

Before you can enjoy a new kitchen, says Angela Pertusini, prepare for generous helpings of mess and misery. It is the optimism that stings the most. My blithe belief – and I really did believe it – was that it would all be over in a few short weeks. After the hell of the world's longest conveyance, surely luck has to be on my side and the builders would be in and out and I would soon have my lovely new home and lovely new kitchen? Because, of course, when you move, it goes without saying that you replace the kitchen.

Not that our kitchen needed replacing. It needed napping. Smaller than a walk-in wardrobe, it had no room for a fridge and the oven had been removed by the sellers for a combination of safety (dangerous whiff of gas) and hygiene (dangerous build-up of dirt). But there was a useful and redundant room next door which it grew into – all that was needed was a bit of demolition, a rewire, replumb, replaster, new units and appliances and, hey presto, we would have a kitchen diner.

I imagined my baby being weaned there on a selection of purees lovingly prepared on the new, five-ring hob. My baby is weaned now, mostly on a diet of toast. As for the rest of us, looking back, I think we shall call these the Pasta Months. At one point, it looked as if they might become the Pasta Years. My brother lent us his rice steamer but with no means to cook anything to accompany the rice (and an aversion to ready meals), we used it to boil water for endless pasta.

Now I am sure there are readers who could cater for visiting heads of state using a rice steamer, a kettle and a

toaster. But I was less inspired. I just cooked pasta. Occasionally, I thought about buying a camping stove but that seemed too much like giving in, admitting that the work was going to take much longer than I wanted. And this issue of the work dragging on and on is a common one. One friend claims that she was without a hob for seven years and only had an oven because her plumber rescued one from the municipal dump as an act of mercy. "It had its good points" she says stoically. "No one expected an invitation to dinner parties."

Jane Jeffrey's work to demolish the wall between her existing kitchen and dining room, and extend into the garden, began in September and, when I visited her seven months later, the basic building work had been completed, but there was still the decoration and unit-fitting to go.

"It was definitely going to be finished by December," says Jane, who has just given birth to her second child. "We were going to have a big Christmas lunch for everyone. Then it got moved to February, because I said I had to have the house back to normal and time to clear up before the baby arrived." (Nature may work to deadlines, but kitchen renovations have their own pace, and it's always too slow.)

"Then it was March," she adds wearily, "but I only got rid of the builders in April. They then had to come back a couple of weeks later to finish it off."

There is no doubt that Jane's kitchen will be fabulous. It is vast and has glazed, concertina doors filling the entire exterior wall looking out over the back garden. The floors are thick strips of oak and the units will be hand-built

walnut. It is truly a thing of beauty, almost a thing of wonder. But, at the moment, it is clearly also a thing of stress.

"It's the length of time it's taken and the upheaval," says Jane. "It's affected the whole house – shuffling things around to make room for deliveries. I naively thought that there would be a seamless transition between boilers but when the old one came out we were there without heating for 10 days – in the middle of December."

"When work was being done on the extension, I could sit on the loo and look my builders in the eye. I think the space will justify [the problems] but I can't imagine saying in another two years' time: 'Let's do another project.'"

According to Hugo Tugman, founder of Architect Your Home, such complaints are typical. "No one ever realises how long it will take or how disruptive it will be. The problem is that often people don't plan properly and it becomes a living hell," he adds cheerfully. Small domestic projects such as kitchen extensions are Tugman's bread and butter, and he is amazed how much people are prepared to spend on them without thinking them through first.

"It's often the first thing people want to do but they haven't really thought about how the room will work, how it will fit in with the flow of the other rooms." Everyone, he says, is after the large space which, ironically, given the effort it takes to create these gargantuan, multi-purpose rooms, are meant to signify a relaxed ambience and certain disregard for stuffy bourgeois entertaining. Unlike Jane –

who's husband is an architect – very few achieve the to make-your-friends-die-for finished item.

'We get called in a lot by people who rely on kitchen designers to remodel their room,' Hugo sighs. "Kitchen designers are often attached to a kitchen company and their job is to sell kitchens, not figure out how it will adapt to you."

Having a bells-and-whistles kitchen does add value. Putting in your own does personalise a house but, far from being the straightforward little number that estate agents would have us believe ("Obviously, the kitchen may not be quite to your taste but you would put in another one" is the typical throwaway line), and cliché though it is, the kitchen is the heart of the home. Don't underestimate the complications associated with a transplant. And they're not purely physical – the psychological damage can continue long after the worst physical trauma has passed.

"We've finally got a kitchen," says Natasha Brinsmead, who has been writing a monthly column on her house renovation for Move or Improve? Magazine, "but I just can't get used to it. We had a camping stove for so long that I still find myself trying to cook everything on one ring."

HUGO TUGMAN'S TIPS FOR KITCHEN RENOVATIONS

1. You don't need a huge amount of space for the kitchen part of your room – appliances shouldn't be more than a couple of steps away from each other for you to work ergonomically.

2. In order to stop your kitchen dating, choose natural materials – wood, stone etc – and give it a lift with more colourful accessories.

3. Don't think just in terms of space but how that space will be used. It may be that you don't need as much room as you thought, but it can be planned better.

4. Think through the practicalities – it is quite common to find that worktops are thrown into the shadow once someone stands at them because the lighting has been incorrectly placed. A kitchen has to have a functional as well as decorative element.

5. If it's going to be a really major renovation, move out. The builders will be able to get on much quicker and it will be far less stressful if you can leave them to it.