Key Steps in Planning a Bathroom Renovation from Start to Finish

Planning a bathroom renovation from demolition to tiling

Bathroom renovations can feel overwhelming when you consider everything that must happen in a small, often windowless space. Water, drainage, electrical work, tiling, and ventilation all have to come together without leaks or delays. The key is to plan the sequence carefully before anyone picks up a tool. This article walks through the main stages of a typical bathroom renovation, from the first demolition swing to the final tiling row, and highlights what to watch at each step.

Step 1: Demolition and stripping out

Demolition is the fastest part of a bathroom renovation, but it also sets the tone for everything that follows. The goal is to remove old fixtures, tiles, and sometimes wall or floor finishes, while leaving the underlying structure intact. Protect any adjoining rooms with dust barriers, and cap off plumbing and electrical connections safely before starting. Check whether old waterproofing membranes have failed, and note any areas where moisture has penetrated the substrate. This is the moment to decide if you need to replace the entire wallboard or just patch sections.

What to watch: Demolition debris can hide plumbing or wiring that still runs to other rooms. Mark all live services before swinging a hammer. Also, confirm that your skip hire or waste removal plan covers the volume of old tiles and rubble, because bathroom demolitions produce surprisingly heavy loads.

Step 2: Rough-in plumbing and electrical changes

Once the space is stripped, you can see the original pipe runs and electrical points. Any changes to the layout, such as moving a toilet, shower, or basin, require rerouting supply and waste pipes. This is often the most expensive and disruptive part of a bathroom renovation, so take time to get the positions right. For example, if you are installing a wall-hung vanity, the drainage must sit inside the wall, not on the floor. Similarly, a new shower enclosure may need a linear drain, which changes the floor slope and the height of the waste pipe.

Electrical work includes adding or moving lighting, extractor fans, heated towel rails, and shaver sockets. All electrical points must comply with current regulations, especially near water sources. Plan for enough lighting zones: general ceiling lights, task lighting around the mirror, and perhaps accent lighting in the shower or niche. What to watch: Check that the new

plumbing layout allows for proper fall on waste pipes. A bathroom renovation that looks good but drains slowly will cause frustration later.

Step 3: Wall and floor preparation

With the rough-in complete, the walls and floor need to be made ready for tiling. This usually means repairing any damaged plasterboard, building out stud walls for recessed fixtures, and applying a levelling compound to the floor. The substrate must be flat, clean, and stable before any waterproofing or tiling begins. If you are installing underfloor heating, this is when the heating mats or cables go in, covered by a thin self-levelling screed.

What to watch: Check that all wall surfaces are plumb and square. Out-of-plumb walls cause tile cuts to look uneven, especially in a small bathroom where every line is visible. Also, verify that the floor substrate can support the weight of the tiles and the screed. In older homes, the floor joists may need reinforcement.

Step 4: Waterproofing

Waterproofing is the single most critical stage in any bathroom renovation. Even a small leak behind tiles can lead to mould, rot, and structural damage. The waterproofing membrane is applied to the floor and to the lower sections of walls, especially around the shower area, the bath, and any wet wall where a basin or toilet will sit. Most modern systems use a liquid-applied membrane or sheet membrane, with reinforced corners and fabric tape at joints.

What to watch: Let each coat of waterproofing cure fully before applying the next. A rushed job can leave pinholes or thin spots. Also, pay attention to the transition between the floor membrane and the wall membrane. This corner detail is where leaks most often start. Once the waterproofing is tested and dry, you are ready for tiling.

Step 5: Tiling

Tiling is the finishing stage that transforms the room. It also demands the most patience. Start with the walls, working from the bottom up, and let the wall tiles set before moving to the floor. This avoids mortar or adhesive falling onto fresh floor tiles. Use tile spacers to keep joints consistent, and cut tiles carefully around pipes, niches, and corners. Large-format tiles need a notched trowel and back-buttering to achieve full coverage, especially on walls. For floors, choose tiles with a suitable slip rating for wet areas.

What to watch: Plan your tile layout before mixing any adhesive. Dry-lay a row of tiles to see how cuts fall at the edges and around the shower drain. Shift the layout slightly if it leaves a narrow tile strip at a visible wall. Also, seal natural stone tiles before grouting to prevent stains. Grout should be applied after the tiles have set for at least 24 hours.

Step 6: Installing sanitaryware and fittings

After tiling, the bathroom starts to look like a finished room. Install the shower tray or base first, then the toilet, basin, and bath. Each fixture should be levelled and sealed against the wall with a silicone bead. Connect the plumbing carefully, checking for leaks at every joint. Fit the shower enclosure, towel rails, and accessories last, because they can be scratched or knocked during the installation of heavier items.

What to watch: Do not overtighten connections on modern sanitaryware, especially if the fittings are plastic or brass. Overtightening can crack the fixture or damage the thread. Also, leave the silicone sealant to cure for the time stated on the tube before using the shower or bath.

Ventilation and moisture control

No bathroom renovation is complete without addressing ventilation. Even a well-tiled bathroom will develop mould if moisture cannot escape. Install an extractor fan that is correctly sized for the room volume and ducted to the outside. If the bathroom has no window, the fan must be wired to come on with the light or run on a humidistat timer. Consider adding a small gap under the door to allow fresh air in when the fan runs. What to watch: Check that the duct run is as short and straight as possible. Long, kinked ducts reduce fan performance and increase noise.

Common pitfalls to avoid

Bathroom renovations often go wrong because of poor sequencing. For instance, tiling the floor before the walls can lead to water sitting on the floor tiles while the walls are being worked. Another common mistake is ordering tiles before the plumbing layout is final, only to find that the tile size clashes with the position of the shower drain. Always finalise the dimensions and locations of all fixtures before ordering materials.

Budget overruns also happen when hidden problems surface during demolition. Rotting subfloors, outdated wiring, or corroded pipes can add days and costs. A thorough inspection during the strip-out phase helps you plan for these surprises. Build a contingency of around fifteen percent into your budget for unexpected structural or plumbing work.

Why professional management matters

A bathroom renovation involves multiple trades: plumbers, electricians, tilers, plasterers, and sometimes carpenters. Coordinating their schedules and ensuring each step is done in the right order is a skill in itself. Without a single person overseeing the project, delays and miscommunication are common. A professional renovation manager handles the sequence, the material orders, and the site safety, so you are not chasing subcontractors.

Rupping Construction brings this kind of coordinated approach to bathroom renovations in Cape Town, Stellenbosch and the Helderberg region. Their team manages the entire process from demolition through to final tiling, keeping the project on track and within the planned timeline. That level of oversight is especially valuable when you are renovating a bathroom that is the only one in the house, because downtime matters.

Final checks before using the bathroom

Before you declare the renovation finished, run a final test. Turn on the shower and let it run for several minutes while checking for leaks around the enclosure, the drain, and the wall joints. Flush the toilet a few times and check the connection at the cistern. Fill the basin and bath and watch the drainage speed. Look for any tiles that feel loose or have a hollow sound when tapped. Seal any gaps around the edges of the shower door or the bath panel. A careful final inspection saves you from dealing with small problems after the room is in daily use.

Rupping Construction includes this kind of thorough sign-off in their service, giving homeowners confidence that every detail has been checked. With a solid plan and the right team, a bathroom renovation can go smoothly from demolition to the last tile.