

Giving New Life to Old Structures: Part II

by John Gower

You have found your dream place in the country, the one with the funky 60-year-old farmhouse. After a couple of years you have learned its quirks — the pipes that rattle when the cold water is turned on, the closet that you call your guest room — and have adjusted to them. But now, you want to make the house work for you. It's time to renovate!



In my last article, I talked about assessing the merits and deficiencies of an older home. Starting with the foundations and working upward, we looked at each aspect of the structural, electrical, and heating systems and the building envelope. From that, we could compile a to-do list of basic repairs and upgrades, some of them more urgent than others.

Doing these repairs and upgrades ensures that your home is safe to live in and that your investment retains its value. However, most people have other reasons for renovating their home. Usually, it's to make their dwelling better suit their needs and lifestyle. This might mean making it larger, more open, or simply more modern. It's also an opportunity to create an aesthetic that's in line with their personal tastes.

This process of giving new life to old buildings is the most rewarding, but also the most challenging kind of construction project. When it's done well, the result is a home of classic charm that preserves the best aspects of the original house and blends them seamlessly with the renovations or addition. The renovation is carried out smoothly and quickly, is finished on budget, and without excess stress.

When a project is mishandled, on the other hand, it can be a disaster. The initial charm is lost. The renovations clash with the original home. You are over budget, the job stretches on longer than you thought, and you have to bunk with your in-laws. Your spouse leaves you and you wonder why you ever started down the road to "Renovation Hell."

Given the complex nature of the renovation process, setbacks can come from a variety of sources — inexperienced contractors, uncooperative weather, lack of preparation, too-high expectations — but the greatest source of uncertainty is the structure itself. Until the house is opened up, the actual condition of its studs, rafters and joists remains a mystery. How, then, do you keep your renovation from going off the rails? It's largely a matter of preparation. At the centre of every successful project is thoughtful design and planning.

The Program

Every construction project should start with a "program" — a clear statement about what you want to accomplish by renovating or adding on to your home. If your inspection has revealed structural or safety deficiencies that must be remedied, these go at the top of the list. What else could be improved? Do you need to create an additional bedroom or a sumptuous master suite, a functional "mud room" for family coats and outdoor gear, a kitchen for gathering or entertaining, or perhaps a covered verandah? Would you rather that your living room faced the view instead of the street? This "wish list" for your home-to-be may grow as other ideas arise, but it is a crucial first step in defining the scope of your project.



Once you are clear on your objectives, the next step is the design of your project. Not only is this your chance to convey your dreams and desires into built form, but it also is where you will tailor the renovation to your budget and to your convenience — or inconvenience. (Do you plan on living in the house during renovation? Do you need to be there during the entire process?) To assist you in this crucial step, you should add a couple of people to your renovation team.

First, get a builder or contractor involved — even before you draw up plans. An experienced builder will be an invaluable source of information about the current condition of your dwelling, what is required to fix it and the relative costs of renovation and addition options. He or she should also be plugged into a network of sub-trades (masons, drywallers, etc.) and can organize and carry out the renovation work. Some builders will even offer design suggestions. (Here it pays to be a bit careful. Many builders have set ideas about the best way to do things, which can preclude design options that may be more interesting or more appropriate. This is in fact an ideal time to call upon the next member of your team — a design professional.)

An architect or building designer brings creativity, knowledge of construction, and, ideally, a breadth of experience with older structures. They are skilled at understanding your needs and the inherent possibilities of your house and property, and can help you explore a range of different options while keeping your budget in view. They can also be good allies in any dispute or conflict with the contractor or other trades.

Whether you decide to do it yourself or hire a professional, the crucial starting point is a careful assessment of how your house is put together. An essential tool for this job is a carefully measured and drafted set of "as-built" plans, cross-sections, and elevation (exterior) views of the house. Like an x-ray image, these drawings reveal a great deal about its history, structure, and underlying architectural order. Once you know what you have and how it works structurally, you are then ready to consider your renovation options.



Most commonly, design ideas are tried out by overlaying new ideas on the existing plans. In this way, you can explore a variety of options and more clearly see alternative ways to achieve the effects you want. Sketches are done to scale and, where appropriate, every effort is made to get maximum benefit from the existing structure.

The final result of the design process should be a fully developed concept that solves current problems, preserves as much of the value of the existing structure as possible, satisfies all the important objectives of the program, and fits within the budget. It may take the form of a simple refurbishment of what's already in place. Or, it may involve a complete gutting of the whole structure down to the studs with many structural changes, revisions to the roof lines, whole new additions, and new finishes inside and out.

Doing the Work

Now that you are clear on the general direction of your renovation efforts, it's time to do the actual work. How can you ensure that your project comes in as conceived, within budget, on time, and doesn't unnecessarily disrupt your lives? Again, it's a matter of being fully prepared and hiring the right people for the job.

Which brings us back to the contractor. There's a lot out there, but how do you choose? Being your own contractor can save significant amounts of money but only if you have the time and knowledge of construction and the various sub-trades. The builder should be matched carefully to your design — both to the level of craft required and the builder's willingness and ability to follow the drawings.

Check the references of anyone you are interested in hiring. Ask for at least their two most recent customers, call them and see the work for yourself. What was their experience? Also, ask to see a project that the builder feels is the best example of his/her work. Communication is essential. Do you feel you can talk to this person, can you relate?

You should decide whether to proceed on a cost-plus basis (where the builder works by the hour and the homeowner pays directly for the materials and sub-trades) or fixed-price contract (where the builder does the job for a set fee). Both have advantages and drawbacks. Cost-plus is generally more economical but comes with no guarantee of the final price. The fixed-price offers peace of mind but most builders will pad their estimate to accommodate unforeseen problems (which may or may not occur). When getting estimates from a number of builders, make sure that each covers the same things for a sound comparison.

The last way that you can improve your odds of having a good renovation experience is by being prepared for things not going as planned. Even with careful budgeting, cost overruns are sometimes unavoidable. Older homes are prone to nasty surprises (like nonexistent footings, rot, or insects) that can lurk under a floor, in a wall, or in a roof cavity. Have some cash in reserve or be open to reconsidering the design in light of such findings. Bear in mind that once the project is underway almost any significant change will cost extra. A contingency fund of 10 to 20 percent will provide a cushion.

If the renovation is extensive, definitely find alternate accommodation. Living in the midst of dust, noise, and workers day after day compounds other stresses. If you do check out of your home for a while, try to stay where you don't need to be out on a certain date. Things have a way of taking longer than expected.

In your arrangements with the contractor, be sure to schedule regular meetings during the project (weekly is advisable). These should help you keep abreast of progress and the rate at which money is being spent, and allow you an opportunity to move the process along. Finally, to prevent interminable delay at the finishing stage, it's common to hold back 10 to 15 percent of what is owed to the builder until satisfactory completion. This can be an incentive for a speedy finish, as well as insurance that all suppliers and sub-trades will be paid in full.



If you have an older country home or are considering purchasing an existing established property, I hope these articles have provided you with a basic understanding of what you might expect as you bring your dwelling up to current standards and reshape it to reflect your lifestyle needs and aesthetic preferences. Space hasn't permitted a full discussion of all the aspects of renovation. For this, there are a number of good do-it-yourself guides on the market that cover every facet from design to drywall. However, the best way to gain insight about the renovation potential of your dwelling and the costs involved is by enlisting the aid of a skilled builder and an architect or designer with renovation experience to help uncover its hidden assets and give it new life as a comfortable, beautiful, and fully functional country home.



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