



The Big Decision: Build vs. Massive Renovation

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As a custom residential architect, I am often asked the question, “Should we renovate our home or should we tear down?” Over the past 27 years of practicing architecture, this has actually become an easy question for me to answer. How I answer is completely dependent upon three factors. Assuming that the home in question is not on any historic registry or in any historic district or overlay, I need to understand the client’s budgetary goal. In the mid-Atlantic area, new homes construct anywhere from approximately \$200/SF up to \$700/SF at the very high level of detailed design.

The first step in my thinking is a relatively mathematical effort. If a potential client desires to spend considerably less than a dollar amount related to building new, then the project becomes a renovation. This seems like a simple answer. However, it is much more complicated. The challenge is that most often the scope desired by client as a renovation is far greater than the desired

budget communicated. My responsibility, as a design professional, is to reduce the project scope by educating the client, providing options, and aligning my client’s goals with their desired expenditures. Sometimes, this requires helping a client to better understand alternative options in the renovation that help save costs. Otherwise, the budget must expand.

On the other hand, if the structure is built, say, in the 1920s and sits on piers for foundation, then the project is likely not worth the renovation when the costs tip over a limited dollar investment. In these much older structures, the “renovation” desired is usually very extensive due to the age and condition of all of the elements, as well as due to the 1920s plan configuration that does not come close to meeting current living goals. In these project types, it is often more economical for a carpenter to bring down a wall, reframe it and tip it back up than it is to cut and patch an old wall in several places. When these efforts apply to every wall in a home, this becomes a teardown unless the owner is passionate

for the historical fabric, whether exposed or hidden to the eye. Having fully restored and lived in a home on the national historic registry, I can attest to the fact that extensive historic restoration is more expensive than new construction. The only incentive is your passion for history combined with tax credit dollars available for restoring a glorious old structure.

Now, the third test for determining if the house should be renovated or torn down is as follows. While standing in the existing home, I’m often heard asking the questions, “Is every function in the house moving somewhere else? Is every window moving? Is the stair relocating? Are all of the plumbing locations changing? And lastly, is the existing 8 foot ceiling OK?” When the response to these questions is “Yes, I want the new kitchen over there, I want all these walls to be glass and no, the ceiling isn’t tall enough,” then it’s a teardown...or you sell it and buy something else.

In closing, whichever is the solution there can still be a beautiful outcome. That’s the wonderful thing about design.