

One in a Million

Gehman Design Remodeling lends unique solutions to home-improvement projects one might consider less than straightforward.

BY BILL DONAHUE

No home is ever perfect. Even if a family customizes a newly built home according to their precise wants and needs, eventually their lifestyle and preferences will change.

"Our job is to help people imagine the possibilities," says Dennis D. Gehman, MCR, the founder of Gehman Design Remodeling in Harleysville. "When we're talking about what's possible, people will say, 'You can *do* that?' The answer is always, 'Yes.' It will require time and money, but almost anything is possible."

To his point, Gehman's firm often faces remodeling projects that are less than straightforward. While every home renovation is unique, Gehman describes three of the most common problems his firm faces, with potential solutions to each one.

PROBLEM 1:

"The kitchen has too many doors."

Today, most homeowners prefer an open floor plan, with living spaces that are not so well defined. Homes built in the 1970s or before, however, tend to have walled-off kitchens with multiple points of ingress and egress.

"People don't want to feel like they're on top of each other in the kitchen," he says. "We might suggest removing walls to create more of an open floor plan and give people room to mill about. We could also wall some of the doorways off so there are fewer points of entry."

In some cases, he might even recommend moving the kitchen to another part of the home.

"Moving the kitchen to what used to be the formal dining room, for example, might make for a better overall workflow," he says. "If we did that, we would have to consider everything the move would entail—the foundation, the electrical, the plumbing, and any load-bearing walls that would be impacted—but it might be better suited to people's habits and lifestyle."

PROBLEM 2:

"We need more room."

The pandemic forced homeowners to spend more time at home, making some reconsider their living spaces. While many homeowners instinctively lean toward an addition to create more space, Gehman says zoning issues and other factors can make an addition unfeasible.

"That's when we start having conversations about how often they use certain parts of the home, like their formal living room and dining room," he says. "Maybe the dining room can make way for an expanded kitchen, or we can make room by reconfiguring their bedrooms and walk-in closets. There's a lot you can do without building onto your house."

He cites a recent project at a home in Lehigh County, part of which involved digging out a basement beneath the kitchen to provide space for a woodworking shop. As an added benefit, the basement has helped to keep the kitchen floor—and the entire kitchen—much warmer during the winter months. The craftsmanship, scope, and difficulty of the job netted Gehman's firm a Regional Contractor of the Year award (in the "Residential Interior, \$100,000 to \$250,000" subcategory) from NARI, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

"It's not necessarily cheap to do something like adding a basement, but it's probably as cost effective as an addition," he says. "The existing foundation and the makeup of the house itself come into play with a decision like that. As opposed to a stone structure, a house with a wood-frame structure is easier to put a basement beneath, partly because it's lighter to hold up."

PROBLEM 3:

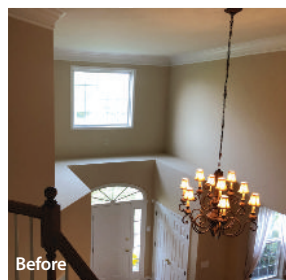
"We need another bedroom."

Finishing an attic or basement, or building a room above a two-story foyer, would address this issue, but some homes require more creative options. Gehman recently started the design process for a twin home in Ambler, in which his firm will create a new bedroom by carving space out of a spacious master bedroom and sitting area.

"If you're thinking of creating a bedroom out of an attic, you have to look at the attic layout and the roof structure," Gehman says. "Does it have traditional joists and rafters? Does it have finished steps or pull-down stairs? If it has pull-down stairs, you're going to need to put in finished steps, so where will they come down? The solution depends on the composition of the house and the needs of the people who live there."

The past few years have been quite busy for Gehman's firm. He does not expect the work to slow down anytime soon, even with the rising costs of fuel, labor, and materials.

"People seek us out because we provide solutions to problems," Gehman says. "If people have been thinking about something for years and can't think of a good solution, it's time to give us a call." ■



Before

These before and after images show a project in which Gehman Design Remodeling used a two-story foyer to create a guest bathroom on the home's second floor.



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