

REMODELING YOUR HOME

Does it Make Sense for You?

Virtually everyone who owns a home has thought about changing it, at one time or another. If you thought your home was close to perfect once, chances are that feeling disappeared as circumstances changed. Families grow and they shrink, habits change, and hobbies develop. All kinds of factors can make the house that might have seemed ideal at one time, now seem wanting in one way or another.

Sometimes, people buy a home knowing it isn't right for them. Maybe it's in the right place or at the right price, but it doesn't have the right number of bedrooms. My wife and I bought our first Land Park house on 14th Street, knowing that the two bedrooms and one bath would be a temporary solution at best. We bought the character of the street, the charm, and the potential. Basically, that's all we could afford. Adding the square footage to our home shopping list pushed us right out of our budget. Like most people who buy too small due to budget, we figured that at some point, the sooner the better, the house could be changed into the right house.

So, like almost every homeowner, you find yourself thinking about remodeling. How can you come to a rational decision about whether an addition, alteration, or house re-do makes sense for you? Based on talking to neighbors and friends, you know the remodeling process can involve a lot of money, time, personal energy, and maybe some aggravation thrown in for good measure. It is not something that merits a casual look followed by a blind jump in. You know that if you make a mistake in remodeling, it could be a BIG mistake, that probably won't be undone.

Before you start down the path of remodeling your home, whether for major changes or a more modest scope of work, isn't there some type of process you can go through to make sure that it makes sense?

As the Architect for literally hundreds of home remodeling projects over the last twenty years, (a number of which involved my own family's sanity and precious resources), I can assure you that there is a rational process you can go through to arrive at a decision about remodeling that makes sense for you. The issues that you should consider can be illustrated by taking a look at some of the reasons that I've commonly seen for a remodeling. Some of them are good, sound reasons, that weigh on the positive side of the ledger. Some of them are weak, at best. If you can't stack up significantly more good reasons than weak ones, you better think about something else besides remodeling!

"There is all that space *just sitting up in the attic (or out in the back yard, or over the garage).* We just have to do something with it."

This is what I call the *opportunity driven* remodeling project. The chance to grab some significant square footage is appealing. After all, houses are a bit like checking accounts - more inside is better! Just about anyone would like just a bit more space - a study, an exercise room, a place to leave sewing or other projects out. If grabbing that extra space seems easily done, it is all the more compelling. When you poke your head into the attic and see that huge volume of space, or think about that 'wasted' part of your yard that seems to be yearning to be a room, it is easy to skip over all the issues involved and start focusing on the result: How you are going to use all this wonderful newly found space?

I have had clients retain me as Architect for the primary reason of figuring out what the appropriate uses might be for this great bonanza of space that seems to be right around the corner. Usually, after a careful review, it turns out that the space is not as

close as it seems. For an attic to be a room, you need a stair that has to meet both functional and code requirements. You also need a floor structure which has to be carried by suitable foundations. Wait, you might point out, there's at least the *start* of a floor - look at the ceiling joists that are already there. Unfortunately, it's rare that the ceiling alone is enough to serve as a floor. When a home is built as two story originally, it's true that the ceiling and floor framing are the same joists. When converting a one story house to two story, though, we generally leave the existing ceiling framing alone - it's only strong enough to carry itself. The floor framing is an entirely new joist system, that is placed above the level of the ceiling framing. One result of this is that part of that big volume of space in an existing attic often gets eaten up by about a foot of new floor thickness.

Similarly, it is also rare that the roof can serve as a ceiling for that new second floor. That leads to more structure, and more reduced volume. Add in considerations of wiring, heating, cooling, windows, etc. and what might of seemed as a couple of weekends of work can easily become a five digit project that will take an experienced contractor five or six months to complete. Without a compelling need for the space, it usually does not make sense to grab it because it is there.

In our next column, we'll continue our look at some *not so good* reasons for remodeling your home.

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