Exploding Boxes

My experiences in teaching dozens of classes to hundreds of homeowners, designers and contractors, and as an architect designing thousands of residential projects over the years, has made me aware of a whole grab bag of misconceptions and hand-me-down-bad-information that might steer you in the wrong direction if you're not careful. In the spirit of 'blowing up boxes' - which I think should be a rainy day activity for every person, organization and government body at some level or another, let me share a few myths I've run into over and over and set the record straight.

Myth No. 1   It costs less to remodel.

Wrong. It always costs more, on a 'unit cost basis' (i.e. per square foot or per room or any other such measure) to remodel a home than it costs to build to the same quality level in a new home. Use a little mental exercise to understand why. If you were a plumber, which would be easier and less risky: working on a new home, under open sky laying plastic pipe in neatly dug trenches, or crawling under a fifty year old house, fighting spiders and rotten pipes in the hopes of retrofitting a really old plumbing system (that may have been done wrong in the first place, and may have already failed in three different ways)??? You get my drift I think. Remodeling should only be decided as a rational direction when all options have been put on the table, including: moving to another home that might already meet your needs; moving to a new home; and even the more exotic option of moving 'down' to a less expensive home in a better neighborhood, in order to maximize the money available for a remodel. Consider this: with enough of a budget, anything about a house can be changed! What you can NOT change no matter how much money you're prepared to spend is the look of the neighbor's house across the street, the size of the mature tree on the front lawn, and the barking dog and crabby neighbor next door.

Myth No. 2   Design is easy, construction is hard.

Good design can be VERY hard, as it requires discipline, imagination, training and experience, all of which tend to be in short supply in our modern world. On the other hand, if a design is well thought out *and* documented, the problems have been solved ON PAPER. In this case, building is the linear implementation, step by logical step, of a scripted solution. Unlike building to a detailed and well crafted plan, Design *is not* a linear process. I think that's why design is so misunderstood, and can seem so mysterious. Most of what passes for 'design' is really just drafting – simply drawing a preconceived idea. A true design process – as might be undertaken by an architect - is *circular* . After gathering data on the existing conditions, goals, and constraints, I 'take a stab' at a solution making needed assumptions using my experience and training. The resulting concept is then explored as a pattern in the abstract (by sketches done on paper or on a computer). Using the sketches I flesh out the conceptual pattern sufficiently so that I can then EVALUATE it --- reviewing appearance, cost, codes, function and other issues that will be used to judge the quality of the design. When I've completed that review, I take the results from checking the design against those parameters, and go back the start and adjust the design … and round and round I go – and that just to develop ONE idea completely. In my opinion, before you select a design as 'best for you' meaning it gives you the highest return in function and beauty for the money invested, you should be evaluating at LEAST THREE and preferably more options. To come up with three to five really creative and completely different

design options that lay out the function, costs, advantages and disadvantages of each approach – that's not easy.

Myth No.3   Remodeling always takes longer and costs more than expected.

That myth is true ONLY if expectations are not realistic.   Some of us fall prone to 'looking for the answers' we want. If you keep talking to builders, until finally one comes up with a seat of the pants budget and schedule that fits your incredibly tight resources and timeline, should it be surprising that it really doesn't work out that well, when all the other experienced builders were telling you it would cost more, and take longer?   If you start a building project, without having made all the decisions up front, and getting the budget and schedule pinned down, there is NO DOUBT it will cost more and take longer than you expected.

Furthermore, the more decisions you make while the expensive carpenters, plumbers and electricians are standing around waiting for you to make up your mind, the MORE it will cost and the LONGER it will take. It can be a lot of fun to work things out along the way – kind of like finger painting – but *only* if you have the resources to avoid a stomach wrenching roller coaster of cost and time that will end when it ends – not when you want it to!.

These are just a few of the myths that create a fog you need to cut through to get your remodeling project to success.   No doubt you can tell already – I love to blow up boxes!