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Remodeling boom means challenges for designers

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SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

An aging population, soaring home prices and even the aftereffects of Sept. 11 have been cited, but whatever the causes, homeowners are expanding single-story homes to accommodate growing families and are enlarging kitchens and family rooms for more at-home entertaining.

But like all good things, the boom brings its share of challenges for architects and builders alike. Renovation of any scale often poses hurdles that new construction does not.

"The difference is mind-boggling," said John Catlin, an architect and president of JCA Architects Inc. in South Boston, which specializes in historic restorations and renovations. "Sometimes it may be simpler because you're eliminating some of the ego of design by starting within a framework. But otherwise, the work requires an entirely different approach."

Catlin is currently overseeing a project in the Back Bay in which a historic seven-story building is having three additional floors added. At the same time, the entire interior is being reworked. His firm also worked on the renovation of an old firehouse in Natick being converted into an arts center.

"Finding the right combination of use for the additional space and the right building to expand is really the challenge," Catlin said.

For builders, the difference between building from scratch and reworking an existing structure is equally stark.

"New construction, by and large, is a product business," said David Bryan, the president of Blackdog Builders in Salem, N.H. "Renovation is a service business. You're going into someone's house, most of the time working right around them."

That means more attention to details that aren't in play in new construction, Bryan said, such as ensuring that all subcontractors can be trusted on the site to conduct themselves professionally — right down to how they choose to express

their anger when they hammer their thumbs.

"It means making sure our work schedule can fit around yours, so we don't catch you walking out of the bathroom in your underwear when we show up to work," Bryan added.

Blackdog handles those challenges with an extensive set of pre-construction consultations, in which the customer meets the head carpenter and other key employees and works out a suitable schedule.

For Bryan, business is booming,

thanks to extensive additions and expansions of homes in Andover in surrounding communities, where a gap in the housing stock between starter homes and high-end executive properties creates the need for growing families to expand their existing houses.

And with any renovation comes

the other big challenge not associated with new construction: Expectations almost always exceed budgets.

"People are almost always surprised at what a project will cost," Bryan said.

While the pre-construction meetings, which focus heavily on budget, help cut down on disappointment and surprises, customers often have to learn to accept that reality may not exactly match their imaginations.

Meanwhile, remodeling designers and contractors have another limitation: the existing structure.

"You're working within someone else's framework," said David Morgan, president of DRM Design Build Inc. in Southborough, who does much of his work in Weston and Wellesley, where homes are often being expanded to the limits of their original lots.

While most homes are well-built, there were periods when shortcuts were in favor, when fast and cheap prevailed over well-built. Those homes create additional challenges when it comes time to expand or remodel them.

"Some of the tract developments built in the '50s, '60s and '70s were not done

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to the standards people have today," Morgan said. "That means when you start to do something new, you also have to upgrade to the level people want now."

And that may be one of the biggest challenges Morgan has come across in his 12 years in business.

"The hardest part is knowing when to stop," he said. "Projects can mushroom. It's a real challenge for everybody to temper their expectations and keep an eye on what's really important. That's the real crux of remodeling."

Sometimes, that means going the extra mile. Morgan recently completed a job in which he raised all the ceilings on both floors of a home by 15 inches. "Projects like that are a lot of fun," he said.

Both Morgan and Bryan offer design-

build services, meaning they handle the project from start-to-finish. Though they have worked with architects in the past, and say the addition of a third party can often inject even more complications into the mix.

"Triangular relationships almost never work out," says Bryan.

But Catlin said architects can often bring a kind of vision to a project that can benefit it tremendously. He said renovation and remodeling on any scale has the added benefit of conserving and recycling existing structures, avoiding the new to add new construction.

"Both renovation and new construction have their advantages," he said. "I'm a big believer in recycling that fabric of the community. But you have to find the right way to renovate and reuse a building as well. That's the fun part."