

# Extreme MAKEOVER STUDIO EDITION

everything you need to know about updating  
or renovating your professional space

BY CARRIE McCULLOCH, MD

With warmer weather just around the corner, the time is ripe for rejuvenation. For some Pilates studio owners, this may translate into a reorganization of props and a purging of old client profiles. Yet for others, spring-cleaning season can spawn visions of a whole new look: fresh colors, new lights, more equipment, maybe even a new wall or two.

Done correctly, renovations—big and small—can revitalize your studio and give your business the burst of energy it needs to grow. But these projects can also cause giant headaches and produce one question after another: Do I stay open? How do I make my studio energy-efficient? and How can I afford

this? to name just a few. My husband (and business partner), Matt, and I survived a renovation of our own studio in New York City, Kinected, and we're here to share some tips on how to successfully spruce up your space.

## why bother?

There are as many reasons to renovate as there are studio owners. A new business may be looking to start off on the right foot while an existing business may need an upgrade or update to keep up with the times *and* the competition.

Almost as soon as Jenna DeRosa, owner of South Shore Pilates in Long Beach, NY, decided to move her business out of her home, she found an appealing space. "It was unique and had a lot of character," she says. But it was also long, narrow and not conducive to an efficient layout of apparatus. So her reno involved gutting (leaving its cozy brick walls) and combined with the space next door to create a workable studio.

Though the layout of the 3,700 square feet of unused office space that partners Michelle Gaudette and Christine Koenig found for their studio, Core Mind & Body in Maplewood, NJ, didn't need to be completely overhauled, the ambiance left something to be desired. "Our main goals were to make the space warm and inviting," says Gaudette. "We wanted people to

walk in the front door, take a breath and know all the drama could be left outside." So they focused their work on the overall look and vibe.

Our story: We started Kinected in 2008 by purchasing an existing Pilates studio that was housed in a large, airy Manhattan loft. After settling in for a few months, we chose to revamp the 3,000-square-foot space last spring to accommodate the look and feel of our new brand, our growing administrative staff and upgrades like dressing rooms, refinished floors and treatment rooms for wellness services.

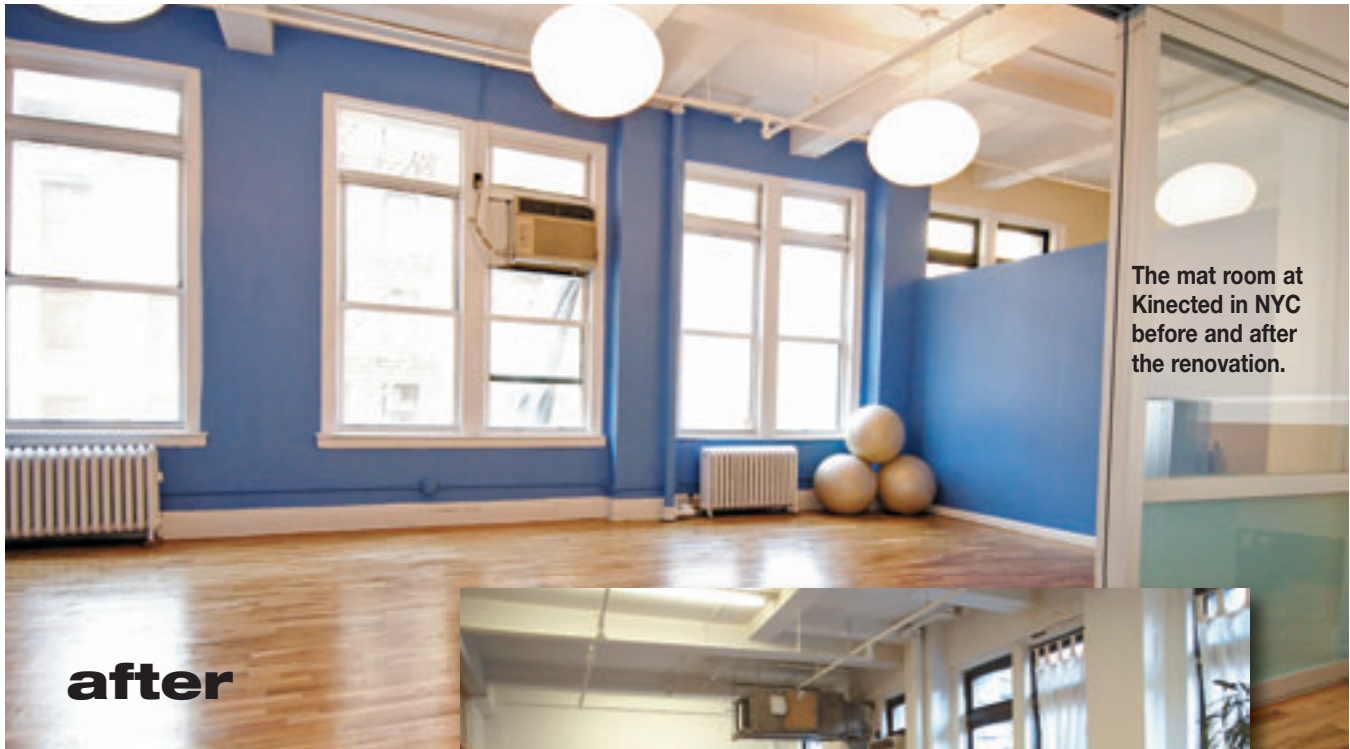
Whatever the reasons for your renovation—whether you're starting from scratch or refurbishing an urban warehouse—there are tried-and-true guidelines that will save you much grief if you know to pay attention to them.

## call in the experts

With all due respect to your inner DIY genius, here's a point well worth taking to heart: Before you start sanding drywall and painting trim, seriously consider enlisting the aid of experts who can save you time, energy and a few bucks to boot.

Prior to putting up new walls, we met with designers to solidify our vision. This up-front cost was worth every penny, as these gurus not only lent their invaluable two cents on mundane construction practices and zoning laws, but they also maximized our space





The mat room at Kinected in NYC before and after the renovation.

**after**



**before**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE LIGHT MILL STUDIOS

and its possibilities by suggesting color schemes, retail opportunities and efficient office layouts that we never would have conceived of on our own.

“If you want to create a truly stunning space, you probably won’t be able to do it alone,” says Megan Smith Ray, a freelance interior designer who helped with our renovation. “A space that is gorgeous and efficient will make clients want to come back—it can make them choose your studio over another’s.”

“It’s helpful to bring in an expert who is experienced in commercial design,” agrees John Garey, who was inspired to overhaul his three namesake studios in Southern California two years ago after a business-card redesign made him realize he needed a total update. He credits one of the best things about his renovation—the use of easy-to-change carpet tiles—to his designer: “The pros have a lot of tricks and techniques you would never think of.”

Of course, hiring expert help means a bigger investment up front, but there are ways to save (see “Design on a Dime,” next page), plus a well-conceived renovation will trim your expenses in the long run, says Smith Ray. “A designer can help business owners create the

aesthetic they’re looking for while avoiding costly mistakes.”

**bid, bid, bid!**

If you plan to use a contractor, start your research by asking friends, colleagues, clients and your building’s landlord (if you rent) for leads. Find at least three you like, explain your vision, ask them to bid on the job, and then wait for the estimates to come in. This process takes a lot of groundwork and patience, which is especially frustrating if you are champing at the bit to get building, but it’s worth the wait. The third bid was the charm for us: After almost settling for two previous offers, the best deal came in right at the end.

Another word to the wise: A recession is a great time to renovate. Though funding may be more difficult to come

by, contractors are hungry for work and are often willing to negotiate and eager to get the job done quickly.

**don’t fear the dust**

To close up shop, or not to close? This is the big question. The construction process is easier if you choose the former, but for the sake of maintaining cash flow, clientele and employees, we highly recommend keeping your doors open as much as possible.

“In this economic environment, you really can’t afford to shut down,” says Jenna DeRosa, who took off two days during her entire six-month renovation.

Construction on our studio lasted about six weeks. Owing to intensive planning and sheer willpower, we were able to keep business moving most of the time, closing only for two

## Design on a Dime

In addition to all these general guidelines, here are some specific, and easy, ways to save.

**Barter:** To afford expert help, try swapping design services for Pilates sessions. Designers tend to know the value of building a strong, yet flexible, foundation.

**Browse:** Visit other studios to find economical solutions that work. Imitation is a very cost-effective form of flattery.

**Shop at IKEA:** Well known for its affordable home furnishings, the big blue-and-yellow store offers endless ways to decorate on a budget.

**Build your own:** Have your contractor custom-build furniture such as benches and desks in just the right size for your space. Try to negotiate to have him throw in these small pieces as a bonus.

**Befriend Craig:** From affordable construction services to gently used file cabinets, *craigslist.org* is filled with bargains and is also a great place to unload furniture you want to get rid of.

## Resources

Check out these shopping ideas, websites and more.

**Contain this:** In addition to keeping closets well organized, modular shelving systems like Elfa work well for retail walls and tight office spaces. They last for years and can move with you to your next location (*containerstore.com*).

**Find the right light:** CFLs can cast vastly different lights, depending on their temperature, which is measured in Kelvins (ranging from 2,700K to 6,500K). Lower-Kelvin bulbs give off a yellow-tinted light, similar to incandescents, while higher-value bulbs cast a bluer tone, similar to daylight. Select your hue of choice at the Home Depot, which offers a useful, live display of CFLs and their effect on other colors (*homedepot.com*).

**Spin your color wheel:** Use Benjamin Moore's online Personal Color Viewer tool to see what shades work for your walls without opening a single can of paint (*benjaminmoore.com*).

**Display drama:** From wall mounts to counter-tops, Displays2go offered the widest selection of retail and literature display options we found (*displays2go.com*).

**Move your equipment, virtually:** The Balanced Body Space Planner lets you test out multiple equipment layouts (*pilates.com*).

**Get inspired:** Visit the IKEA Small Business site to see how other small-business owners make it work (*business.ikea.com*). —C.M.

weekends. If you are looking to do the same, here are helpful tips to get you through what's sure to be a hectic time:

- Impress upon your contractor (with a crazed-business-owner look in your eyes) just how important it is to keep disruptions to a minimum.
- Map out a schedule that allows you stay open for the majority of the time; weigh the cost of paying a construction crew overtime to work nights versus closing shop for a few days. If you must close, do it on weekends or holidays.
- Communicate! Tell your employees and clientele why you are staying open and what to expect.
- Be prepared for your best-laid plans to go awry. When circular saws buzz and nail guns fire during peak hours (and they will), offer complimentary sessions.
- Bring a mop. Plan to arrive early and stay late to personally help keep the dust under control.
- Stay focused. "If you have 100 clients walking through the door, you will get 100 different viewpoints on what you are doing," Garey notes. "Make sure you have a well-thought-out plan, and stick with it to the end."

## get priorities

In a way, renovating is like planning a big wedding. The best wedding planners help clients avoid overspending by setting priorities so that, for example, the bride gets her red velvet cake and the groom gets his Bon Jovi cover band. Declare all other decisions negotiable, and everyone will walk away happy.

Likewise, when renovating, realize that not all projects can be given equal weight. Focus your time, energy and funds on the two or three things that are most important to you. Give the other items on your list attention as well, just not as much of it.

For us, lighting and traffic flow were major considerations. We spent hours with a ladder and painter's tape, testing out different light fixtures and room sizes, respectively. Knowing these were priorities from the beginning helped us manage our time, budget our expenses, and prevent Matt from throwing the occasional lightbulb at me.

## first impressions

When choosing your priorities, carefully consider the entrance, which tells clients about your studio's brand in just a few seconds. "The entryway lobby and front desk, among other functional possibilities for the space, should be where your studio's brand lives," says Demian Repucci, a designer and brand consultant who also assisted with our renovation. To capture Kinected's energetic and modern feel, our designers helped us create an open, airy and streamlined entryway with minimal furniture and bright, fun colors. Some tips for big impact:

- Create a focal point (we chose a 12-foot wall, for example) in the entranceway that grounds your reception desk and gives your company's logo prime placement.
- Don't skimp on signage. This is the place to showcase the logo you spent so much time and money on. From glass and metal signs to stencils and decals, options are endless. Choose durable materials



that are consistent with your brand and placed on a well-lit wall.

- Create (and maintain) a clear path from your entrance to your front desk. If possible, situate the desk near the door—both for clients' ease and so your front-desk staff can catch clients on their way in and out.
- Plan for a seating area—even if you only have room for a stool or two—that offers views of the studio. This is a great (and cost-free) way to educate clients about the services you offer.

### lights, camera...

Proper lighting is a key item on any studio punch list. “A poorly lit place with dingy lighting can look like a dungeon, while an overlit space can be unsoothing and blind clients, especially when they're lying on a Reformer,” says Smith Ray. “Because lighting needs change throughout the day, I recommend that all lighting be controlled with a dimmer switch.” Some other enlightening rules to follow:

- To avoid the “blinding” effect, choose fixtures that either diffuse light or cast it upward toward the ceiling. We found success in lantern-style lights that distribute a warm, even glow across the space. If you use track lighting, try a tip that worked for Garey: Run the track down the middle of the room, away from equipment.
- Find easy-to-change fixtures, especially if you are afraid of heights or if your ladder isn't readily accessible.
- Choose the right compact fluorescent lightbulbs (or CFLs to the eco-fluent) for your studio.

### color therapy

A splash of color goes a long way. “It's amazing what a fresh coat of paint can do to everything from walls to furniture and window sills,” says Smith Ray. “It is probably the quickest and least-expensive way to transform a space.”

Way before you renovate, start compiling a “look book” of inspirational images clipped from magazines, catalogs or ads. This book will help your designer (or you, if you are flying solo)



understand your paint preferences. Are you a neutralist or a fan of fuchsia? Either way, make sure your preferences mesh with your brand, and be sure to test your color choices with large swatches on a wall where you can evaluate them in morning, midday and evening light.

### built-in revenue

Your renovation will likely cost a pretty penny, so why not build in ways to generate more revenue? “People sometimes overlook opportunities to develop revenue streams with retail, mostly because they are so focused on the one thing they originally sought out to do, which is to teach Pilates,” Repucci says. “But for strong brands, there are retail opportunities everywhere.”

Start with a designated retail space near your front desk or waiting area—the bigger the better. There are a hundred ways to display product, so even a lonely corner or the front of your desk can work. Consider the things you'll be selling—clothes, props, videos, this magazine, etc.—before choosing the type of display furniture (glass cabinet versus open shelving) to purchase.

Another simple way to increase your

bottom line is to create space for complementary services, like massage, physical therapy or cardio. If you are concerned that these offerings will not fly with your clientele, gauge their interest before plowing full-steam ahead.

### office space flair

Last but not least, think about the back office—the room that often gets the short end of the renovation stick. Carve out a nook for your employees to take a break in and give your business room to grow by purchasing modular office storage pieces. If your renovation already involves electrical work, hard-wire multiple spots for easy computer networking for when your administrative roster starts to grow.

Bottom line: Design your back office for how your business will operate in the future, not for how it looks today. After all, the vision for your next renovation has to start somewhere. ☺

Got a Pro Zone idea? Email us at [editor@pilatesstyle.com](mailto:editor@pilatesstyle.com).