years later
- Over-specifying storage in small rooms at the expense of natural light and circulation

Choosing the Right People

The single greatest predictor of renovation success is not your budget, your design, or your timeline. It is the quality of the people you choose to execute the work.

Contractor Vetting — The Red Flags Most Homeowners Miss

A polished website and a portfolio of beautiful photography tell you almost nothing about a contractor's operational quality. What matters is the gap between what they promise and what they deliver — and that gap is only visible through the right questions and verified references.

Questions to ask every contractor

1. Can you provide three references from projects completed in the last 12 months — and may I speak with them directly?
2. Who will be the site supervisor for my project, and how many other projects will they manage simultaneously?
3. What is your subcontractor relationship for tiling, electrical, and plumbing — employed or outsourced?
4. How do you handle variations to the agreed scope?
5. What is your defects liability process after handover?

Red flags — walk away if you see these

- Reluctance to provide verifiable references
- A quote significantly lower than all others without clear explanation
- Vague answers about site supervision or who will actually be on site
- Pressure to sign quickly or pay a large upfront deposit before contract signing
- No written contract offered — or a contract that is one or two pages

How to Read a Quote — and Spot the Markups

A professional renovation quote should be itemised by trade and by line item. A quote that arrives as a single lump sum is not a quote — it is a number. And it tells you nothing.

THE BOQ PRINCIPLE

Ask for a Bill of Quantities (BOQ) from every contractor. This document lists every item of work with its quantity, unit, unit rate, and total. Without it, you cannot compare quotes meaningfully, and you have no basis for managing variations during the project.

The Difference Between Key Professionals

Interior Designer

Focuses on aesthetics, space planning, material selection, and furniture specification. The best ones have strong construction knowledge. Their fee is typically a percentage of project value or a fixed design fee — sometimes with supplier commissions built in.

Fit-Out Contractor

Executes the physical construction work. May offer basic design services as part of a design-and-build package. Their primary expertise is construction execution, not design.

Renovation Consultant

An independent advisor who represents the homeowner's interests. Reviews briefs, validates quotes, oversees contractor performance, and guides decisions without any financial stake in the outcome.

Getting Three Quotes — and Knowing Which to Trust

The purpose of three quotes is not to find the cheapest price. It is to establish a market rate and understand why prices differ. If two quotes cluster around a similar figure and the third is 30% lower, the question is not 'should I take the cheap one?' The question is: what has the cheap one excluded?

The most expensive quote is not automatically the best either. Premium pricing requires premium justification — ask for it in writing.

Materials, Finishes and Sourcing in Dubai

Dubai is simultaneously one of the most well-supplied and most overpriced materials markets in the world. Knowing where to buy, and what to pay, saves thousands.

Where Dubai Homeowners Overpay

- Contractor-supplied materials — markups of 15–30% on cost are common and often invisible
- Furniture and soft furnishings sourced through designers on commission
- Imported stone and tiles where local sourcing alternatives exist
- Bespoke joinery that could be specified differently without aesthetic compromise

Where to Source in Dubai

Al Quoz Industrial Area

The backbone of Dubai's renovation supply chain. Tile suppliers, stone yards, joinery workshops, hardware stores, sanitary ware showrooms — virtually every trade has a presence here. Prices are significantly lower than retail showrooms for comparable products.

Dragon Mart

An enormous Chinese goods market with extensive building materials, tiles, fittings, and fixtures. Quality varies widely. Useful for value-engineering decisions where the specification is flexible. Not appropriate for premium projects.

Design District (d3) and Sheikh Zayed Road Showrooms

The premium end of the sourcing spectrum. International brands, high-end Italian and Spanish tile suppliers, luxury sanitary ware. Prices reflect the positioning. Appropriate when the finish level justifies it.

Direct Import

For specific, well-specified items, direct import from suppliers in Italy, Spain, Turkey, or India can offer significant value — particularly for large quantities of stone or tiles. Lead times must be factored into the project programme.

The Finish Hierarchy — Where to Invest, Where to Save

Invest here

- Bathroom wet area waterproofing — invisible but critical, expensive to fix if skipped
- Kitchen worktops — high use, high visibility, expensive to replace
- Primary flooring — the largest visual surface in any space
- Main bathroom fixtures — daily use, long replacement cycle

Save here

- Secondary bathroom fixtures in low-use spaces
- Internal doors and hardware — mid-range products have excellent quality today
- Paint — professional application matters more than premium brand
- Light fittings in low-prominence areas

Managing the Project

A renovation without proper project management is not a project — it is an ongoing negotiation with an uncertain outcome.

Contract Essentials — What Must Be in Writing

No verbal agreement has any value in a renovation dispute. Everything must be in writing, signed by both parties, before work begins. A proper renovation contract should include at minimum:

- Full scope of works, referenced to the BOQ or specification document
- Agreed contract sum and breakdown by trade
- Payment schedule tied to milestone completion — not time
- Variation procedure — how changes are instructed, priced, and approved in writing
- Completion date and delay penalty clause
- Defects liability period — typically 12 months after practical completion
- Material specification and agreed substitution process

⚠ WATCH OUT FOR THIS

Never make a payment without a signed variation order for any work outside the original scope. Verbal agreements for additional work are the primary source of end-of-project disputes in the Dubai renovation market.

Payment Schedules and Why They Matter

Your payment schedule is your primary lever of control. A professional contractor does not need large upfront payments. A contractor who demands 50% or more upfront is either poorly capitalised or poorly motivated to finish.

A reasonable payment structure: 10–15% mobilisation deposit on contract signing; progress payments of 20–25% tied to defined milestones; and a retention of 5–10% held for 4–6 weeks after practical completion, released upon satisfactory snagging.

Handling Delays and Variations

Delays

Establish from the outset that delays require written notification with a reason and a revised programme. If delays are contractor-caused, your contract should provide for compensation. If caused by your own changes or materials you sourced, accept the timeline extension without penalty.

Variations

Every change to the agreed scope — however small — must be captured in a written variation order that states the change, its cost, and its timeline impact before the work is executed. A backlog of uninstructed variations is the most common cause of end-of-project disputes.

Snagging — What It Is and Why It Matters

Snagging is the process of systematically identifying and documenting defects and incomplete items at the end of a project, before final payment is released. A thorough snagging exercise covers:

- All painted surfaces for uniformity and finish quality
- All tiled surfaces for lippage, grout consistency, and alignment
- All joinery for fit, finish, and hardware function
- All sanitary ware and fixtures for correct installation and leak-free operation
- All electrical outlets and lighting for correct function
- All AC outlets for air distribution and thermostat calibration

The snagging list is presented to the contractor in writing. A reasonable rectification period of 2–3 weeks is standard. Final payment is released only upon satisfactory completion of all snagging items.

Case Studies

The following case studies are drawn from composite real-world scenarios in the Dubai market. The decisions, the numbers, and the outcomes reflect genuine patterns.

CASE STUDY

AED 162,000 Saved Before a Wall Was Touched

Business Bay · 1,400 sqft Apartment · Full Fit-Out

The Situation

A couple purchased a 1,400 sqft two-bedroom apartment in Business Bay in a semi-finished state. The developer handover included basic tiling in wet areas, no kitchen, no built-in joinery, and a basic AC system. Their initial contractor quote for a full fit-out came in at AED 520,000. Feeling uncertain, they engaged a consultant before signing.

Problems Found

- The kitchen included a markup of AED 45,000 over a direct-from-supplier price for the same specification
- The AC design proposed a single-zone lounge without proper provision for the open-plan dining area — a layout flaw requiring costly remedial work
- The stone specification included imported Italian marble quoted at 40% above locally available equivalent
- The electrical scope did not include smart home pre-wiring — a variation costing 30% more mid-project

The Approach

The consultant re-tendered the project with a proper BOQ, a corrected AC design, a locally-sourced stone specification, and pre-wiring scope added to the contract. Three contractors quoted against this revised scope.

The Outcome

ITEM	AMOUNT (AED)
Original contractor quote	520,000
Final project cost	340,000
Aule advisory fee	18,000
Net saving to client	162,000

The project was completed at AED 340,000 — AED 162,000 below the original quote — at a higher specification than originally proposed. The consultant fee was AED 18,000. The renovation was delivered at a better standard, for less money, with proper documentation throughout.

CASE STUDY

What Happens When Cheap Goes Wrong

Arabian Ranches Villa · Three Bathrooms + Kitchen

The Situation

A family engaged a contractor recommended by a neighbour for a bathroom and kitchen renovation. The price was AED 95,000 for three bathrooms and a kitchen — significantly below other quotes they had received. They signed without a detailed BOQ and paid 50% upfront.

Problems Found

- No waterproofing membrane was installed in the shower areas — discovered when water began appearing in the ceiling of the unit below 18 months later
- The kitchen worktop was a low-grade laminate presented as engineered stone
- Grout in two bathrooms began cracking within six months due to incorrect adhesive for large-format tiles
- The contractor had disappeared by the time the defects appeared — no defects liability clause in the contract

The Outcome

ITEM	AMOUNT (AED)
Original contract price	95,000
Remedial works cost	68,000

Total cost	163,000
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The original saving was an illusion. The true cost of having no expert, no proper contract, and no protection was AED 68,000 in remedial works — plus 18 months of stress, a damaged relationship with the neighbour below, and a project that had to be largely redone.

A low price without a proper contract is not a saving. It is a deferred cost.

CASE STUDY

Doing It Right From Day One

Downtown Dubai Penthouse · Full Renovation

The Situation

A professional purchased a penthouse in Downtown Dubai with a significant renovation budget and high design aspirations. Rather than going directly to a contractor or interior design studio, she began by engaging an independent consultant to help her build the brief, select the right design partner, and structure the procurement correctly.

What the Consultant Found

- Several interior design studios approached had commission relationships with specific suppliers — conflicting with the client's interest in open-market sourcing
- The initial design concept from one studio was beautiful but technically unbuildable within the structural constraints of the building
- The quoted timeline of 12 weeks from the preferred contractor was unrealistic given material lead times — a planning error that would have caused significant delay

The Approach

The consultant helped the client select a design studio with demonstrated construction knowledge and no exclusive supplier relationships. The procurement was structured as a managed open-book contract, giving the client full visibility of material and labour costs. The timeline was set at 22 weeks with float built in for material delivery.

The Outcome

The project was delivered in 20 weeks — two weeks ahead of the revised programme — at a total cost of AED 1.1 million. Post-project, the client noted that the consultant fee of AED 35,000 was the best money spent on the entire project. Not because it saved the most money — but because it gave her confidence in every decision she made throughout.

C O N C L U S I O N

The Renovation Mindset

A successful renovation is not an accident. It is the result of clear thinking, informed decisions, the right people, and a structured process — applied consistently from the brief to the snagging list.

The homeowners who navigate Dubai's renovation market well share a common trait: they treat the process as a project, not an event. They define what they want before they ask anyone to price it. They compare quotes on a like-for-like basis. They get everything in writing. They manage payments as a control mechanism. And they know when to ask for expert help — before the problems arise, not after.

This guide is a starting point, not a complete answer. Every project is different. Every property has its own constraints and possibilities. But the principles here apply across every renovation in Dubai — from a single bathroom refresh to a full villa transformation.

What Aule Offers

If you found this guide useful and you are preparing for a renovation — or if you are already mid-project and feeling uncertain — Aule is here to help. We offer:

- Property Condition Assessment — AED 1,500 to 5,000
- Feasibility Study + Cost Benchmark — AED 3,000 to 12,000
- Tender Management — AED 5,000 to 15,000
- Project Management / Owner Representation — AED 10,000 to 50,000+
- Hourly Advisory — AED 500 to 1,500 per hour

No commissions. No contractor relationships. No agenda except your best outcome.

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