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It's hammer time



David Males in the Annex home he renovated for a couple. The contractor has seen a surge in business. Tyler Anderson / National Post

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By Jack Kohane

A fix-it that tops \$200,000 may be the tipping point for some people to relocate rather than renovate, but not for Eric Beauchemin and his fiancée Ciara McDonnell. Going in, they knew their decaying century-old, red-brick semi in the Annex needed TLC. They rented the three-storey, four-bedroom Victorian for the first two years, then started remodelling after purchasing it a year ago.

“We had wanted to fix up the house over time, starting with the first floor,” says Mr. Beauchemin, a 34-year-old financial analyst. “But the plan grew to include the second-floor bedrooms and ensuite, a new kitchen, replacing all the windows and doors, adding a new HVAC system and spray-foam insulation.”



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By tearing down the walls of the several small rooms on the main floor, Mr. Beauchemin estimates that livable space increased by about 50%. “We wanted a bigger dining area for a few reasons, primarily entertaining. We did not entertain that much before, we hope to do more now.”

With the main floor now completely open from front to back, the high ceilings (9.5 feet) and the kitchen island, Ms. McDonnell, 34, a telecommunications marketing director, says, “the space is now much better suited for big crowds and entertainment. The project snowballed, but we’re pleased with the results. Because we have roots in the community, we’re happy to have made the investment to stay here.”

GTA homeowners who would rather remain in their home than find new digs is a growing movement that David Males, president of Northern Edge Construction Services, has seen coming for the past two years. “With the cost of moving and the prices of new homes these days, it makes sense for many people who like their neighbourhoods to update and expand their present home.”

Renos are on the rise, according to a May 2011 housing study by the Bank of Montreal and Leger Marketing. BMO economists are predicting Canadians will spend about \$46-billion on home renovations this year. That forecast also shows two-thirds (62%) of Canadian homeowners are likely to renovate their home in the next two years. The main motivators for reno-happy Canadians include keeping up with friends and neighbours, home shows, television programs, magazines and newspapers. Most of those planning upgrades are seeking an improved lifestyle as a result of the renovations, followed by an increase in the value of their home.

“Making home upgrades can add value to a homeowner’s investment, but we’re also seeing clients wanting to renovate because they are frustrated by the current layout or size of their homes,” Mr. Males notes. “Even a dream home will not look appealing due to wear and tear after a while.”

Northern Edge Construction, a winner at this year’s Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD) Awards, took over Mr. Beauchemin’s renovation from a previous no-show contractor. “It’s a bigger project than most,” Mr. Males says. “Many homeowners are downsizing their renovations, phasing the project with a kitchen and/or bathroom now and the basement or master bedroom later.”

He cites the lingering effects of the recession and the HST as some of the reasons homeowners are scaling back the scope of their home improvements. “Kitchens are still a must,” Mr. Males insists. “They are the hub of the home — an important part of how we live, so the kitchen must be functional and up-to-date.”

Budget-tightening hasn’t deterred empty-nesters Rick and Mirjana Prinzen. The couple say they are more interested in establishing a family home than delaying a basement makeover. Their 2,200-square-foot bungalow in a mature neighbourhood in south Mississauga near the lake, was a new construction 10 years ago. The couple felt renovating the main floor wasn’t necessary. “It’s perfect, in our mind,” says Mr. Prinzen, who works at a pharmaceutical firm. “With our kids married, we believe it’s important for our grandchildren to recognize this as a place to call home.”

Opting for a high-end design, the couple’s new basement features a concrete stone fireplace flanked with lower custom cabinets and upper open cabinet shelving and a wet bar. They spent about \$200,000. “We finished the basement as a comfy space for entertaining and for friends and family when they visit,” says Ms. Prinzen, a packaging designer for consumer products. “We have family in Europe, the U.S. and Canada so many visits are extended. The space, though large, is still intimate.”

The renovation “improved the feel and flow of the living space,” says the home’s contractor Michael Upshall, owner of Bolton, Ont.-based Probuilt (another BILD winner). “That’s what clients want in general. People prefer to cocoon in their existing home. They don’t really like the idea of moving to another house in another neighbourhood, especially if uprooting kids is involved.”

Asked what’s hot and what’s not in terms of renovations, Mr. Upshall has a list of items his clients request. “Laminates, marbles and granites for floors and counter-tops are huge, as are engineered hardwood floors bordered by stone to define spaces in an open-concept layout. Lots of built-in cabinets for extra storage are a must-have,” he says. “And people with active lifestyles love mudrooms, which can also do double-duty as a pantry or laundry room.”

Although many homeowners may think a renovation is time-consuming and inconvenient, Bruce Cromie thinks the positives outweigh the negatives. “People see renovations as building equity in their homes,” he says. “The projects may not be large-scale, or luxurious, but most crave more space, and have decided it’s time to upgrade the mechanicals and finishes to today’s standards.”

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Owner of Woodcastle Homes, a BILD renovator award winner, Mr. Cromie says clients now are very design and cost savvy. “They know what they want, they know what they like, they know the styles they adore. Even without a massive investment, they know it’s possible to create a brand new look inside and outside their home.”

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