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Your Neighborhood Remodeler

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Volume 35, Spring 2012

The Attics & Basements Issue

What to Know Before Remodeling Your Attic or Basement



With the addition of dormers, we were able to transform this home's attic into a guest room and bathroom.

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With the current state of the economy, we're getting many calls about attic and basement renovations. It seems homeowners are more likely to stay put and make the most of the space they currently have.

Interestingly, attics and basements are perhaps the two most common projects that homeowners will tackle on their own — or by hiring a “fly-by-night” contractor. And that can be a big mistake.

If you want an attic or basement project done right — including done to code — you must account for a number of factors. Hiring a general contractor with the relevant experience should always be your first step.

Here's a look at key considerations for both attic and basement renovations.

Considerations for Both Attics and Basements

You have to build to code, and every community's codes have their unique nuances. For instance, how much square footage is allowable? The Town of Arlington permits the third level of a home to occupy no more than 49% of the home's footprint. However, some spaces (such as closets) don't count toward the square-footage limit, so you can be creative with this rule.

Egress is an important building code issue — i.e. what is your egress out of the attic or basement (other than the stairway)? According to the Massachusetts State Building Code, any bedroom must have at least one window that measures 20" x 24" in either direction and is no more than 44" off the floor.

Continued inside

Management Memo:

Stick to the Right Permit Process



President Bill Farnsworth, general manager
Scott Blain.

Can hiring a contractor for a remodeling project put you at great risk? Absolutely — if you hire the wrong one.

One way Massachusetts tries to protect homeowners is Home Improvement Contractor (HIC) registration.

As explained on the state website: “The Office of Consumer Affairs and Business Regulation regulates the registration of contractors performing improvements or renovations on detached one and two family homes. Prior to performing work on such homes, a contractor must be registered as a Home Improvement Contractor.”

For most residential projects, a contractor must also be licensed as a construction supervisor by the State Board of Building Regulations and Standards. The Construction Supervisor License (CSL) requires that candidates have at least “three years of experience in building construction or design” before taking the state exam. Then they must pass the exam, which tests “knowledge of the building code and general construction practices.”

A licensed construction supervisor must also meet continuing-education requirements every two years — please see the From the Office feature on page 4 for more details.

Proceed with Caution

Here’s why HIC registration should matter to you: A contractor who isn’t HIC-registered cannot pull his own building permit with the building department — and thus cannot legally complete your project. There’s also a good chance he doesn’t carry workers’ compensation or general liability insurance. He might not have a CSL either.

Homeowners who pull their own permit are making a dangerous choice. If the contractor in fact doesn’t carry workers’ comp or general liability, a worker who gets injured on the job could sue you.

And what happens if neither you nor the contractor bothers pulling a permit? Suppose you have some electrical work done. The work is never inspected, and an electrical fire burns down your home six months later. In this case, your home insurance won’t cover the damage.

Homeowners and contractors are most likely to try to cut corners with attic or basement renovations. Don’t fall into this trap. Whether it’s an attic, basement or other type of project, beware the contractor who is hesitant or unwilling to pull his own permit. It might very well mean he doesn’t meet the standards of the HIC program or doesn’t have a CSL.

For more details on HIC registration, visit www.mass.gov/ocabr/consumer/home-improvement-contract.

Continued from front

If your attic or basement is not serving as a bedroom, it still must have eight square feet of window surface for every 100 square feet of floor space.

Know your headroom codes, too. The State Building Code stipulates that at least half of the floor space have at least 7’ 3” of headroom.

Insulation: Properly insulating your attic or basement is essential for energy efficiency. Closed-cell spray foam has been growing in popularity in recent years. This type of insulation can provide a level of structural integrity to roof rafters and sometimes is the only way to meet the requirements of the state “stretch energy code.”

One manufacturer we like is Icynene — their product provides a great seal, lets no air through and is made of reusable materials.

Attic-specific Considerations

Attic renovations can come in variety of flavors. In the ideal scenario, your attic is ready to go, with features like a nice stairway, one or more windows, ample headroom and an established floor system. In this case, you’ll be able to explore a number of possibilities for the renovation.

On the other extreme are the many homes built since the 1950s (particularly ranches or Capes) whose attics were not built to support much weight and lack some or all of the above elements. If you have an attic like this, you’ll need to temper your expectations about what is structurally and/or financially possible.

Dormers: If your attic falls somewhere between the above two extremes, dormers may be necessary to create the space you need and to meet headroom requirements.

Access: How will you access the attic? If you can already get to the attic via a stairway, you’re in good shape. If not, you may face a tough decision, as building a stairway often means sacrificing a second-floor bedroom in smaller homes.

Basement-specific Considerations

As you can imagine, ensuring your basement will stay dry is the No. 1 consideration for these projects. If you have a newer home, the basement is probably well-sealed and has a sump pump installed. If your home is older, that might not be the case. Either way, be sure to address any water issues before proceeding with a renovation.

Ventilation: The State Building Code requires “every room or space intended for human occupancy” to have “natural or mechanical ventilation.” Bathrooms must be equipped with a mechanical exhaust fan.

Consult with the Experts

Renovating your attic or basement can create more valuable space in your home, from an office or extra bedroom to a media room or exercise room. At Custom, we’ve worked on dozens of these projects since 1990. If we can be of assistance, please call us today at 781-648-2835.

Thanks for Your Support!

We're grateful to the following Custom clients, who gave a referral or spoke as a reference for us in 2011.

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Alex & Esther Aronov | Gladys Hansis |
| Alice Diamond | Harold Boll |
| Anne Basile | Janet O'Brien |
| Bill Dawe | Karen Schragle |
| Chip & Lara Terry | Kathy Goshgarian |
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Check out photos from recent client projects, tips from Custom and more. You can even write a review of Custom or "Like" us.



Our YouTube page is loaded with videos from the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. Remodeling tips, information on NARI certification and more.



If you're a Custom client, please take a moment to share your thoughts at yelp.com, which features reviews for a variety of businesses.



If you're an Angie's List member, please tell others about your experience with Custom.

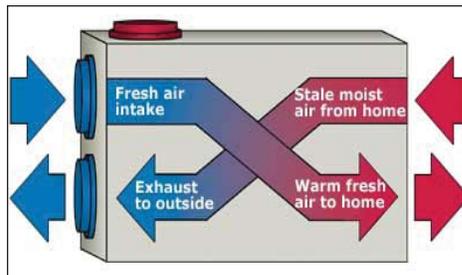
Watch out for Air Quality

Thanks to state-mandated requirements, today's homes are being sealed tighter and tighter. With less air getting in and out, how is air quality being affected?

Three years ago, Massachusetts passed the "stretch energy code," which gives municipalities the option of adopting energy-efficiency requirements that exceed those in the Commonwealth's "base" building code. These standards call for improved energy efficiency in new construction and major remodeling of residential and commercial buildings.

One of the primary ways builders and remodelers are meeting these requirements is the use of improved insulation. As we mention in this issue's cover story, closed-cell spray foam — the gold standard for insulation — has become increasingly popular. Spray foam does its job so well that it's having an impact on air exchange.

What Is Air Exchange Rate?



Credit: HomesteadingToday.com

The Environmental Protection Agency defines "air exchange rate" as "the rate at which outdoor air replaces indoor air." A lack of air exchange can trap stale air and moisture indoors, which can really be a problem in basements. And with excessive moisture can come molds, various other allergens or even dangerous gases like carbon monoxide.

So if you have an energy-efficient home, you have to be mindful of air exchange — especially in the basement.

One solution we like is the Lifebreath system (www.lifebreath.com). This mechanical ventilator has two ducts — one that sucks in fresh air from outside and another that expels stale air from inside. (Some air conditioning units perform a similar function.) The manufacturer also claims the system produces savings on heating and cooling.

Another solution to consider is the Humidex (www.hqhometek.com). This moisture control and ventilation unit expels humid, contaminated air, which is then replaced by dry, fresher air coming from the upper levels of the home.

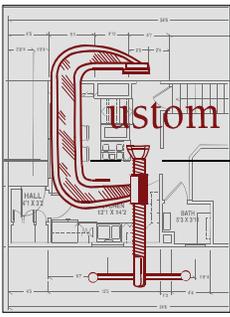
If you need advice on purchasing systems like these for your basement or elsewhere, please call Custom at 781-648-2835.

Have You Written a Review of Custom?

Over the past few years, we've heard from a number of homeowners who found us online. Some came via our website, but many more discovered us through community email lists or popular review-oriented sites.

More and more consumers are looking to resources like these when making important purchasing decisions. A positive note on a site like Angie's List or Yelp can really make a difference for a business like Custom.

So if you've ever shared your thoughts on Custom via one of these avenues, thank you! And if you haven't, we'd truly appreciate if you would do so. It only takes a minute to write a review and tell other homeowners what the Custom experience is all about.



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From the Office

Committed to an Educated Workforce

 A note to our clients: Custom is shutting down on May 14 and 15 for Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) construction safety training. OSHA offers a variety of training courses to help contractors and other businesses to identify, avoid and prevent safety and health hazards in the workplace.

In addition to OSHA training, we are committed to meeting the continuing-education requirements of the Massachusetts Construction Supervisor License (CSL). (The Management Memo on page 2 has more details on the CSL.) Depending on their category, licensed construction supervisors must complete anywhere from six to 12 hours of continuing-education courses every two years.

OSHA and CSL-related training are just two examples of how Custom invests in a well-educated workforce. Training like this costs money, of course, but it's worth it to improve the safety of our employees and quality of our work.



Scott Has a New Grandson!

Dylan Thomas MacDonald was born on March 4 to general manager Scott Blain's daughter Tracy and her husband Steve. He joins older brother Mason.

OSHA and CSL-related training are just two examples of how Custom invests in a well-educated workforce.

Client Spotlight: The Langlois Home

As Elena and Mike Langlois began their search for a general contractor, Custom was on their short list. To begin with, we had the seal of approval of Lara and Chip Terry, Custom clients who live nearby.



After inspecting our work on the Terrys' kitchen, Elena and Mike decided to give us a closer look. Having recently had a bad experience with another contractor, they liked the fact that we're an established business with an office in Arlington.

"That was really appealing," said Elena. "It was good to know they have an infrastructure and an office staff, and that they'd be there for the long run."

Saying Goodbye to the Dining Room

Since moving into their home in 1996, Elena and Mike have overseen a number of renovations. The last rooms on their list were the kitchen and dining room.

Like many homeowners today, Elena and Mike wanted to repurpose their formal dining room. It wasn't getting much use, other than serving as a repository for the kids' school projects. Their goal was to use that space to create a large, open kitchen with plenty of room for the family (including three kids) and friends to spend time together.

After taking down a wall and gutting the two rooms down to the studs, we rebuilt the kitchen. The room now features ample white cabinetry, tasteful crackle-finish tile backsplash, beautifully patterned granite countertops and new appliances including refrigerator, dishwasher, electric oven, gas cooktop and exhaust hood. Prefinished white oak floors complete the kitchen.

Elena loves the centerpiece of the new kitchen: the island. "We sit around the island all the time," she said. "Overall, the kitchen is just a brighter, nicer place to be. It's become a great hangout space, and we find ourselves spending a lot of time in here."

Kudos for Jay and Nikki

One of Elena and Mike's other favorite enhancements is the new set of built-in storage shelves behind four custom cabinet doors, installed courtesy of lead carpenter Jay Carr.



According to Elena, the kitchen has "become a great hangout space, and we find ourselves spending a lot of time in here."

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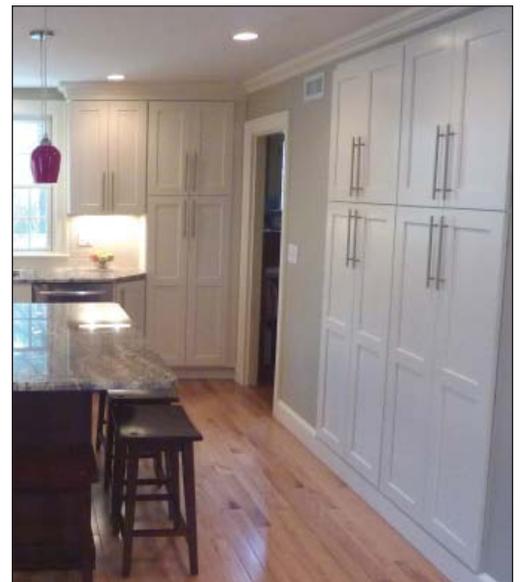
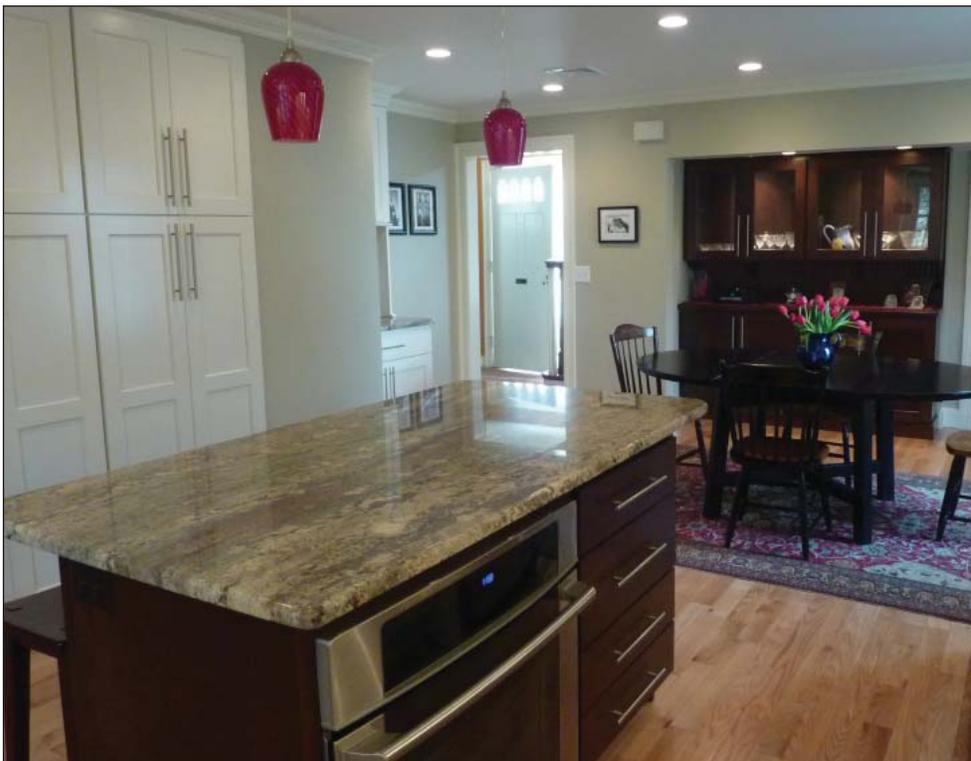
“Jay was not only a terrific carpenter, he was a pleasure to have around,” said Elena. “Every night, Mike and I would come home and walk through the space, and many mornings we’d ask Jay questions about work that had been done the day before. He was always willing to answer all of the questions and also did a great job keeping us up-to-date on the project schedule.”

Our interior designer, Nicole DeFelice, was another big asset during this project. She worked extensively with Elena and Mike on kitchen layout, and her suggestion to place the sink along the back wall has improved the flow of the entire downstairs.

Nikki also advised Elena and Mike on cabinet, tile and granite selections. “She was great to work with, and she had some terrific ideas,” said Elena. “She was very helpful in saying what would work or not — we don’t have that kind of experience.”

“Our overall satisfaction with the project is very high,” Elena added. “I’d highly recommend Custom on all counts.”

‘Overall, the kitchen is
just a brighter, nicer place to be.’



Elena and Mike wanted to get rid of their formal dining room and create a large, open kitchen.