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Remodeling and remuddling your place in the country  
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Spring brings out the remuddler in us. Warmth encourages knocking down, throwing out, fiddling with and adding to.

The line between remodeling and remuddling is clear after the fact. A remuddle never looks quite right and doesn't work quite right either.

Particularly prone to immediate remuddling are new property owners who have convinced themselves that anything that was plenty good enough for the previous occupants must be done over. I've also observed this behavior among my local woodchucks.

I, too, have succumbed to this new-owner need to replace what is with something I've half thought out. I think this instinct in men has something to do with testosterone and marking territory. I've never met a guy who was unhappy with a crowbar in his hand.

Women in my experience remuddle less and remodel more. On the negative side, they care about interior design. I suffer constant criticism from both my wife and daughter for hanging my college lacrosse stick in our living room. They refer to it as "decorative adolescence."

Newcomer new owners often underestimate the wisdom embedded in an existing house design. I knew a fellow whose first act was to tear out a perfectly serviceable woodstove and chimney in the middle of his newly acquired old farmhouse. "Baseboard electric!" he boasted. "It's 2007!" Then his pipes froze one night with every baseboard unit turned on high.

A fancy architect I knew insisted on ripping out a perfectly good double-hung window and installing French doors on a south-facing wall in a windy valley. "The snow'll blow through," I said. He insisted that modern materials and installation techniques would prevent snow blowing through until the January day he arrived and found that snow had blown through.

The first order of most new property owners should be...do nothing. Don't gut anything until you've learned how your new house works with the climate, land and people who inhabit it.

Assuming that you pay no attention to this sound advice -- an assumption based on my wife's practice over 24 years -- here are some tried-and-true-again ways to avoid remuddling.

**Fit it in.** Modern additions should be blended into an existing structure. A hasty marriage between a domed addition and a two-story, brick colonial will produce confused offspring. Stick with a scale, materials and colors that don't call attention to themselves. Be distinctive without being offensive.

**Start humbly.** While houses do exist that deserve no mercy, I've learned that adapting and refashioning is often a wiser first step than demolishing and starting from scratch.

For every unit of anything that is torn out, two units of replacement are usually needed. Replacements are always bigger, costlier, trickier to install and operate and more inclined toward breakdowns that are not your fault.

**Start slowly.** The faster change occurs, the more unpredictable its results. Confusing the necessity of change with the speed of getting it done can get things off on the right foot while ending up on the wrong one.

An environmentalist I know bought a farm and immediately erected a new boundary fence made of untreated posts, primarily maple and oak. He refused to poison the ground, he said. His posts began rotting in less than five years. But before that, he sold the place to a fellow who was enchanted with the eco-friendly fence. It was he who watched the fence fall apart, and he who replaced it.

**Eat an elephant one bite at a time.** Do big projects in small steps. While it will take longer, slow, incremental change gives you time to learn from the feedback of your immediate past. Small steps keep mistakes small.

If you're new to an area, start with a small remodeling project that allows you to test the local trades for their reliability, cost and workmanship. Redoing a bathroom is such a project; building a new kitchen is not.

**Old functions done better.** Make sure that the property's basic systems operate efficiently and safely before piling on new demands. Add to system capacity -- electrical, plumbing, septic -- before building additions. Check with appropriate local officials regarding requirements and permits. Avoid building before acquiring permits—a situation that doesn't have a happy ending.

**Research your help.** Local construction work rests on an invisible network of trust and loyalties amongst individuals in various trades that were built over many years. Your project needs to be tapped into this network and coordinated through a contractor in good standing.

You have to fit the worker to the job. I once suffered daily headaches from a construction crew who could not read architectural drawings, a fact I learned

as I watched them try to build a first floor using the second floor's plans. A project that's beyond your crew will not get done right.

As much as competence, you want to find a contractor who infuses your work and the job site with good feelings. Sour work crews produce bad work and needless conflict.

Remuddling is not like death and taxes. It's not inevitable. But it is around, much like the flu, waiting for an opportunity to infect your project.

Knowing the difference between a remuddle and a remodel is your first step toward doing the job right the first time.

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