

Move or remodel? Compare both needs

Written by Jeb Breithaupt
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I've been working with the nicest young couple: They have three kids and live in a picture-perfect, middle-class neighborhood on a cul-de-sac. The kids have close friends on the block, and all of the parents there feel it's a safe place for their youngsters to ride their bikes and play outdoors all they want.

But the couple has wanted a bigger house for awhile now, and their kitchen and breakfast room are sorely in need of a facelift. So they've been shopping for a bigger place for about a year.

They've found lots of properties in their price range; it's a pretty good time to buy a house, after all. But they're finding the best prices on larger homes come in neighborhoods a little farther from town than they want to live. And most of the homes closer in town are smaller than the one they already have.

Plus, they want to live in an established neighborhood, so they're looking at existing homes rather than in brand-new subdivisions. As it turns out, many of those older homes need just as much updating and enlarging as the one they live in now.

So they have decided not to move. Instead, they're going to remodel.

Initially, they thought it would be cheaper to move than to remodel. But it turned out that they probably would have to do at least as much work on the next place if they traded the 10-year-old house they live in for another 10-year-old house somewhere else.

Plus, they would give up the clean, safe neighborhood where their friends and their kids' friends live and where they already feel at home.

If you're in the same boat, consider remodeling rather than relocating.

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The upgrades you make to your home will pay off if you stay in your home for five to seven years, according to remodeling industry estimates. And the changes you make—adding on or designing your dream kitchen, for instance—just might convince you to stay put for many years beyond that.

But house size and the quality of the neighborhood shouldn't be your only motivation for staying home. If you're going to keep the property you already own for the long term, it's a good idea to make non-cosmetic improvements as well so you don't wind up with an expensive structural problem that will make you wish you had moved long ago.

Here are three important areas that homeowners often overlook when they start remodeling:

1. The foundation. Does yours need "leveling?" The only way to know is to ask a foundation specialist to evaluate its condition. If you see deep cracks around windows and doors inside or outside—deep enough to stick the point of a pencil into—that could be a sign of a foundation problem.
2. The roof. In Louisiana, you need a good roof to keep the rain out. If yours is in disrepair, consider tending to it before you remodel your kitchen; you need a sturdy roof more than you need new countertops, after all.
3. Heating, cooling, electricity and plumbing. If your home is 50-plus years old and it's never been remodeled, there's a good chance that those systems are out of date, ill-equipped to handle all of the appliances and electronics your family uses, and on the brink of a breakdown. A tip: Bring your house up to today's building codes so your systems will continue to operate safely and reliably.

When most of us think about remodeling, we envision how beautiful our redesigned rooms will look. But it's a mistake to start adding rooms or gutting the kitchen and bathrooms before you look inside the walls. You might install your new appliances, add new light fixtures, buy a state-of-the-art coffee maker or tuck a new treadmill into a corner of the breakfast room—and then find out your home's aging electrical system can't handle the load.

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Once you have taken care of what you can't see, you can feel confident that the time and money you spend remodeling what you can, will leave you with a place where your family will be comfortable and proud to live for many, many years.

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