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The madness ...and rewards... of renovating

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There is a good way and a bad way to do home renovations and C.J. Marsden knows first-hand what the difference can mean.

Her quiet waterfront bungalow home on Yoho Lake Drive outside Fredericton wasn't always so quiet or cosy. When Marsden decided to build an addition onto the side of her home about four years ago, she made a mistake when it came to choosing the right contractor for her.

"He was cheaper than everyone else so I wanted to go ahead," she explained.

The renovator told Marsden he was a general contractor as well as a licensed electrician and plumber and "in spite of how intelligent I am I didn't check him out," Marsden admitted.

And long before the contractor began showing up for work drunk Marsden knew she had made a bad decision.

"They've kind of got you by the short and curlies," she explained. "It was just awful. It couldn't be worse."

Nine times out of 10 the homeowner doesn't check references and they don't check to see if their renovator's workers are covered by workplace compensation coverage and liability insurance, said Robert Case of Case's Renovations, located just off Hanwell Road.

"It's rampant," Case explained about people taking advantage of homeowners. "There's people suffering because of a bad cash deal they did and they got caught up in an unprofessional, unethical contractor."

He has heard plenty of horror stories like Marsden's and he has been called in numerous times to fix the mistakes other renovators have made. Case takes on about 250 renovation jobs each year and between eight and 10 per cent of these mean fixing other people's mistakes.

"Right across the country there are still homeowners feeling the effects," the business owner explained.

He estimates that about every fifth house that has undergone some type of renovation has been negatively affected.

A lot of the mistakes are made because people don't have renovators in very often, Marsden said and cautions other homeowners that getting quotes from different contractors doesn't necessarily mean you will get the best buy.

"A lot of guys out there are working out of their truck," said Case, who's been fighting for provincial legislation that they're hoping will protect people when it comes to suffering from poor workmanship and unethical contractors.

Marsden eventually called in Case to correct the mistakes that were made and this time she was prepared.

"We didn't have to do a great deal of design work," Case said looking around Marsden's finished living room.

"She had lists, many lists," he said grinning.

And her detailed lists were highlighted in every colour imaginable and her file included pictures, cutouts and notes on every room that was to be overhauled.

"It's important to know what you want," said Marsden who knew she didn't want regular narrow window frames for her front porch doors. "I didn't know what I wanted but I knew what I didn't want."

Her renovation saga began in April of last year and was completed a few months later in July.

"It was a bigger renovation than we thought it was going to be," said Marsden, noting that there were a lot of fundamental problems like the wiring and water that needed to be looked after first.

And that is a common scenario that happens in a number of large renovation jobs, Case explained.

But Marsden did her homework and she knew her priorities and her budget before she started, he added.

And the two worked well together and Case helped her out with a few suggestions of his own during the project.

"You're just like a married couple," said Marsden. "You go through the whole gamut of emotions."

It's important to be realistic about the plans you have for your house because "you're not going to get everything you want," said Case, referring to the added cost the homeowner may face.

Marsden's entire renovation included the plumbing, electrical work, gutted interior, a new 12 foot by 24 foot addition put onto the rear of the house, exterior cedar finishing, a mechanized ventilation system, ceiling air vents, water filtration, paint, trim, doors, windows, floors and closets.

Closets were added to the upstairs bedrooms since there wasn't a closet in the house when Marsden bought it. There was also a pressure treated deck added to the new rear addition and French garden doors were installed.

"Some stuff is more exciting than others," the homeowner said bringing on a smile from Case.

As you walk through her back door, that leads into the hallway, the first thing you notice is a sliding screen door called the phantom screen since it slides right into the wall.

"I hate screen doors," Marsden said, noting that this one helps keep spring and summertime bugs outside where they belong. "And it doesn't spoil the look of the house."

The bathroom sink is another attractive feature and one that makes both Case and Marsden smile. Marsden ordered the large, hand-painted piece from San Francisco and the plumbers refused to pick it up when it arrived since it cost more than \$3,000.

The size of the bathroom was expanded to fit a large whirlpool tub that features six water jets and one part of a bathroom wall was fitted with special glass blocks that let in refracted light. Marsden decided on the right tub for her after doing her research by taking baths at a number of her friends' homes.

"I have a really stressful job and it's nice to come back and soak in the tub," said the mother of one who is also the director of marketing and communications for SmartForce, formerly scholars.com.

She also had special blinds installed right inside her windowed front doors. The vertical blinds, that are inside the window frames, are controlled on the outside of the windows.

"I hate blinds," Marsden explained. "They get very dusty."

The special blinds also help further insulate her home since they have a special coating on them.

"There are a lot of leading edge products here," Case said.

Her lights were also put on digital timers for both safety and to keep her home as low maintenance as possible.

Another unique feature that Marsden decided to splurge on was the electric heated ceramic terra cotta tile floor in her living room. Her cats also love the added warmth and the new floor was a more practical alternative to carpet since family members and guests can go directly outside onto the front porch.

"It was really the only way to go," she explained, adding that the carpeting would have been ruined and a wood floor would have suffered scratches.

The room is also made extra warm and cosy by a new propane fireplace that decorates one corner.

"You want it to be welcoming. I wanted this house to totally reflect me," said Marsden. "A great place for parties don't you think?"

Her entire renovation project cost about \$86,000. She originally paid about \$90,000 for the house when they bought it five years ago in June.

But the average renovation job including kitchen and bath work ranges from \$30,000 to \$40,000. An exterior makeover job on a bungalow-size home, including windows, doors, siding and roof would cost about \$18,000, Case noted.

A number of older baby boomers are beginning to look into large renovation work now that their children are living away from home and they are slowing down in their careers.

"And they want to be comfortable," Case said.

And it's time they started making their house into a real nest egg "because it's the house we're going to die in," said Marsden, who plans to retire next year. "So sitting around doing nothing is very important to me."

Baby boomers like the 55-year-old Marsden are doing more entertaining and they also have more money to spend on their homes than their parents ever did.

"I want to do it now in my 50s so I get all of my money back," she said. "It's a good investment."

And it beats buying another home when you get older, she noted.

Marsden's renovation story isn't over yet and Case has already been placed on stand-by.

"He just has to pace himself and work around my bonuses," said a smiling Marsden.

She is already planning to put in a new kitchen and a state-of-the-art front deck next year.

"She has what we call an active file at the office," Case said wearing a grin on his face.

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