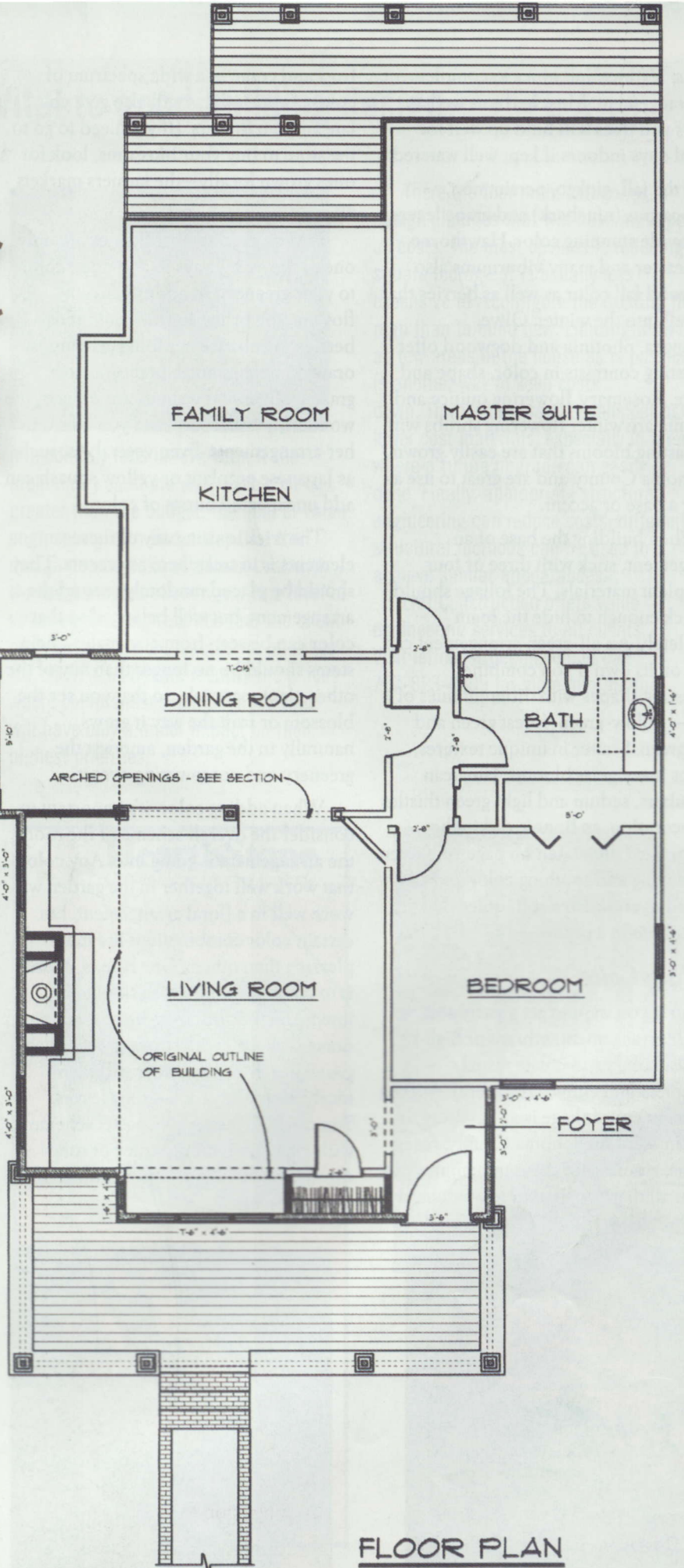


The Strategic Remodel

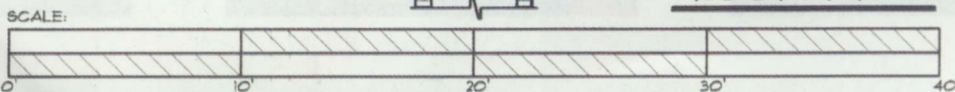
story by Pam Williams

BRICK OVERLAY ON CONCRETE PORCH

Much has been written and joked about in regards to the horrors of remodeling one's house. There's the old saw about the true test of a marriage being a home remodel. Let's face it, living without your kitchen, a bathroom or half of your house for many weeks to perhaps months is stressful.



FLOOR PLAN



Another remodel hobgoblin is the infamous money pit scenario—start messing around with one area of the house and soon your project list is growing by leaps and bounds as you uncover yet more that you'd like to do or that needs fixing.

Divorce court and bankruptcy fears aside, the critical time in a remodeling project happens upfront, before the demolition crowbar is even lifted. According to the professionals, the key to a successful remodel is all in the planning.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

So where does the planning start? David Leff of Leff Construction in Sebastopol says that any design plan has to fall within the context of the budget that you decide you can handle. Set that number and then go from there.

Foremost is identifying the “problem” that has triggered the desire to remodel. It can be a physical limitation or lifestyle change that has altered the efficiency or comfort of your home. That problem (and it's not always a negative thing) could be a new baby, deciding that the kitchen is too small, that you want to give your teenagers a space of their own, or an

Your budget will go further by moving or removing interior walls, rather than taking on more expensive projects such as adding new foundations. Recapture some underutilized space...

area of the house that is too dark. Decide what the problem is and how much money you can spend to solve it.

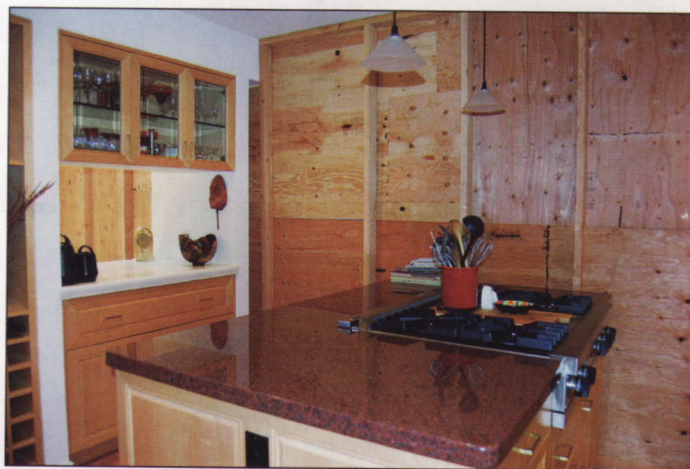
There are often many solutions to any given problem, but your budget should be the arbiter of narrowing down those solutions. Look at the costs of each option (whether it's an addition or a reconfiguration to the existing floor plan) and weigh the cost-to-benefit tradeoff, a ratio of the value of your money to your priorities. Leff calls this decision process ‘value engineering.’

Leff applies a ‘design-build’ approach to construction that brings together the architect, contractor and in-house engineer from the very beginning. This way, costs for any aspect of the project are known from the get-go and for structural changes that come up.

Planning without a budget is where the nightmarish qualities of remodeling can raise their ugly heads. The homeowner falls in love with a design, but suddenly can't afford to make it happen.

Casey Caldwell of Caldwell Trouette General Contractors in Healdsburg agrees that an absolute budget number must be

set. Equally important is to state all the expected inconveniences up front, so there are no surprises once construction begins. While some changes to the plan are unavoidable, Caldwell says that staying on top of any changes and keeping the schedule, having status meetings and being respectful of the client's property, lifestyle and even pets will help get the homeowners through the remodel process with the least grief.



Above— Scaffolding shows the four-foot perimeter being built out from the original footprint, photo by Sarah Bradbury; Below— A temporary wall separates the living space from the area being remodeled photos by Sarah Bradbury. [Page 14] Drawing courtesy of Carol Chapman, CPBD.

EXISTING FOOTPRINT VS. BUILDING OUT

Leff has made a practice of having his clients draw their perimeter walls on a blank piece of paper and then fill in their dream floor plan. He suggests that big changes can be made in not so big ways. “It's possible to refine within the footprint of a house. Think out of the box,” says Leff. But not necessarily outside of the house. Your budget will go further by moving or removing interior walls, rather than taking on more expensive projects such as adding new foundations. “Recapture some underutilized space,” he recommends.

Leff points out that many older homes used lots of space



for circulation—hallways, for example. By opening walls, creating space and changing ceiling heights, it's possible to create "transparencies" in a home, also known as 'tangential circulation' in the trade, which utilizes the edge of a room for traffic without separating it as a hall or a "circulation-only" area.

"Consider the small changes—relocating doors and windows, for example. Ask yourself, 'how do I entertain? Do I need a formal dining room?' Spend time beforehand carefully considering your design options and how you want your house to work for you," advises Leff.

Carole Chapman, a certified professional building designer in Healdsburg, says that many people buy a house and immediately see changes they want to make to it. Her advice is to wait at least a year. "Experience it through all four seasons before changing anything. You sometimes use space differently than you had planned," she says.

... be sure to get personal references for contractors. Once you find someone reputable and that you can work with, trust them. Let them do their job. The good ones will respect your family patterns, including making sure the cat doesn't get out.

An example she gives is of a certain corner of a family room, where you pictured the TV. After a time, you might discover that this corner makes a really good seating area or reading nook because of the wonderful light it gets.

Chapman says that creating a master plan for eventual remodeling projects is a good idea, but more importantly, to keep that master plan flexible, as lifestyle changes and time may alter how you use a space in your home.

So we're ready to tear out that wall now, right? One more piece of advice from Caldwell: be sure to get personal

references for contractors. "Like in any field, most general contractors are honest, care about their customers and do a good job. There are a few who give the industry a bad rep," says Caldwell. "Once you find someone reputable and that you can work with, trust them. Let them do their job." The good ones will respect your family patterns, including making sure the cat doesn't get out.

One Sebastopol woman and her husband know they want to remodel their in-town, vintage 1960s home. They have asked for referrals to contractors, but haven't called one yet. "First my husband and I have to agree on what it is we want done," she laughed.

Sounds like a plan.



Left— A redesigned kitchen (before and after) gained an airy yet still-compact work space with removal of a wall, photo courtesy of Leff Construction. Above— A remodeled bath benefits from a repositioned commode and door; photos courtesy of Leff Construction.