



Before photos courtesy of Richard Nolan



Blending Styles

by Richard Nolan

Arts & Crafts meets '50s Raised Ranch



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I have always felt that a raised ranch would be the ultimate in a renovation project. These architectural designs from the 1950s are now passed over by today's demand for open floor plans and high-end amenities. Due to urban sprawl these dinosaurs often sit on choice pieces of land that sometimes make what the house sits on more valuable than the house itself. When I saw just such a house on Old Niskayuna Road, I decided to take the challenge.

Major renovation projects can be intimidating because they carry with them unforeseen problems. They have to start with a good design, which is even more daunting when an addition is involved. A raised ranch is a particular architectural challenge because of what made it so popular originally: its efficiency in the use of space. Having the front door centrally located and elevated may have made sense when trying to minimize common areas and costs, but it doesn't work with today's needs for open space and aesthetics.

Architect Ken Syvertsen knew his biggest challenge was getting around the front door issue. "What saved this house was being set back on a corner lot," says Syvertsen. We reversed the conventional thinking when adding on to an existing house. The whole orientation of the house was shifted from Cortland Drive to Old Niskayuna Road. By doing so we were able to create a ground level front entry opening to the social rooms. "The goal of the new addition was to make it feel like the original house and have the raised ranch blend in as (if it were) the addition," says Ken. The old living room, dining room and kitchen areas became an expansive master bedroom suite.



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Today's Design Trends

One of my biggest problems was determining what to save and what to eliminate or replace. The green tiled hall bathroom was in perfect shape but the color scheme didn't go with today's muted earthy tones. The low

basement ceiling would never be built today, but unless we wanted to put the house in a dumpster there was no getting around it. The new 23' living room height and 10' kitchen ceiling would have to counterbalance this obvious drawback.

Renovating a house with today's electrical standards is complicated. Putting in a security system is no longer a luxury but a standard. High-speed cable connections in the bedrooms and social rooms are also needed. I went a step farther and made sure a cable port was put over the gas fireplace for that future standard — the plasma TV.

I wanted a gourmet kitchen and that meant putting in high-end appliances and granite. The Wolf stove, from Earl B. Feiden Appliances, is the focal point. It is contrasted by the dark butterfly green granite and cherry cabinets.

Yesterday's luxury was the Jacuzzi tub, but how many times does that tub every get used? My real estate broker said the latest trend is the custom tiled shower with a glass surround. I decided to go one step farther and put in two shower heads — a little more practical than a Jacuzzi.

Formal dining rooms have gotten smaller while kitchens and adjacent family rooms have gotten larger. "Parties will usually gravitate to the kitchen regardless," says Syvertsen, "so we decided to combine those two functions." This was done by placing the kitchen behind a set of raised cabinets and continuing the hardwood floors.

An interior designer can help to integrate design details. Since the exterior has elements of an arts and crafts design, Bonne Mellin, the project's interior designer, chose similar accents. The 8' Simpson Fir front door with dentil shelf from Harbrook, a brass fireplace surround, period paint colors, hardware, and other details carry the theme throughout the house.

Challenges and Pitfalls

A big challenge with renovation is making that connection from the old



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Richard Nolan in the addition's great room.

to the new. It is always good to use the same materials and colors. A tricky part is to have the floors match. In this house we chose 2.5" red oak flooring so that the landing of the stairs in the addition matched with the hall of the existing structure. On the outside, it is important to blend the new siding onto the existing addition. The object is not to see where the addition started.

In doing renovations you need to plan on the unexpected and have something in the budget set aside.

Delays in the beginning of the projects may seem trivial but it is only at the end of the project that their true cost is fully apparent. That is also when you realize the budget is tight. It is always good to add an extra 10 to 15% to the budget as a contingency line item for those unforeseen problems that reveal themselves during the process. Add in more time than you think you should take, too. Chances are you will use it.

Anticipating delays in getting and installing high-end materials needs to be plugged into your timeline or you will be waiting. For example, "the granite man" alone takes several weeks and he has to be done before the backsplash can be placed.

In summary, serious renovation projects start with trying to work out the best design possible. It is a lot easier to change a piece of paper than some drywalled studs. Be ready for the unexpected and attend to details.

Richard Nolan, BA, MBA, started building decks 15 years ago, then built small commercial projects for the state. The Loudonville project was his first major residential renovation.