

March 2009

To All:

Given the numerous recent postings seeking references for general contractors or subcontractors, I wanted to relate my recent experience with our architect (Bruce Rich, "Bruce Rich & Associates") and our general contractor (Jeff Robins, "JEFFCO") -- and they both are long-time Luxmanor residents. And I want to say a few words about our interior designer, who lives nearby (Adrienne Selzer, "AR Design Ltd."). I'll throw in some of my thoughts about construction projects, as I go along. This is just one man's experience, and I hope it will be of interest.

Jeff and Bruce have worked on many homes in Luxmanor and in this area. Ditto for Adrienne. They have loads of references, so you don't have to just take my word for it.

My comments are chiefly directed at major projects, rather than "handy man" situations. But my perception is that sometimes the line between the two can be blurred and what appears to be a simple project can end up being more complicated than first thought.

In our case, we did a major renovation job that included a major addition to an existing house, built in 1964. It is one of those things in life that "says easy, but does hard". The end result in our case is absolutely stunning, based upon the evaluations of several people. If anyone in Luxmanor would like to hear more about my experience or actually even take a look at the house, please feel free to contact me. I'll be happy to tell you more and show you more. The house really speaks for itself. If you're really considering a project and looking for a general contractor and an architect, you definitely should consider talking to Jeff and Bruce and Adrienne. They are extremely professional about what they do.

It is my impression that often homeowners "think" they know what is desired or what needs to be done. But most people have a very limited understanding of such matters. An experienced architect and general contractor are simply essential, in my opinion, if you want to end up with something that is well done, well built, looks good, and won't be the source of endless headaches and problems starting almost immediately.

To me, finding a general contractor and an architect is like looking for a doctor or a dentist -- you want the very best people available. Nobody wants to hire a contractor who is going to be creating problems for a house that will surface at a later date. So, we spent some time checking around.

I know that many folks want to get several bids and take the lowest one. But you probably wouldn't try to find a surgeon using that approach, and having work done on your home is almost as important. Picking the low bidder might not be a good plan in many situations, because the best people generally always charge more and are well worth the extra money. If a contractor bids low to get a job, that often means he will be forced to cut corners to be able to make a profit. That's how I see it, anyway. To each their own, of course.

In the case of a major construction job involving an older home, the first consideration often becomes:

(a) do we do a complete "tear down"

vs

(b) can we "add on" to the original structure.

This analysis requires experts who can properly assess the true condition of the original house and its foundation walls, footing, plumbing, wiring, framing, etc. My strong impression is that many contractors today aren't that all that familiar with previous building techniques. That knowledge of prior building methods is necessary to analyze the project and to do a proper job.

A related consideration is that most additions often end up looking like exactly that -- an addition. But what you really want is an addition that DOESN'T look like an addition, but instead appears to be a seamless part of the original house. That's not all that easy to do or accomplish, however. This requires a good architect and a good general contractor.

And here's another thing to consider -- doing an addition often results in running into unexpected problems. When that happens -- and it is likely to happen -- you want and need to have an experienced general contractor who KNOWS what the likely issues are, can recognize them when they present themselves, and on top of that can then proceed to deal with those matters properly.

The foundation and foundation wall issues -- these are things that an experienced general contractor is equipped to identify and know what to do. Obviously these things are critical if you want to obtain a good job. Attaching a "new" footing and foundation wall to an existing foundation can be tricky. It often results in the introduction of water into the basement area.

The issue of "water" in basements is of particular interest to me. I believe there are many myths and misconceptions involved where water infiltration and basement "water proofing" is concerned. Jeff Robins knows what he's doing in that department. From the beginning, he made it clear he was big proponent for having proper grading on the lot and around the perimeter of the house. (If you inspect our house that Jeff just built for us, the proper grading of the lot is very apparent and it is easy to see how water is unlikely to be a problem for us --- and the things you cannot see virtually guarantee that water and moisture will not be an issue for us).

With all of the current concern about "mold" in homes, I am not concerned about that either. Both Jeff and Bruce understand the causes and how to prevent mold problems. There are also many misconceptions about mold. In any event, mold will never be a problem for us either. Proper measures were taken to prevent mold issues for my house. They did several things to prevent it.

I know some people like the idea of being their own general contractor. But I don't think it's wise in many situations. Most people simply lack anything even close to being qualified or having the required knowledge and experience. Maybe at one time they knew a few things but their knowledge is not current. I found that to be true in my case. Most people would not know what subcontractors are needed or how to find them. The best subcontractors often are not going to give your job priority, because they know it is a "one time deal". The best subcontractors might not even deal with a homeowner directly. They will be tempted to cut corners and hope you won't know or won't see. You WILL NOT be first on their list of priorities in many cases. They are not going to give your project a lot of thought or planning. They often don't have And so on and so on. And if you run into building inspector issues, good luck without a general contractor who knows the ropes. In contrast, subcontractors who routinely work with a general contractor are going to give 110%. And if they make a mistake, the general contractor will KNOW IT and make them fix it.

Our situation was special in many ways, but most of what we did would translate 100% for most people who want the option of remaining in a house as they age and being able to function if they need to use a wheelchair or need in-house caregivers at some point down the road. We needed a house to suit the needs of an older person who is confined to a wheelchair, who did not want to be forced to go to a nursing home. These days, nursing home costs can exceed \$100,000 annually. So staying in your own home may be less expensive and also better than going the nursing home route.

In our case, we couldn't have the typical narrow doorways or cramped bathrooms that are in so many houses and don't work out too well with wheelchairs and older people, who need more space. And caregivers need to have lots of extra space to deal with an incapacitated person. Caregivers are not interested in injuring themselves because of a lack of space to be able to safely assist a patient. Extra space is also required in the event that specialized equipment may be needed. Many are not aware of the limitations of their homes and only discover them after someone becomes disabled and needs more room to move around, to bathe, and so forth. Having a cramped home can lead to being TOLD (by medical professionals, social workers, etc.) that a person cannot be safely maintained at home and must be sent to a nursing home.

We started off by hiring Bruce Rich to design the project. Nothing of this magnitude can be done properly without an architect. Bruce has won many professional awards and has extensive experience with commercial and residential projects, including nursing homes. He has had lots of experience in dealing with the problems of older people, wheelchairs, etc. He also knows all about solar energy and all the so-called "green" building concepts. He is up on the latest "universal design" methods -- which is a nice buzz word for a house that is set up for wheelchair access but LOOKS LIKE any other house. The bottom line is this -- Bruce did a tremendous job for us. He listened to what we wanted and pretty much did everything we asked and much more. He incorporated lots of wonderful, up - to -date features and made the best possible use of the available space. He has tremendous skills. His sense of "scale" is superior. Bruce is very responsive. I would even say he is an artist. He also led us to our general contractor, our kitchen designer and ultimately our interior designer. When anyone sees our house, they have to realize that it started with having a great architect.

Bruce recommended 3 builders for us. The second builder we interviewed was Jeff Robins. We didn't have any further interviews. We were immediately very impressed with Jeff, who is an award-winning builder. He has lots of experience building custom homes and additions in this area, for many years. His clients rave about him. We hired him immediately. We felt confident he could handle any surprises that were likely to come up. He knows the ropes in dealing with building inspectors. Jeff really knows his business. He has great people working for him. He knows who the best suppliers are, what the best products are, and has the very best subcontractors. He has clout with all of them.

What is really great about Jeff is that he is a hard worker. He's serious about what he does. He starts work early each and every day. He's even available on the weekends. This guy is flat out INTENSE. He was at the job early every single day, first thing in the morning. He stays on top of everything and everyone and knows who is doing or going to do what. Jeff normally answers the phone himself when you call. Or, if not available, he always returns phone calls and emails within a short time. He has a great electrician and plumber and concrete man and a roofing guy. He has the greatest stone and brick people anyone could hope for. And the list is long. And he stays on top of these people.

I really appreciated how flexible Jeff was. He put up with quite a few curve balls that I threw at him. We changed directions on him 180 degrees more than once. But no matter what I came up with, he dealt with it and always did his best to please.

We had several special needs and Jeff knew who to get and what to get. For example, I was interested in a geothermal heating and cooling system. Jeff knew exactly who to get. I wanted special wood flooring and he took care of that. I wanted an elevator. No problem, he knew who to call. I wanted a water treatment system and "bam" he knew the guy to do that. I was concerned about drainage, "water" issues, and foundation wall "strength" issues --- and Jeff and Bruce knew how to deal with all of those matters too and how to do it. He knew all about insulation. I wanted products that were safe and proven and Jeff (and Bruce) are knowledgeable about all of those things as well. Jeff had great workmen for us in every trade involved in this house. I had several special requests and each time he came through. And so forth and so on. It is a very long list.

Another thing that was great about Jeff and also Bruce and also Adrienne -- when I suggested a "bad or stupid idea", they just came right out and told me so (that happened a few times). But they were ready to do what I wanted if I had a good idea. They looked out after my interests. For example, we hear a lot about solar energy these days. Well, the truth is, that technology still has a ways to go. It has a long, long payback time. Geothermal has a similar problem, and it costs a lot to install -- BUT the operating costs are very low. But there are many things to consider and you need to have a qualified subcontractor who knows what he's doing.

Jeff provided us with a full-time onsite building superintendent (Tom Kelly) whose involvement was invaluable. He kept things moving smoothly. With lots of workers on the jobsite, it is essential for someone to be in charge every minute to make sure things are done right and mistakes aren't made. This isn't easy with lots of activity all at the same time and materials being delivered and so on. Of course, it costs a little more to have an onsite building superintendent but it is worth every penny and then some. The amount of coordination required to build a house is mind-boggling. That's why you want a good architect and a good builder. We had a couple of runarounds with the County. Jeff and Bruce had the experience to deal with these sorts of problems. They both have great reputations with the County, which is helpful when things come up, let's just put it that way. Having our superintendent on site was essential when building inspectors dropped by unexpectedly.

During the project, one particular issue came up that illustrates "why" having an experienced, influential, "recognized" general contractor and architect is simply invaluable. We had a major problem with our patio doors leaking water. This was a major window and door manufacturer with a reputation to protect. This was their top-of-the-line product. The local dealer was a problem and is now out of business because of financial problems resulting from the bad economy. Jeff (and Bruce) were all over these people and MADE THEM fix it and get it right. It was Jeff's tenacity and reputation (and Bruce's also) that really forced this company to do what was needed. Jeff was on the phone with their top management and was relentless until they performed, which they finally did. I have to think many builders wouldn't have had the ability or the clout or even wanted to know how to do this. That's a story and a problem that came up whether to go with the lowest bidder or an inexperienced builder. There were a number of similar issues and problems that came up along the way, and having an experienced "team" was a great benefit to us in each case. We had a few curve balls from the County's building inspectors and permitting officials and they were all dealt with.

And I have to add a few comments about Adrienne Selzer, our interior designer. Every color, finish, etc. reflects her impeccable taste. She selected so many things in the house I don't even know where to start. Even the outside colors were chosen by Adrienne or she helped (roofing, painting, window color, brick, stone, doors). Everything flows. If someone comes to see the house, they'll know right off the bat that we had a great interior designer. I have to let the result speak for itself. I would have been lost without Adrienne to help me with all of these decisions.

By the way, things are slow right now and it is an excellent time to do a project, get good pricing and get lots of attention from an architect or general contractor -- at least that is my guess.

Summing it up, if you are planning to do a major home construction project, all I can say is there is a lot to think about. It is not a matter to be taken lightly. There's no substitute for having an architect and a general contractor with plenty of experience and a superb reputation. Even minor jobs can benefit from having an experienced contractor who understands the process and takes the time to diagnose the problem correctly and do the job the right way. It's a way to avoid a lot of potential pitfalls that might not show up until years later. That's my thoughts on the subject. I give Jeff Robins, Bruce Rich and Adrienne Selzer my complete endorsement and would recommend them to anyone.

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