

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a stone tower, likely part of a French chateau. The tower is cylindrical and built from light-colored stone blocks. It features several small, arched windows with decorative stone surrounds. The tower is set against a clear blue sky. The main text is overlaid on a white, semi-transparent banner at the bottom of the image.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

RENOVATING YOUR CHÂTEAU

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Renovating your Château

Practical considerations

1. Planning permission

Although not all châteaux are ‘protected’ (protogé in French - similar to listed building status in the UK for example), the majority are due to their historical interest. From a planning perspective, this means there are a number of possible consequences. For example, the local branch of the Architecte de Bâtiments de France (‘ABF’) will be involved in approving any changes to the property, often limited to those which alter the external appearance, but sometimes in relation to internal changes too, depending on the level of the building’s protection. Examples of this would be the type and colour of materials to be used, the general appearance if the proposed renovation works result in modifications which are not in harmony with the existing building, etc.

There may also be other authorities or officials who have a say in the planning application process, all of which means there will be a longer than usual consultation period before planning permission is granted. Typically, this could be up to 6 months if there are no contentious issues, but possibly much longer if there are, because plans and drawings may have to be modified and resubmitted.

To complicate matters further, it is usual for regional variations to exist, such that in one area, a particular requirement may apply, whereas in another region, that may not be the case.

Château owners can request meetings with the various authorities to discuss specific issues prior to developing a planning dossier – this helps ensure each party is fully aware of the proposed renovations and can identify any areas of concern. Time spent in this way is always beneficial and will help ensure the planning process is as smooth as possible.

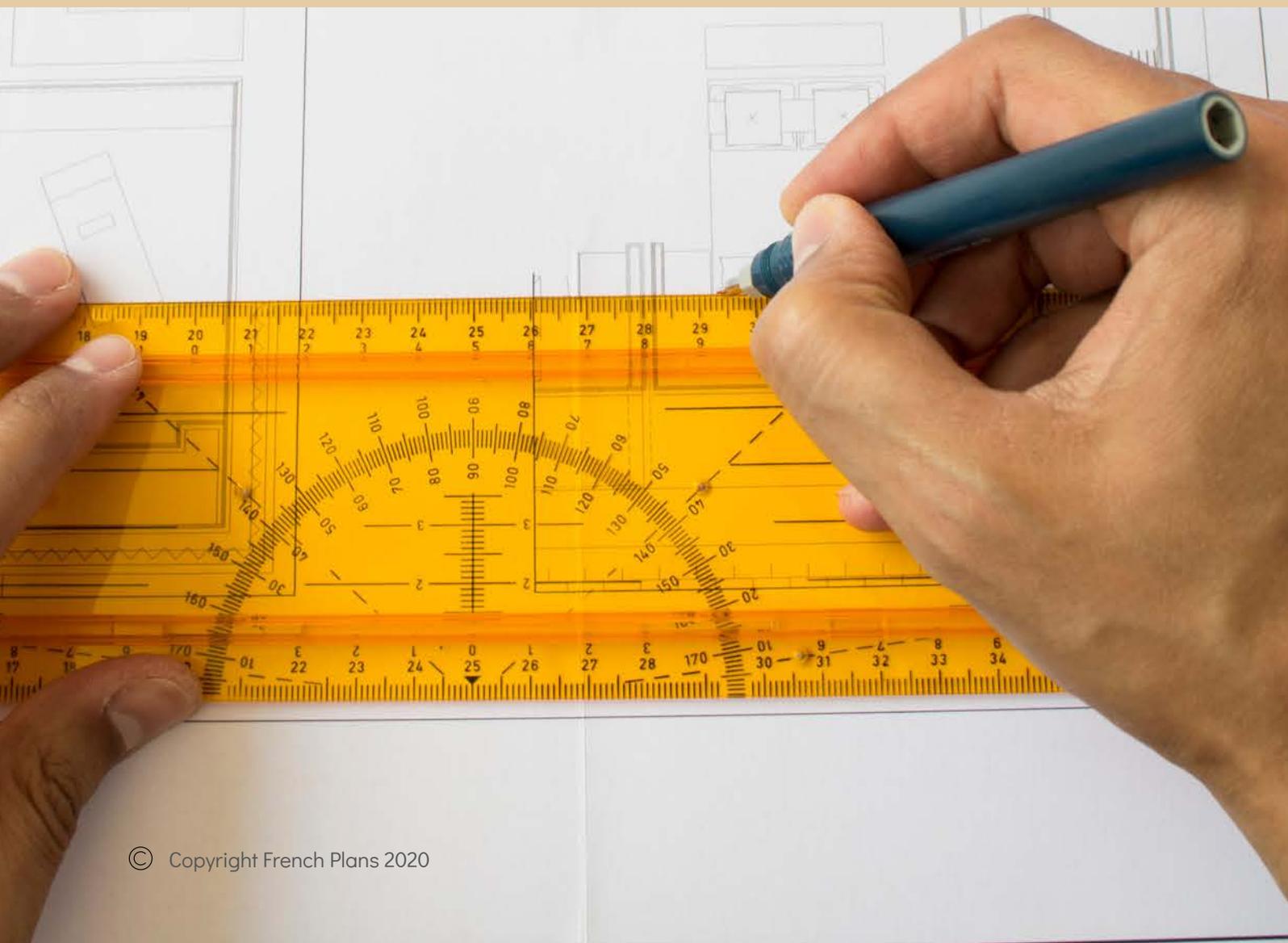
We strongly recommend appointing a specialist planning expert to assist from the outset, because there are many pitfalls that can occur for the unwary....



Finally on the subject of planning, it is highly possible that some modifications and works have been undertaken on the property by previous owners and not always after applying for permission. It is wise during the purchase negotiations to thoroughly investigate all works which have been done, and whether permission was sought and granted.

If not, then you can use this opportunity to insert suspensive conditions in the purchase agreement that any such planning breaches will be regularised before completion.

Alternatively, you can consider dealing with any regularisation yourself, and negotiate a price reduction. Care is needed though, because if you accept the latter, you may find yourself in a situation where retrospective planning consent is not possible.





2. Budgeting for renovation costs

Self-evidently, the cost of renovating a château is going to be entirely different to the cost of renovating other types of dwelling – not just because of the size and scale of a château, but also because of the fine detail often found within such buildings. Examples may be intricate plaster cornice and ceilings, carved wall paneling, fine external roofing and lead work, etc. Anything which is out of the ordinary will undoubtedly cost significantly more than ‘normal’ building works for a typical dwelling.

With a property of this type, there will almost certainly be hidden issues which only surface when renovations begin – not because the seller is trying to hide them, but simply because of the age and nature of the building itself, with renovations and changes carried out perhaps over a period of centuries.

Whilst purchasing a château in France at what seems like excellent value may seem an attractive opportunity, serious consideration should be given to the renovation costs before a final commitment is made to proceed with a purchase, and even then, a significant contingency fund should be available to cater for unexpected costs. The price of a detailed survey may be high, but not as high as proceeding in ignorance and only later finding out the true cost of realising your dream property.

On the upside, it may be possible to apply for grants for certain aspects of the renovation – these vary from project to project and area to area, but are generally available (at least in principle!).

3. Managing a château renovation

If you intend to undertake or oversee renovations yourself, there are a number of things to carefully consider - some more obvious than others, but equally relevant and important!

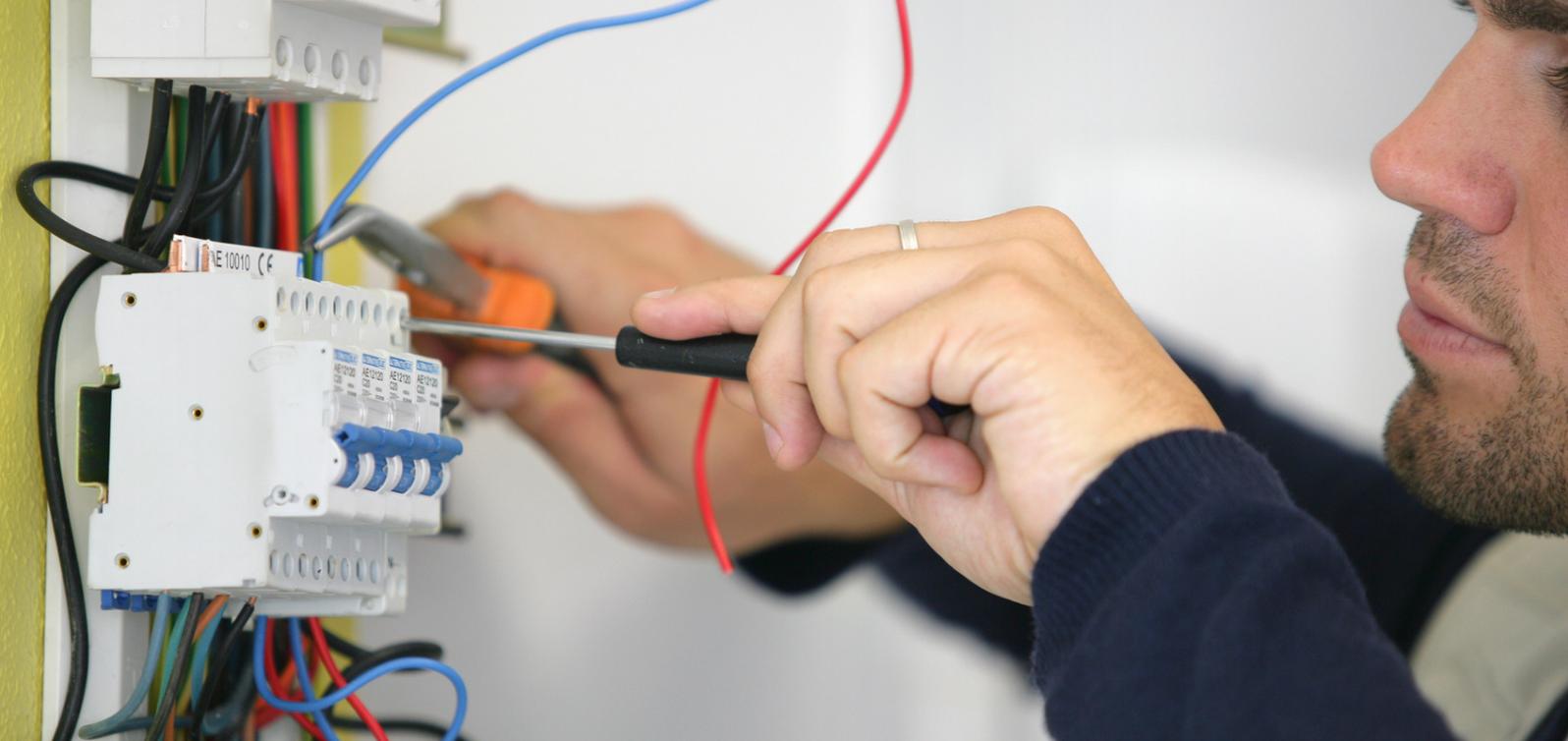
Language: do you have the necessary level of technical language skills to be able to deal with the challenges which will inevitably arise from the outset of a renovation project of this type.

Experience: do you have any relevant experience of managing a team of artisans working on a project like this? Even if you have, you will find the way artisans work in France is different to what you may be used to, and one of the hardest things to achieve is the right sequence of works, so that each artisan or contractor is on site when they are needed – failure in this aspect will potentially mean long delays and increased costs.

Do obtain as many quotations from artisans as you can and compare them carefully – they will not all be the same in terms of the work being quoted for because each artisan will interpret the requirements of the job in a slightly different way.

Cultural differences: this may be the most difficult aspect to understand and no offence is meant to any of the fantastic contractors and artisans in our host country, but you need to consider the cultural differences between you as a foreign national, used perhaps to dealing with things in a particular way, and how that may differ to ‘the French way’. France is ultimately a socialist country, and most people don’t believe in working long hours in order to achieve a deadline.

Not a criticism – more in fact an appreciation of why so many British and other nationals choose to live in France – for its more laid-back lifestyle.



However, when you're on a tight schedule and trying to ensure steady progress, you need to bear in mind that your schedule and that of your contractors may not exactly 'tie in'. They may arrive to discuss your project on a day and time that you've agreed, or they may not. They may provide a quote for works within the timeframe they have agreed, or they may not.

Once you've agreed terms and dates, they may turn up on the appointed day to start, or they may not. They will almost certainly take a two-hour lunch break whether you like it or not, even if adding ten minutes to the mornings labour would see something completed before they go. Come annual holiday time and they will go on holiday, downing tools if necessary and potentially leaving you with a half-finished job to boot.

Mealtimes, holidays, etc., are more important than anything, and you will become frustrated from time to time. Better get used to it if you're embarking on a château renovation!

Timeframe: whatever timeframe you're hoping for to complete your renovation, double it. Again, this is not a criticism, simply experience, and an early acknowledgement that it may take a lot longer than you hope for may save you some heartache later on in the process.

Good luck with your château renovation project.

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