Kitchens continue to be among the most popular remodeling projects, in part because they yield a good return on investment.

Photos courtesy of Casa Bella Design Center

neighborhood are selling for — you don't want to make yours into the most expensive one on the block.

"There are times we'll tell people, 'Hey, this is not the house to do that in,'" says LaMantia. "Maybe the lot is not big enough, or you don't want to invest that amount. If everyone around you has a $300,000 house, you don't want to have a $600,000 house."

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Once you've decided what you want to remodel, take some time to pull your thoughts together before looking for a contractor. Many builders recommend that you start a file of magazine or catalog clippings that illustrate styles, features and materials you like. Check out decorating and home design books and photocopy your favorite ideas. Visit stores and showrooms for more inspiration.

"The more we can tune into your interests, the better the process will go, but it's also nice to have an open mind," notes McDowell. "You might be really focused on something, but a remodeler has done 10, 20 or 50 of these projects and can suggest things you may not have thought of."

To help get you started on planning your new room, draw up a list of all the things you don't like about the current room. Next, make a list of features you want the remodeled room to include, ranking them in order of importance.

Determine what you have to spend and what you can afford to borrow. Be honest with yourself and your contractor so they can help you prepare a plan that fits both your needs and your

More spacious master baths, many with spa-like amenities, have become increasingly popular.

Photos courtesy of Casa Bella Design Center

budget. "If you only have $10,000 to spend," says Kemp, "don't have them draw up a $60,000 plan."

If you're trying to figure out roughly what a project might cost, check web sites and showrooms to find out prices of the materials you wish to include, such as cabinetry, flooring and the like. You'll still need to add in the cost of labor. Keep in mind that remodeling and adding on can be more expensive than new construction because the process of integrating new elements into an old structure is more complex.

Many people have several projects they'd like to have done, but can't afford everything at once. Jack Steindl, co-owner of Hinsdale-based Normandy Builders, says it helps to let your contractor in on future plans — they may be able to adjust the design of the current project to pave the way for the next one. For example, perhaps you're building a family room addition but know you would like to top it off with an expanded master bedroom a few years down the road. For a just few hundred dollars extra, your contractor could install floor joists instead of ceiling joists, which would save you both time and money later.

SEEK OUT A SEASONED PRO

With your ideas in hand, now it's time to look for someone who can bring them to fruition. Some companies offer remodeling services but do not do design work, so you may need to work with a separate designer or architect. A newer option is a "design/build" firm that can provide you with the full spectrum of services.

Working with design/build firms can be advantageous because they know the job costs and can take that into consideration throughout the design process. You also benefit from the enhanced communication and organization that comes from the entire team working for the same company, which can make for a smoother remodeling process.

Some projects, like replacing your siding, roof or windows