

Home rehab: Take it one day at a time

By CRAIG WILLIAMS
The Associated Press

Three years ago, I bought a great old Victorian house in Ohio City, a trendy historic district on the west side of town.

My friends and family thought I was crazy when they first saw the place. Sections of water-damaged plaster hung from the walls. The floors were covered with gray tarpaper. The wood around the windows was rotten.

It was a fixer-upper for sure. But at its price, I would have been a fool not to swipe it up, especially in this up-and-coming area where property values have shot up 50 percent in just three years.

The problem with buying an affordable fixer-upper, though, is that you eventually have to start fixing it up. And while I, a cash-poor writer, had the initial means to buy this gem-in-the-rough, I knew finding the time and money to do a total house rehab — and finishing it in a matter of months, as most of my neighbors have — was going to prove difficult.

If I could somehow break this huge project into a series of smaller tasks, I just might be able to pull it off. But I wasn't so sure that renovating a 100-year-old house a little at a time was feasible.

So I talked to neighbors, architects and a general contractor to get their opinions. If you're thinking of tackling an old-home renovation, too, here are some points to con-

sider:

Living in chaos

"Remember, the longer you drag out a project, the longer you drag out the mess," Larry Brichacek, a neighbor and a reputable general contractor, warned us.

This is something I'd already prepared myself for. I've gotten married since buying the house, and the good news is that like me, my wife Connie also is perfectly willing to live with plaster dust, plywood floors and rooms without walls for years to come, if need be. We've decided it's sort of fun. Our cozy upstairs master bedroom, which is the only almost-complete room in the house, has become an apartment of sorts. The rest of the house can be finished around us.

Financial help

Living with a long-term mess is the easy part. Our real obstacle is money; we don't have much of it to work with. Luckily, the renaissance of our once-forlorn neighborhood is not only good for area homeowners, but also a boon for the city. Consequently, residents have access to city-sponsored incentives like low-interest loans, funds for emergency repairs, even, in some cases, free materials and equipment.

If you live in an older neighborhood, check with your city or county to see if they have similar programs.

Do it yourself

Knocking out old wall plaster has become an obsession

with my wife, who finds it therapeutic. We haul out a few small boxes and bags of debris with our regular trash each week, too, which saves us from renting an expensive on-site Dumpster.

Homeowners who contribute their own elbow grease to a renovation can help cut down the overall cost significantly. Be careful, though. While professional contractors appreciate you doing some of the work, it's possible also to become a hindrance.

"If the owners want to save money," said Brichacek, "they should take on only the work they're sure they can handle. Some people bite off more than they can chew and end up causing delays for the contractors. Know your limits. What you can't handle, leave to the pros."

The master plan

Although our goal is to rehab bit-by-bit, Brichacek reminded us that we'll have to consider some of the overall details of the project at the outset.

"For example, before you start work on any one room," he told us, "you'll need to update wiring, plumbing and heating-cooling ductwork throughout the house. That work has to be done first because it requires access to the spaces between the walls, ceilings and floors."

We wouldn't want to lay a beautiful new tile floor in the kitchen, for example, only to find the plumber needs to tear it back up to replace our old lead pipes.

To determine where all the wires, pipes and ducts will go, we needed to know what the layout of our completed house will look like. We needed a master plan, which requires the help of a couple of experts.

One of them is an architect. Our house originally was built as a single-family unit and later converted to a double to provide rental income. Turning it back into a single means we need to completely rework the layout, and for that we needed architectural drawings.

In our area, such drawings will cost between \$2,500 and \$5,000. That's a lot of money, especially for us. But the drawings are the foundation of our master plan. They're the road map that will guide us through the rest of our piecemeal renovation. Investing in some solid pre-planning up front will help us avoid costly mistakes later.

The other is a general contractor. This professional will oversee the execution of master plan and, in our case, help decide how best to divide it into smaller sections. It's the contractor's job to juggle the talents of various subcontractors like plumbers, electricians and carpenters, making sure they not only show up, but also that their schedules don't conflict with one another. The contractor also is responsible for obtaining the necessary building permits.

If architectural drawings are our road map, a reputable contractor like Brichacek is the tour guide who's been down the road before. He will point out the best route to get us where we're going, and steer us clear of expensive mistakes



Craig and Connie Williams currently are reconstructing the kitchen in their Victorian house in Cleveland's Ohio City historic district. The couple has chosen to renovate the house gradually as time and finances permit.



Postman Gary Gardner closes the gate on the Victorian-era home owned and being gradually restored by Craig and Connie Williams. The house is in Ohio City, a Cleveland historic district that is being rediscovered for its old-house charm.



AP Photo/Tony Dejak

The master bedroom in the Williams' Victorian house was one

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