

interior monologues

deciding to remodel or rebuild means looking inward and asking what both the house and the client want.

by cheryl weber, lead ap

When Alan Dynerman's clients outgrew their small 1890s Virginia farmhouse, he urged them to tear it down and build something new. They resisted, so he followed their wishes, adding living space almost double the size of the house and remodeling the old part. It wasn't until the project was finished that the owners told him they regretted not taking his advice. "The wife wanted something old and rustic—that was her romance," says Dynerman, FAIA, principal of Dynerman Architects in Washington, D.C. "But what they were saving had no merit; it was just old. The new part we did was more rustic, simple, and elegant than the old thing."

Whether to raze or remodel is a question architects routinely address. They're weighing several pressures: money, time, resource efficiency. But clients often need more clarity these days, since that decision bumps up against increased environmental consciousness and financial caution. Psychology is a factor at play, too. Clients may idealize a home's historic value, or resist tear-



Mark McGinnis/Munro Campagna

ing down a place filled with memories or where they've invested a chunk of money. Others want the slate wiped clean. They're determined, at all cost, to have a house designed from scratch.

From an architect's perspective, a tabula rasa has huge appeal: The only conceptual dialogue you're having is with yourself. Remodeling is a far messier

choice. No one knows for certain what lurks behind the walls until the demolition crew arrives. It also forces other difficult decisions, such as where to draw the line between old and new. You don't want to leave something clients will regret. On the other hand, remodeling preserves some of a building's embodied energy. It is more disci-

plined and nuanced, and it sets up a conversation across time. You're digging into a past mindset and trying on new ideas, forms, and materials.

happy hybrids

Most architects enjoy grappling with a range of challenges, and they take the question seriously. "I take a

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lot of pride in the fact that our houses look brand new, but are not,” says David Jameson, FAIA, Alexandria, Va., who designs modernist homes on the bones of the Washington, D.C.–area’s aging housing stock. “Our inclination is not necessarily to show up and take the house out.” Practically speaking, he notes, it’s hard to scrape off a house on an urban lot. And while a gut remodel may not end up being less costly than ground-up construction, it might let you build something that zoning would not allow new.

It’s often speedier, too. “The first guy on the job is not the excavator, it’s the framer,” Jameson says.

“Many framing guys do the selective demo work these days, because they have to tie the new part back into the old. It’s not the bull-in-a-china-shop mentality anymore.”

Artistically, a hybrid approach can result in an interesting “situational aesthetic,” Jameson says. When the existing footprint and the new program mesh, he relishes the opportunity to reinvent what’s there. An example is his award-winning Black White residence, originally a rambler with a hodgepodge of additions. He left the entire footprint intact, spent \$15,000 to increase the load-bearing capacity,

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home economics

Not all clients have the forethought to buy a house with future remodeling in mind. If they did, they could avoid the wasted money and embodied energy inherent in knocking down to build new, says architect and real estate curator John Brown, RAIC, founder of housebrand in Calgary, Alberta. With post-crash consumers opening up to an intelligent, utilitarian design approach, Brown’s goal is to help people achieve a high-quality home at a reasonable cost. He believes it rarely makes economic sense to demolish a house unless it’s small and broken down. If you’re spending \$300,000 to \$400,000 on a 50-year-old house, for instance, almost all the value is in the land, he says, and you’re buying the excavation, foundation, and framing in 1960s dollars.

“We have a lot of people come to us and say, I talked to a builder and he told me to rip it down. That’s the mentality of the trades,” Brown says. “The general perception is that you have to take the house down. We’re showing that you don’t.” Working with an integrated design/build business model, the firm’s gut renovations clock in at \$125 to \$150

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per square foot, compared with \$250 to \$300 per square foot for its new homes.

Some houses are easier to renovate than others. “Two parties, plus housebrand, come to an architecture project: one is the client and what they want, the other is the house and what it wants,” Brown says. “You can turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse, but it’s expensive if you don’t start with something halfway there.”

He helps clients evaluate the raw ingredients from a size, structural, and layout perspective: Is the house oriented to take advantage of views, breezes, and the sun’s angles? If an outdoor connection is desired, where is the kitchen? And are there bedrooms along the back of house that will have to be removed? “If the task is to make dessert, there’s no point in starting with meat and potatoes,” he says.

Size is the biggest issue affecting economic efficiency. The footprint is discounted because of its age, and as soon as you expand it you’re paying a premium—essentially building another house, even if it’s just 200 square feet, Brown explains. “That’s the strength of having an architect participate in the purchase,” he adds. “The design process starts when we go out the door to look for a property.”—c.w.

and added a second floor half the size of the first. “It allowed us to juxtapose a white stucco plinth with a glass volume and apertures of light that erupt out of it,” Jameson says, “and it created nice interstitial spaces. Reusing what’s there allows you to contemplate the house in a less efficient but more unique way.”

Robert Swatt, FAIA, agrees. His firm, Swatt | Miers Architects in Emeryville, Calif., transformed a tired 1970s house in San Francisco’s South Bay area while reusing the foundation and two-thirds of the framing, including the pitched roofs. While out-of-character for the modernist firm, the angled

roofs worked well for the new solar panels, he says, and the combination of pitched and flat roofs added up to something fresh. “By putting our own architectural language with an older language, we created something we never would have come up with had we started from scratch. It was a happy surprise,” Swatt says. “It cost a lot of money, but for the owner it was an ethical issue, not a cost issue.”

Other clients cling to shreds of familiarity, making the decision easy. One couple Jameson worked with spent \$1.5 million reworking the awkward interior of a developer

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McMansion. Although they could have built a one-of-a-kind home for the same cost, the owners were attached to the place they'd inhabited for 20-some years. "All of a sudden the soul of the house would have been different," Jameson says. "Some houses fight like crazy the idea of being renovated; others are very welcoming to it. Houses have their own voices."

Boston architect Jeremiah Eck, FAIA, has

approach this," says Eck, founding principal of Eck | MacNeely Architects. "You can't get away with it anymore; clients are laser-focused on this stuff."

But, in his view, a house has to be worth saving. That means stoutly built, and with good siting, massing, proportion, and detailing. Nineteenth- and early 20th-century houses often fulfill those requirements, Eck notes, but all bets are off on

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—sebastian schmaling, aia

similar feelings in regard to houses. "There's a kind of spirituality to a house that remains if you save it," he says. "On occasion, we've done heart surgery on houses. I think when you're done it feels better, like you've respected the historic nature of the place."

Beyond that sixth sense, the world is looking at value in a new way, Eck says. People are focusing harder on what they have. And if money was the driving force in the old economy, it's also the driving force in the new one. "In the old days there was more leeway about how you

more recent structures. "In about 20 years we'll have a huge stock of houses that will require forensic architecture" when it's time to remodel. "We'll be fixing things rather than starting with a unique slate."

cut and paste

Austin, Texas, already faces this dilemma. It's a city that never attracted much money, and even architecture with provenance tends to be thinly built. David Webber, AIA, principal of Austin-based Webber + Studio Architects, found himself fighting on the wrong side

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of the issue a few years ago when a bungalow he was trying to save from demolition turned out to have single-walled construction. “There were no studs, so if you removed the wood siding the house would fall down,” Webber says. The owners subsequently tore down the house, and a local architect designed a new one on the lot. “The house that replaced it will have

than to enlarge. Contractors often aren’t studying the details early enough in the process to give clients accurate information, according to Webber, and they’re focused on the easiest way to get the job done. “With the foundation of an average house costing around \$40,000 and the framing \$60,000, it’s rare that it makes sense to start over completely,” he says.

“some houses fight like crazy the idea of being renovated; others are very welcoming to it. houses have their own voices.”

—david jameson, faia

more historic value in the long run,” he says.

In a complicated endeavor, every now and then a clean solution presents itself. When Webber designed a large addition to a house a few years ago, the contractor counseled that it would be cheaper to tear down and rebuild. Webber disagreed. The issue was neatly resolved, however, when the house was sold and moved off the lot, clearing the way to build his design as a new house. The clients were thrilled to avoid dealing with the problems of adding to an old house, Webber says, or the guilt of throwing it away.

That house did end up costing more to build new

“Even if the construction is poor, you can use the foundation.”

Milwaukee-based Johnsen Schmalig Architects saved roughly 25 percent of construction costs by taking that approach to a 1970s bilevel tract house a few years ago. The owners didn’t need more space, just more light, storage, and outdoor connections. Principals Sebastian Schmalig, AIA, and Brian Johnsen, AIA, uncluttered the floor plan, added window walls, inserted two cantilevered storage volumes, and popped up the roof with a dramatic clerestory, all while using its boxy footprint,

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plumbing core, and main perimeter walls.

“You can get a good gut feeling for the house’s condition if you start at the bottom, looking at the foundation for damage and water infiltration,” Schmaling says. “Then you move up to the wood frame, checking for mold and rodent damage. Once you’re above ground, everything is game. All

joists,” he says. “We found a beautiful white-washed oak floor that is the same ephemeral light color of concrete. You just need to find alternatives.”

Seattle architect Nils C. Finne, AIA, is working on a new 4,500-square-foot house in Boston where the rough framing bid is close to \$100,000. So from a purely financial perspective, it’s smart to

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—jeremiah eck, faia

four sides are load-bearing so we open it up as much as we want to.” The firm has performed these major interventions several times. Even with builder fees inflated to work around existing conditions, costs typically have been 25 percent lower on gut remodels than starting from scratch, Schmaling says. Invariably, though, there are trade-offs. On a similar project under way in Ann Arbor, Mich., the clients wanted exposed concrete floors. “We had to tell them that the existing floor framing would not support the additional weight of the concrete, and we couldn’t reframe economically with stiffer

start with the viable parts of a house’s skeleton, if you can. With a specialty in highly crafted furniture and interiors, Finne urges remodeling clients to rein in footprint creep because there’s more freedom to invent when you’re not struggling with the budget. “We’re working on three new houses at the moment, and I’m fighting for my cabinet and tile budgets,” he says. “A lot of the renovation work is different from that point of view.”

One of the hardest jobs architects have is helping clients visualize what they’re buying. In Finne’s experience, remodeling also helps clients clear that conceptual hurdle. “I think

it's somewhat easier when you can walk through the spaces and wave your hands around," he says. And while a renovation can be more design-intensive than new construction, the difference isn't significant for Finne. "We go in beforehand and cut holes in the ceiling, peer up with flashlights, trying to figure out what's going on as best we can," he says. "It generally bears out what we think, although sometimes we have to do pretty intensive revisions."

clean slate

Indeed, there's a tipping point on every ambitious project. Architects are weighing the limits of what exists against what they want to achieve. And the minute they start fiddling with bits and pieces, it often makes sense to take the building down. Berkeley, Calif., designer Fu-Tung Cheng once wasted five months trying to make a sprawling, cheaply built house with complex roof lines work with the clients' program. "After awhile you're pushing it uphill," he says. Cheng has learned to call a spade a spade. "I have torn down parts of houses and saved just one area that was remodeled 10 years ago, and lived to regret it. It was like a gnat you couldn't get rid of." Sometimes, he believes, conservation is best served by reusing the materials to build something people respect.

Other circumstances conspire against a house's long-term survival—a deeper understanding of environmental context, for instance. Asked to add 1,000 square feet to a 2,500-square-foot house on Little Round Bay near Annapolis, Md., Dyerman dismantled it and designed a new one farther from the water's edge, a move that helped reduce runoff into the Chesapeake Bay for decades to come. The old house also happened to be poorly planned, along the lines of, "What were they thinking?" Only the utility room had a water view, Dyerman says.

In the remodel-or-rebuild puzzle, the starting point is always the question, "Can we make this work?" Compatibility to program and context is the equation that needs to be solved. But when clients really want brand-new, Dirk Denison, FAIA, principal of Chicago-based Dirk Denison Architects, advises them to sell their perfectly nice house and buy a suitable lot or a small house with low intrinsic value. The same is true when, say, they're hoping to save the updated kitchen in a structurally mediocre dwelling. "I suggest selling the house. Then you don't have the inconvenience of renovating a house you're living in, and you can recoup the cost," he says. "That should always be on the table." *ra*

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