

“SHORT ON SPACE? CONSIDER BUILDING UP, OUT OR UNDER

By: Jim Sulski

After living in the northwest suburban ranch home for five years, the couple decided they needed to expand with another bedroom, another full bathroom, a new family room and a remodeled and extended kitchen. Their initial plans were to extend the back of the house, taking up some of the yard space.

After meeting with Glenview-based remodeling contractor David Callahan, however, another option was presented: building up, not out. “It made sense to add a second floor to the house for a number of reasons,” said Callahan, also a vice-president with the Chicago branch of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. “And most importantly, it would save the couple money, but give them the same amount of space they hoped to gain.”

Deciding to build up, or out, or out and up, or occasionally under when adding new space to a home is sometimes a simple decision, especially if a house is limited by any one of a number of constraints. Other times, it’s not so simple, said remodeling officials.

“There’s a few things you have to consider,” said Callahan. “There are certain parameters that will guide you in how to build that addition.”

For example, the first is determining a homeowner’s needs for an addition. “You have to figure out what a person really needs – say an extra bedroom or a second full bathroom or a great room,” Callahan said.

“You also need to consider what the homeowner wants to do,” he added. “Maybe they want an addition off the back of the house versus adding a second floor onto the house.”

Sometimes, as with the northwest suburb couple and their ranch home, that wish list doesn’t make sense logistically, Callahan said. “It usually comes down to cost,” he said.

The second parameter to consider is housing type. For example, a Chicago bungalow is not conducive to adding out. “It’s such a long and narrow house that it’s hard to add an addition to the side or back of a bungalow,” said Mal Graifman, the former program director of the Remodelers Council of the Home Builders Association of Greater Chicago and a siding contractor based in Elk Grove Village.

Bungalows also often sit on narrow lots that also don’t make sense to add out. “So in the case of the bungalow, it makes more sense to add up, versus out,” Graifman said.

A ranch house, meanwhile, can be added to either by going up or out, said Callahan. A Georgian can be added to both by going out and up, he added. A Cape Code home can usually be expanded by going up and adding dormers to a second floor attic. But it can also be expanded by going out.

Another factor is the lot the home rests on. “Here, you have to consider how the home sits on the property, local zoning parameters and floor-to-area ratios,” Callahan said.

“Sometimes, the lot is not always conducive to what the homeowner wants,” he added. “Occasionally, you can go for a zoning variance, but that’s not always feasible and it takes a lot of time.”

Finally, cost is a significant factor, said the remodeling officials.

The remodeling budget comes in right at the beginning of the conversation with the homeowner” Callahan said. “You have to talk about budget.”

“A lot of times, homeowners don’t factor in the ‘soft costs’ of an addition – the decorating, the lighting, the ceiling fans, the closet systems,” Graifman said. “That can add another \$10,000 to the price.”

Here’s how a budget can affect the decision to build up or out: “A lot of times it can be less expensive to go up versus out,” Graifman said. “When you’re building up, you already have a foundation to work with. And most existing foundations for one-story buildings can carry the load of a two-story building.

“Adding a new foundation to build an addition off the back or side of a house can get very costly,” he added. “Also, when you build out, you have to worry about the costs that come with moving sewer lines, electrical lines, etc. to make way for a new foundation.”

When building up, a homeowner can also save money with materials and labor for tasks such as laying pipe, or heating and cooling ducts, said the remodeling officials. “Going up versus across a house can be a shorter route, which saves money,” Graifman said.

By going up, homeowners can also save money with the cost involved with matching up exterior materials. “You might have less siding to match if you’re going up, especially with dormers and such,” Graifman said.

Despite the cost savings, most people build out (and often up) versus up, especially in the suburbs, said the remodeling officials. “Those folks on larger suburban lots have both the room and the money,” Graifman said. “People on narrow city lots, meanwhile, will often go up.”

Another way to add space is to go under – in other words, remodel unfinished basement space into bedrooms, bathrooms or family room space. “This can be expensive if you have to dig out a crawl space into a full basement space,” Callahan said. “But if the basement space is there it’s a low-cost way to add living space. The cost to add finished space to a basement per square foot is a lot cheaper than going up or out.”

Finished basement space also makes sense for city homeowners on tight lots, Callahan said.

However, a downside is that finished basement space may not be considered living space come resale time. “You can’t add the finished space into the overall square footage of the house,” Callahan said.

On a similar note, it’s not expensive to transform unfinished attic space into living space, such as bedrooms and bathrooms. “Especially in older homes with steep roofs, it’s easy to add space in an attic,” Callahan said. “You can add dormers and change the roof lines without having to raise the entire roof. I’ve done whole third floors out of attic space.”

When considering an addition, the remodeling officials said homeowners should consider as many options possible. It’s important to get more than one idea,” Callahan said. “You should talk to at least two or three contractors and/or architects.”