



Photo courtesy of Normandy Remodeling

ROOMS FOR IMPROVEMENT

BY LISA SLOAN

Expert advice on how to boost the comfort and functionality of your home

Whether spending more time than usual at home has given you ample opportunity to assess areas that need improvement or you had already been looking to update your living space, local design and remodeling experts offer advice and inspiration for ways to make the most out of your abode.

A good starting point for any remodeling project is for homeowners to assess their needs and budget to determine the best course of action. “The key considerations are cost vs. value, how long you plan to be in the home, and how to utilize the new space to accommodate the needs of your family,” says Brian Hogan, president and CEO of Hogan Design & Construction in Geneva.

Communication is key to a project’s success, agrees Jeremy Paris, designer at Normandy Remodeling in Hinsdale. “We meet with people to get to the bottom of what’s causing problems and what can be improved, whether it’s a lack of space or function. That might mean working within an existing footprint, moving things around, or adding more square footage.”

CHARTING A COURSE

When it comes to remodeling, Bryan Sebring, owner and president of Sebring Design Build in Naperville, says that homeowners really need to consider how long they plan to be in the home before investing in substantial projects. In a “Remodeling 101” course he offers, he ties the extent of the project to the length of time you intend to live in the home.

Using a kitchen as an example, if you plan to stay two years or less — painting the cabinets and swapping out old countertops might be the best choice. Those expecting to live in their home a bit longer might replace kitchen cabinets, but keep the same footprint. Those who intend to stay put for a decade or more might want to make more substantial changes. “In that case, remodeling is a lifestyle choice — the return on investment is sitting around your kitchen island on Christmas morning eating cinnamon rolls or whatever it is that allows you to really enjoy your home,” says Sebring.

If resale is driving your desire to remodel, think about relatively inexpensive and quick updates that will make your home’s interior seem bright, open, modern and clean. Paint cabinets and walls, replace countertops, carpet and light fixtures. Replacing interior doors and swapping stained for painted trim can also go a long way toward refreshing a home’s interior.

REPURPOSING ROOMS

Bruce George, president and CEO of Naperville-based Charles Vincent George Architects, says that those tight on space should first consider whether remodeling is a better choice than expanding.

“Repurposing rooms is the most cost-effective solution to remodeling,” he says. “Painting, decorating and the possible relocation of a door or window is far less costly than larger building projects, such as basement remodeling, attic remodeling and full-blown additions.”

Working with a professional can help you re-imagine your rooms. Pam Stasney, an interior designer at Haven Interiors Ltd. in Geneva, explains that designers can provide a fresh perspective on reconfiguring a space — “no construction required.” Something as simple as measuring a room and putting a properly scaled floor plan on paper can highlight what works and what doesn’t. It might be as simple as finding the correct size furnishings or rearranging pieces to create better flow.

Stasney offers the recent example of an empty-nester couple who needed help rethinking their living space. “They were frustrated because they didn’t have a dining room for visits with children and grandchildren. We showed them another possibility — a living/dining/workspace all in one.” She helped them find a large dining table that was suitable for family gatherings when needed and also could serve as a desk/work surface for daily artistic projects.

“Not only was it more functional,” says Stasney, “but this new floor plan gave them plenty of room for cozy conversation.”

TRACKING TRENDS

Kitchens and baths are perennial favorites when it comes to remodeling, but other rooms are popular picks as well.

Sebring has noticed that more kitchen remodeling projects are tending to spill over into adjacent rooms, such as the laundry room or powder room. “Kitchens are becoming a first-floor project,” he says. “I think (homeowners) figure they may as well have it all done if they have to be without a



Photo courtesy of Hogan Design & Construction

Kitchens and baths continue to be among the most popular remodeling projects, but the scope of the project can depend on the stage of life of the homeowner and the length of time they plan on living in the home.



Open floor plans conducive to both entertaining and family gatherings remain popular.

kitchen for a length of time.”

In terms of bath remodels, Hogan says, today’s homeowners are still looking to replace master bathroom tubs with roomier showers. “While it is important to have at least one tub in a house, I have heard a lot of people talk about how they never use their master tub and would like to utilize that space to allow for a more functional master bath,” he says.

Some projects are tied to the stage of life the homeowners are in. Older homeowners who wish to age in place or are those looking toward accommodating aging parents are adding first-floor bedrooms, converting powder rooms to full baths and moving laundry to the home’s main level. “We have converted unused front rooms into a first-floor suite as well as adding to the floor plan of the first floor to give in-laws the space they need,” Hogan says.

Younger homeowners are often seeking additional bedrooms and family gathering areas. At Normandy, updated kitchens with open floor plans and a space geared toward entertaining are top requests. Often as part of these projects, families will seek to add a mudroom. “As a family grows, they may notice that their older home is lacking that kind of drop-zone,” says Paris.

Guest rooms are also stepping into the spotlight, and Stasney says they are among Haven’s top-requested projects. “Many homeowners want to create an inviting and restful space for guests, better than an Airbnb,” she explains.

Stasney also notes that while open-concept living is still desirable, more homeowners are seeking to balance that with smaller private spots. “People want to feel connected, while still having spaces to retreat,” she says, pointing to cozy reading nooks under a flight of stairs or a homework station in a corner of a large room as examples.

While kitchen and bathroom improvements may provide some return on investment, attic renovations or any addition project that adds livable above ground area are more valued in the real estate market.

FINISHING SPACES

Building within existing basements or attics can be an affordable alternative to a full-scale addition as they eliminate the cost of the superstructure the latter requires. While basement projects can be limited because they are often lack natural light and are constrained to a defined area with a fixed ceiling height, they are a great choice. “If you are willing to leave a good deal of the existing structure, piping and duct work in place, basement remodeling projects can be the most economical expansion you could do,” George says.

In terms of attic remodeling, a project might be as simple as adding drywall, flooring, electrical and lighting, but many attics need much more extensive work, in particular, shoring up the floor joists and increasing the depth of the rafters to accommodate the required insulation. Adding dormers to expand space and let in more light

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is a popular choice but can increase costs. As George points out, “These additions are what usually make attic renovations more complicated and thus more expensive.”

ADDING ON

Some homeowners might choose to add a second floor. Building over other spaces can require significant structural modifications to the existing structure, which can come with a hefty price tag.

Still, new additions can be even more expensive, as they require excavation, concrete work, roofing, siding and more as well as the interior work. George offers the following ballpark costs for comparison: basement remodels range from \$50 to \$70 per square foot for a basic remodel and \$100 to \$150 per square foot for a higher-end project; attic additions can cost from \$100 to \$250 per square foot to \$300 and higher; additions can run from \$150 to \$300 per square foot on the low end and \$350 to \$450 or more per square foot for luxury homes.

Photos courtesy of Normandy Remodeling



Reconfiguring space to include functional areas like mudrooms and laundry rooms is popular among homeowners with children.



EXTERIOR ELEMENTS

When it comes to getting the most bang for your buck, many in the remodeling field say improvements to a home's exterior can really pay off. And spring is a perfect time to do outdoor projects, such as installing new siding and roofing, and replacing the front door and/or garage door. “Front door replacement has the best return because of the added curb appeal that comes from the swap,” Hogan notes.

Paris also says tweaks to the exterior, such as adding a covered porch or a portico arch element, can really bolster curb appeal. “These changes can have

a dramatic impact on your home's appearance,” he says.

However, he notes, thinking of everything in terms of dollars and cents may not net you the greatest reward. “I think the most important thing to consider is your long-range plans for the house,” Paris says. “Is this a project to help sell or is it something you want to enjoy for the long term? Make the biggest investment in a home you want to be in.” ■



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