

Raising the rock-solid ranch

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Robbie Harkey (left) will be next door when her daughter-in-law Bonnie, granddaughter Taylor and son Reid move into the renovated home. JEFF SINER – jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

More Information

Tips for homeowners from John Morgan, Urban Building Group:

Do your homework. Check references, visit one or two of the company's projects, meet personnel, review the firm's permit history before hiring a contractor.

Plan ahead. Select a contractor that emphasizes preconstruction planning with your design and material selections.

Check documents. Make sure your plans and construction documents are detailed and concise.

Schedule regular meetings. Though certain situations and decisions require daily communication, a weekly production meeting will keep all parties up-to-date.

Be a good partner. Be straightforward and easy to work with, and your contractor will want to please you even more. If you're happy with the work, don't wait till the end to tell the workers.

Be safe. For all projects, but especially those where owners have children and pets, be sure your contractor contains hazards such as lead paint and fall areas. The project manager should partition off the construction zone and potential danger areas.

Check insurance. Let your insurance agent know the work you're planning and be sure you have sufficient coverage for the improved value of your project. Verify that the contractor has workers' compensation and liability insurance.

When the Observer wrote about it in 1966, the house in Matthews was a showplace – and a curiosity.

The contemporary ranch contained close to 20,000 square feet of marble and tile – on the floors, walls, ceilings, swimming pool and pool house. Its owners, Jack and Myrle Renfrow, ran Renfrow Tile, a Charlotte tile and marble distributing business. They felt their home showcased the beauty and durability of those products.

Even the closets were lined with tile, which made for easy cleaning, the Renfrows told architects and others who stopped by to check out the unusual home.

The crowning touch was the living room's travertine marble wall and fireplace, quarried in Carrara, Italy. The large pieces were cut from a mountain, numbered as they came out and installed on the wall so that the patterns and veins of the marble matched perfectly.

As a boy, Reid Harkey loved to hear his grandfather telling the story of the travertine. Now, he's renovating the Renfrows' 1959 ranch, and the marble wall will be the centerpiece of the home he'll share with his wife, Bonnie, and 11-year-old daughter, Taylor.

Reid and his brother Jeff Harkey run Harkey Tile & Stone in east Charlotte, a successor to their grandparents' business. The Harkeys' offices and stone fabrication shop are in the same building his grandparents built in the early 1950s.

So it was fitting that Reid Harkey would renovate “The House That Marble And Tile Built,” as the Observer called it in its 1966 story.

The Harkey family owns 15 acres on a hill overlooking Sardis Road North. Reid's mother, Robbie Harkey, lived next door to her parents with her husband, Jim Harkey, before his death in 1999. The Harkeys bought the Renfrows' tile business and raised their four sons to be close to their grandparents. All four sons live within a mile, says Robbie Harkey.

When the renovation of the Renfrow house is complete, Taylor will occupy the same room her grandmother did when Robbie Harkey was a teenager.

The Renfrows both died in 2005. The home sat empty while Reid and Bonnie Harkey tried to decide whether to renovate it or start from scratch by building a new house on the property.

Work begins

They decided to renovate, and started in June. Since the roof needed replacing and the Harkeys wanted more space, they added a second story.

Charlotte architect Ken Edwards drew a plan that had the European feel the Harkeys wanted, but stitched together some of the house's existing elements. The façade will marry the ranch's gray-and-tan marble veneer with a stucco second-story centerpiece. The backyard pool and contemporary poolhouse will remain untouched.

Builder John Morgan, who heads Urban Building Group in Charlotte, said the renovation will add about 2,000 square feet to the 4,000-square-foot ranch. The ranch has large rooms, he says, but just three bedrooms and 2.5 baths. The second story will add another bedroom and bath, a media room, a billiard room and an office.

“The Harkeys could have probably saved 25 percent on this project by tearing the house down. There's plenty of room to build a new home,” says Morgan. “But Reid wasn't going to tear down his grandfather's house.”

The 1959 house had radiant heating, which heated the structure with hot water running through floors made of concrete and tile. The decision to keep the radiant heating led to extra work and the installation of a backup system.

“It is great heat, uniformly radiating throughout the house with no vents to blow dust or cause drafts,” says Reid Harkey.

The renovation, to be completed in the spring, will increase the size of the foyer, kitchen and family room, rearrange space in the bathrooms and leave the bedrooms and formal areas intact. The home was ahead of its time in having generous closets, spacious bathrooms and other spaces that lived large, the Harkeys say.

“It was a real masterpiece in its day, and we are proud that the updated version will be a nice mix of old and new,” says Harkey.

Original tile to go

Most of the tile will go as the house is renovated. Much of it is worn or dated, such as the tiny mosaic tile with contrasting colors that lines the bathrooms. The kitchen was covered in light blue tile squares that gave it an institutional look, says Morgan.

What will remain are memories of family fun and togetherness, the Harkeys say.

They talk about swimming in the pool and hot dog Saturdays, with the Renfrows fixing hot dogs on a rotisserie grill for family and friends who showed up.

“My grandparents loved to entertain – I guess that's where I get it,” says Harkey.

“I have so many wonderful memories in this house, and I'm looking forward to making many more.”



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