Real-Life Renovations

With housing prices rising, people are finding it easier to simply remake the current house. But what they’re doing is not that simple at all.

By Bill Slocum

Ron Hazelton is taking a rotor saw to a part of the wall in his first-floor foyer, trying to widen the initial sight lines that greet people when entering his house. Behind him two camera operators in facemasks angle for position, zooming in while a director voices instructions inside their headphones. A boom operator captures the sounds of a whirring blade and flying plaster. Klieg lights blaze overhead, bleaching the scene almost white to the naked eye.

Across the bucolic and orderly acres of lower Fairfield County, home renovation has become big business. And inside Hazelton’s light-colored clapboard house in the Greenfield Hills section of Fairfield, just a few mailboxes from the Westport line, it has become show business as well.

Welcome to another episode of Ron Hazelton’s HouseCalls, viewed by an estimated 800,000 households across the United States every week, including some 40,000 presumably bleary-eyed do-it-yourselfers in the greater New York City area. Hazelton has been published by Time/Life Books, featured on the History Channel, is the home-improvement editor for ABC’s Good Morning America, and since last July, has made his newly purchased Fairfield manse into the main set for his weekly show. Segments he has shot for the cameras include modernizing his circa 1970 kitchen, touching up his living room and replacing old bathroom plumbing, his team of carpenters and video technicians in tow.

There is an audience for this kind of programming, he says. “I think there was a period of time when there was a greater tendency to sell and buy a new house,” he explains. “Now more people are renovating.” That
appears to be the case around his neighborhood. According to Realtors, architects and builders, the
renovation market is in play in Westport, Weston, Wilton and Fairfield like never before. Today, adding
features is often the first thing people do when moving into a home rather than the last thing they do before
selling it.

“As property values have increased, home owners are finding it costs more to move from their current
location than it is to add to an already-done home,” says Westport architect Peter Cadoux. “Also, people are
traveling less. This concept of being home more has actually fueled construction.”

For many, like Hazelton, renovation projects can be fairly simple in nature, like replacing a kitchen window
or screening off a porch. But the growth in home improvement is especially strong at the higher end, where
architects are hired to draw up floor plans and builders toil for months, if not years, to complete a project.
Elisabeth Wadsworth, a partner in the Byram-based architectural firm Jones Footer Margeotes, estimates
the average renovation project she and her associates handle in towns like Greenwich, Darien, New Canaan
and Westport range in price between $500,000 and $13 million. “Those large projects have always been
there, but we’re probably seeing more now because of the value of real estate,” she explains. “It makes sense
to put that kind of value in a piece of property. They think it’s a smart investment.”

Westport architect Anne Sellars Lathrop agrees: “Everyone seems to want to improve their house and has
the money to do it. What has slowed down is new construction.”

Precise figures on just how much renovation work is being done remain elusive, but many who make their
living in the real estate business agree that building on or extensively refurbishing an existing home is at least
as popular as it ever was. “It’s been steady for the last decade,” says Kelly Wright, a contractor and co-owner
of Wright Brothers Builders in Westport. “Maybe it’s been a little more since the amount of available new
land has decreased.”

While Wright notes that some renovations are simple, like adding a dormer window or finishing a basement
room, he adds that most are elaborate projects that require an architect and six to nine months to complete.
“In order of frequency, it’s generally improving a kitchen/family area, creating a master suite and then a total
upgrade with new moldings, electricity, plumbing and modernizing.”

“Sometimes a home is too small and they need more room,” says architect Jonathan Wagner of Westport.
“That’s the driving force. Anyone who has lived in a house around here generally finds their property
appreciates in value and, therefore, they can borrow money to do a renovation.”

Pete Muller wanted more space for his seaside beach house, just 1,300 square feet inside. Built on wood
pilings, with no insulation and minimal heating, it had been designed to be a summer retreat, but Muller
wanted a permanent residence with more elbow room. At the same time, he didn’t want to lose the character
that first attracted him to the property: simple, cozy, bucolic.

“I wanted a big airy living room and kitchen area, and a room with a peaceful view where I can write music,”
says Muller. “I was very proud of how it came out. It was definitely worth it.”

The renovation involved gutting the original structure. In its place, a twin-gambrel roofline with a sloping
bell-shaped second floor that creates a setting reminiscent of a captain’s cottage, but with a modernist twist.
Looking out the living room window, one of many that take advantage of the ample natural light, one’s field
of view is filled out by the yawning expanse of Long Island Sound. In the summer one is reminded of a Bali
hut; in the winter, of a whaling station off the Arctic Ocean.

Architect Stuart Disston of the agency Austin Patterson Disston in Southport worked on the Muller
expansion along with interior designer Kathryn Hood: “The aesthetic is what I’d call Shaker minimalist,”
Disston says. “Very clean lines, not a lot of decoration or over detail. The house bridges the warmth of the
traditional and the feel of a contemporary.”
Tear Down the Walls
To hear people talk, teardowns were more common in the late 1990s than now. “The market dynamics have created this,” says Westport architect Roger Ferris. “People get used to living where they are. They want to realize the maximum potential they can have from living in their house. If there is any way to get 80 percent of their wish list from their existing house, they do it.”

When Ellen and Rick Spear purchased their Westport home in 1997, they were just happy to be where they were, in a large-lot residential cul-de-sac close to the railroad station. But over time, they decided changes were in order. The house had been built in the late 1960s. The flow from room to room was awkward. The kitchen was cramped and full of failing appliances. The frontage was faux-Colonial with a second floor that jutted out over the first, forming a bulky overhang. “Aesthetically, we never liked that look,” says Rick, a former management consulting executive who now devotes himself to organizing and competing in bicycle races.

The pair worked with Anne Lathrop on a redesign that would add more than 500 square feet to the 3,000-square-foot house, widening out the kitchen and creating an adjoining family room, designing a porch in front that would conceal the overhang and adding windows, lots of windows. “We didn’t want to make the house bigger, we just wanted to improve the flow,” adds Ellen, who devotes herself to raising two children. “The bones of the house were good. Other than cosmetically, we didn’t change much except the kitchen and the family room.”

In 2000 Ellen was the mother of a preschooler, Phoebe, and a newborn, Hallie, and was nursing a broken leg
when contractors John Ditullio and Gary Duffy of Norwalk were supervising work on the home. “Certain parts go fast,” Ellen says. “Details take forever. The granite for the kitchen countertops — they promised it would be ready in two weeks. Then they had to wait for the cabinets and the sinks. Then they have to measure. Then the granite guy is sick.”

But the couple has no complaints with the results. The Spear home does not look like the typical Westport home, not even a remodeled one. It has a feeling of a contemporary California ranch house, albeit one grounded in a New England aesthetic. Visible rafters and light-beige flooring create an informal atmosphere enhanced by the sunlight streaming through unmullioned windowpanes. Lathrop, a protégé of famed architect Philip Johnson, calls the result “not so much a style, but a renovated Colonial open plan.”

The Spears just know what they like. “It sounds crazy, but the things that are important to us aren’t big rooms, but windows, moldings, framings — the details,” Rick says.

While home owners most often opt to renovate because of lifestyle issues, a new kitchen or an additional bedroom does have a way of paying for itself. Some Realtors in the area agree. “Say you spent $1.2 million on a house, then did a $100,000 renovation for your kitchen,” says Emily Gordon of Coldwell Banker in Westport. “Could you get back $1.3 million for it on resale? Probably. Maybe you could get $1.5 million. But there’s no science to it. A lot depends on the size of the house. Ultimately, the enjoyment factor is more important.”

Even the best renovations come with a cost beyond the dollars spent on construction. Much of it comes in the form of disruption. “I’m very much in favor of renovating homes, but it’s more traumatic than people think,” Emily cautions.