

COLUMN FOR JANUARY 21, 2006.

HEADLINE; PLANNING FOR AN ADDITION

Q; We are hoping to add a family room to our home this year. I have watched Holmes on Homes on TV and from what I see this can be very scary. How do you suggest the average homeowner go about this?

A: That HGTV show is very popular and I must admit Mike does make some very valid points. Lack of skill and construction knowledge coupled with a lack of just plain honesty is the number one issue that most of his shows focus upon. That said there are many good, reputable and skilled tradesmen around that quietly go about their business building a reputation one house or addition at a time. Planning for an addition takes time and establishing what you expect out the room, its actual use and how it will fit into your present home are paramount. In my former life as a builder I often brought some hard reality to a customer. They had dreams of an addition and omitted to consider how it will affect the existing home and the present systems installed.

My first suggestion is to make a scale drawing of you present home and it must be accurate. Now do the same with the proposed addition, include furniture if possible. Don't under-estimate the space that stairs take for example. Take the time to familiarize yourself with the position of your drains and water supply. This is especially important if a bathroom is planned. Confirm the size of your electrical panel and see if you have any open spaces in the panel. If you have a fuse panel this often means an upgrade to a breaker panel for example. It will depend upon the use of the addition. One of the main stumbling blocks I hit upon was a furnace that lacked enough capacity, especially in a larger addition. Some oil furnaces can be increased in BTU capacity, this is generally not possible with a gas furnace. Proper supply and returns are important, return ducting is often forgotten in many additions.

One factor that is often overlooked is the manner in which the addition foundation is abutted to the existing home. I have seen more additions than I care to discuss that have settled away from the main home due to a poor basement installation. This should be number one on the list, if the basement is wrong, everything from there up is "fudged" to fit. Proper drainage should be added and it may be necessary to upgrade the "weeper" system in the main home.

Lets start with a list; 1) familiarize yourself with your home and complete your drawings. If it is a large addition, contact an architect or architectural draftsman and have these drawn up for you. They can also help with your specifications. 2) Contact a reputable contractor and ask him to look at your plans and confirm your ideas. One thing Holmes on Homes does do, Mike is a Skilled Contractor, but he is not an electrician, plumber or heating specialist. He hires the specialty trades and then oversees their work. 3) Take your plans or drawings to the local building department and see if they have any issues. I have seen more than one plan get slowed down or reconfigured due to a zoning by-law or municipal regulation. 4) Do your due diligence on the contractors you are considering. Contact your local office of the Canadian Home Builder Association and ask them for references. Their membership is usually reputable and they often have member-contractors who specialize in renovation work. Ask your friends and neighbours, or call a tradesman you have used in the past. 5) Unless you have strong construction skills, pay a pro to handle the general contractors responsibilities. I cannot count the number of times in my former life where I got the call "we are busy and cannot get our addition finished, can you help?" only to arrive and find the job has been wrong from the start. 6) Try and get three quotations for the project. It is tough these days with the demands for trades, but try hard and then compare each quote carefully. 7) If one quote is very low, throw it away. If every contractor is working off the same estimate, there should not be major differences. 7) Get comfortable with whomever you choose to build your addition, but keep it at a professional level. 8) Get a contract drawn up that is in clear and simple language that both you and your contractor agree upon. Include a clause that allows for mutual consent when changes arise, they will, then set out in the agreement that both must "sign off" on the changes. Make sure all

the necessary insurances are in place. 9) Make sure the necessary permits are obtained, the permit should be attached to the building for all to see.

My last suggestion is, keep the lines of communication open between yourself and your general contractor. If you don't express yourself or if you feel the contractor is not speaking up, have a coffee and thrash it out. Remember you chose him and he is spending your money, understand there will be delays but if everybody is on the same page the addition of your dreams can soon be a reality.

Last week I asked what is a frog? The answer was B) the hollow portion in the face of a brick. Now this week we want to know, what is pebble dash? Is it A) term for applying pebbles into fresh exterior mortar. B) the amount of aggregate used in repoint mortar C) another name for a rough cast finish on exterior walls. The answer in next week's column

Cam Allen L.I.W. RHI is a former builder/contractor and teaches Home Inspectors on Heritage Home Inspection. He can be reached at cam.allen@sympatico.ca