

Living

Barrier island renovations: The pros and cons

BY LISA ZAHNER
COLUMNIST

First of Three Parts

As many homes on the barrier island pass the 30- and 40-year-old mark, owners and buyers are frequently facing the dilemma of whether to start from scratch or renovate.

For those who decide to renovate, be warned that it's not an easy, short or inexpensive process. To help illustrate, in detail, the steps necessary to carry out a major professional renovation with a contractor heading up the project, we'll be covering this topic in a series of three articles.

This, the first of the series, will discuss the pros and cons of renovating and what the decisive factors are for each situation, the preparation and planning phase and demolition.

The second article will cover the construction itself, both the successes and the pitfalls. In the final episode of our renovation saga, we will present the finished product and all the details and implications of moving in after a renovation is complete.

We're fortunate to have several local contractors who make renovations a part of their business and we'll be

enlisting some of them for help with this series. Croom Construction was recently named the 90th largest renovation firm in the nation (and the fourth largest in Florida) by volume, as determined by *Qualified Remodeler* magazine.

The Croom team has been building and renovating homes in barrier island communities and throughout Indian River County since 1978.

They've also taken on some major commercial or institutional renovations, including the St. Edward's Lower School complex and McKee Botanical Gardens, where it was important to preserve the history and character of the existing structures and make the new buildings or features appear and function in harmony with the old.

David Lyons handles the front end of Croom's renovation business. In addition to being the initial contact for anyone considering a renovation, Lyons plans and costs out the project, transferring it to Project Manager Aaron Benson when the contract is signed and it's time for demolition to begin. Benson has managed 66 major home renovation projects for Croom since 2004.

First of all, why do people renovate instead of build new?

"There are basically two reasons why people renovate. The first is when someone buys something existing and renovates and this is a transactional project," Lyons said. "The second is that they live in the home and decide they want to make changes."

Within the first category of transactional renovations, Lyons normally gets involved before the home is purchased, or as early as possible. He helps clients decide whether or not the house is a good candidate for renovation or if it would be better to knock it down and start from dirt, or to buy a different property.

"Is it on a piece of property that makes it worth spending the money to renovate the home, in relation to the neighborhood? That would probably be the first question we would ask," he said. "Then we would look at the structure, layout or 'bones' of the house, pull a survey, look at the setback, the flood elevation, deed restrictions and septic tank drain fields, if that's an issue.

"Then we have some information to decide if it's best to rip it out or to renovate, to see what can be done. The best endings start with good beginnings when it comes to renovations, when the owner is aware of

everything that has to happen and we have a great game plan."

Within that second category, the homeowner is pretty much stuck with the house they've got as far as renovation potential, but there are also two types of scenarios -- either owners making changes that they had in mind ever since they bought the home or renovations or upgrades due to a growing family or change in lifestyle.

"In this economy, instead of moving and trying to sell their homes, many people are making changes to make themselves happier where they are."

Lyons said renovations can range from bumping out a couple of rooms to add square footage, tearing off part of the roof and adding a second story or even adding a guest house or a room on top of a garage.

For a Croom client working with Lyons from the beginning, the planning and design stage, in conjunction with a design professional, normally takes two to three months. At that time, all the subcontractors are chosen and scheduled to ensure the best value for the client.

Once the project is costed out by Croom's full-time estimating staff and budgets are set, then there is an introduction meeting with the client and Benson, who prepares the home for demolition and construction. Sometimes this involves diverting electrical, plumbing and air-conditioning equipment. Extra work is involved if the owners are brave enough to live in the home during renovation.

"We want to be very careful about protecting what is there, protect their flooring and what's valuable to the client, so we seal off rooms using a zipper system, tarp everything, sometimes move trees and we even protect what's outside, considering the wear and tear the property will undergo during renovation," Benson said.

"There are going to be trucks and dumpsters, so we take care to look out for the irrigation system and we can even cover the driveway with a layer of visquene and bring in a couple of tons of sand so that's what the trucks will be driving on. The last thing we want is to finish and for the driveway and sprinkler system to be damaged."

Benson hates rain, as it's the major cause of delays and problems with renovations where part of the house must be partially exposed while the new segment is being added. But he baby-sits the projects as much as necessary and even recalls emptying out

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all the garbage cans from the Croom offices to take them to a client's house in the wee hours of the morning to protect expensive flooring from one of our Florida diagonal downpours.

Benson said he likes the challenges of renovations because they demand that he test his problem-solving skills and his people skills every day on the job.

"I get more out of it than new construction because I get to be creative and I get to get into the heads of my clients and know what their tastes are," he said. "When you can't reach them and need to make a decision, you don't want to have to re-do things over and over again, so you have to know the client really well."

John Huryn, president of Huryn Construction, also gets to know homeowners and homebuyers through the process of planning and carrying out renovations. On average, Huryn Construction completes four home renovations per year.

Though he's been in the construction business for 25 years, nearly 15 of those in Vero Beach, Huryn got an education in 2007 when he renovated his own residence where he lives with his wife and daughter. He calls it is favorite renovation, and we'll be featuring the construction part of Huryn's home in the second article in this series.

Huryn agreed that the house has to have good "bones," as Lyons said, and he added that the land itself must offer the space and flexibility to accomplish what the owner wants. Beyond that, his best advice pertains to the design phase of the renovation process.

"I generally don't get into the design phase, we can walk through the home, give a rough estimate of what can be done and how much it will cost, but I advise all my clients to enlist the expertise of an architect," Huryn said.

"A good architect will ask you questions such as do you eat dinner together, who gets up first, they will find

out how you live in the home and use the home. If they don't find out how you live in the home, they're probably not the right architect to have."

Once the owner and architect come up with a plan, Huryn takes that plan and begins to cost out the materials and finishes, which he said takes about 2-3 weeks.

them to focus on the end product," he said. "You can put off making the decisions about the finishes, but in order to get a house of really good quality, you need to start with the finishes and work backwards."

Huryn said renovations now make up about 35 percent of his business, an increase from 20 to 25 percent a

time to do construction, it's never going to be cheaper. Materials will certainly go up and the cost of labor is as low as it can go.

Huryn concurs with Lyons that for prospective buyers hoping to renovate, it's smart to get a contractor involved while serious property-shopping is going on.

"I got a call from a client who had narrowed their search down to three homes, we walked through all three homes with them and were able to give them an idea of what could be done and how much it would cost," he said.

"They ended up making an offer and making that decision based upon the information they got from us. We can give them a pretty good idea and help them avoid big mistakes."

The homes Huryn is being called upon to renovate lately tend to have been built in 1980s and or more recently, with the newest being only 12 years old. The most popular renovation features are reflecting the changing lifestyle of the barrier island demographic and also the features which are nearly standard in today's new, upscale homes.

"They are adding bedrooms with private baths, a lot of my clients are a little bit older and have grandchildren. Grandchildren grow in number faster than the children did and they want more space for them," he said. "They're also renovating kitchens, opening them up into the family area and adding porches and covered areas."

More of Huryn's clients are expanding out and up, and that makes doing their homework on the setbacks and deed restrictions even more important. Huryn sees keeping homes to one story as a protection of options and of investment in a community with an aging population.



Cabinet Protection - The cabinets in this home were covered and sealed to protect them from dust, debris and the elements during renovation of that portion of the home.

To make final decisions, his clients can look at samples and photographs at Huryn headquarters or view internet presentations from manufacturer websites in the conference room on a large screen. For tile and plumbing fixtures, Huryn sends clients to a couple of select dealers in town to view installations and samples.

"The biggest challenge is getting

decade ago. He attributes this not only to the slowdown in new construction, but to the opportunities available in the Vero Beach real estate market today.

"Recently, we've had an increase in the number of calls about renovations, in the past month," he said. "People can buy existing homes at very cheap prices and now is a great

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Dobbs before - Demolition of a home in John's Island for a major renovation.



Dobbs After - Finished renovation of demolition shown in previous picture, completed by Croom Construction in 2009.

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"It's difficult to sell second-floor renovations in Florida due to the number of retirees," he said.

If the owner does want a two-story house, a downstairs bedroom is usually built with doors at least 3-feet

wide to potentially accommodate a wheelchair, walker or other medical equipment, in case that should ever be necessary.

"Code also requires handicap accessibility in at least one bathroom on the main floor," he said.

Speaking of code, Huryn said if the

renovation ends up amounting to at least 50 percent of the total assessed value of the house, the entire structure, both the existing and new parts, must meet current building codes. This can be a good reason for homeowners to scale back renovation projects slightly to stay safely under that 50 percent.

It sounds like contractors offer a great deal of expertise for the homeowner or prospective buyer who involves them in the planning, long before the wrecking ball hits one block or brick, but will enlisting the services of someone like John Huryn or David Lyons increase the overall cost of the project? Both in-

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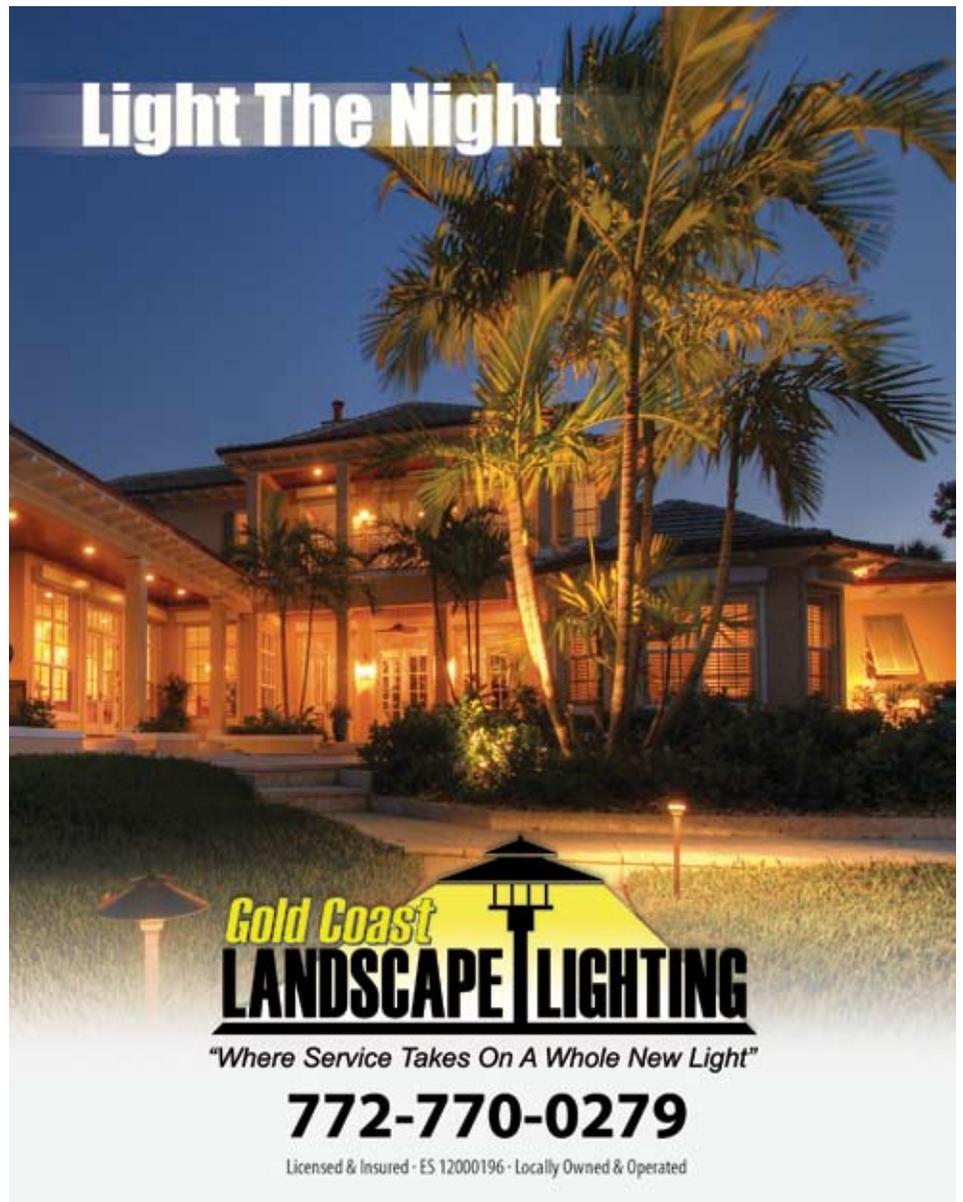
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Minton before - Demolition of a home in John's Island where roof is still intact but walls and interior of the house were completely gutted.



Minton after - Finished renovation of demolition in previous picture, completed by Croom Construction in 2009.

sist that what they do does not cost extra and can actually save substantial money in the long run.

"There are no charges for planning and design services, any charges begin when we have a contract and start construction," Lyons said.

Huryn also includes the planning

and estimating services he provides, the official term being "value engineering," plus coordination with the architect, as part of the cost of doing business and no money exchanges hands unless he is required to order materials that his suppliers deem as custom and that he could not use in

the typical home, or unless he spends an inordinate amount of time on the planning phases of a project.

Huryn added one caveat that can tip consumers off to a contractor who may not be very financially stable or on the level.

"I recommend that people don't

pay deposits on renovation work," he said. "When contractors are looking for cash up front, they're often not the most reputable."

Next issue (May 21): The construction phase of renovation, featuring examples, including John Huryn's private home in Pebble Bay Estates.

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