



Room additions are projects that often miss point

By [Bob Karlovits](#), PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
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Builder Rick Horn of Reserve says a vital question whenever he talks to a potential client about a room addition is "What are you going to do with it?"

Room additions are projects that often miss the point. The extra space sometimes is not really needed as much as a better use of the existing area.

"Think about the past when six kids and two adults lived in a house with three bedrooms," says Vickie Dellaquila, the owner of Organization Rules, a McCandless organizing firm.

Jim Cardillo, a Mercer County architect who does a great deal of work in Allegheny County, says he tries to plan additions with the same philosophy he uses in building homes.

"Build only what you need." he says, adding reconfiguration of space often can be a better plan.

And far less expensive.

The decision to add a room is one that should be taken only after a great deal of consideration, the experts say.

- **Down to basics** -- Before even thinking about what is needed, make sure it is allowed. Kathleen A. Hrabovsky from KAH Architecture in Mt. Lebanon advises acquiring a copy of the property survey to be make sure the addition is in usable space. More importantly, she says, find out about building restrictions that could prohibit placement.

"Sometimes you can't put anything on the front," Horn says. "Sometimes you can't get too close to the property line. Sometimes you can only have a certain percentage of building on a lot."

- **A practical matter** -- Even if the building is legal and permitted, it could be more trouble than it is worth. Natrona Heights architect Bob Barrage says an addition can put heavy loads on heating and air conditioning systems, creating the demand for new equipment and an added expense.

Barrage also says placement can be a huge matter. Property use can be changed greatly when the outline of a home is changed. That addition also probably will change access to the house and the ways sunlight hits various rooms, the architects warn.

Cardillo also cautions about interior placement. The use of an existing room could be changed greatly it access to an addition sends traffic through it.

- **Be sure of use** -- Do not build simply for space, Hrabovsky says. Make a list of activities and steer your work to them. Of course, that also means examining current space and determining if that work could be moved to some existing space, add Dellaquila and Leslie McKee from McKee Organizing Services in Mt. Lebanon.

Dellaquila says a stern attitude on use of space and belongings even could reduce the size and cost of an addition if it is decided.

"You might be able to go from a 20-by-20 to a 12-by-12," she says.

- **It is not cheap** -- Be aware of your budget. Room additions are a costly matter. Horn says being aware of the budget is second in importance only to the definition of purpose.

He and others say it is possible to do a room for \$100 a square foot if there is not much technical work needed such as adding ductwork or electrical or plumbing lines. With those elements added, it can be easy to double or triple the cost, which is more likely the case.

Some people do not realize that at all.

"People come to me and say they want to do a job for \$10,000 and then show me pictures of what they want from Architectural Digest," Hrabovsky says.

- **Make it look right** -- Barrage and Cardillo say one of the best ways of adding a room is to make it look like it was there in first place. That can be difficult to achieve considering how materials of the addition might not look nearly as worn as those on the original house.

For that reason, Barrage says, make the addition look "like an addition, with a conscious effort to look new and different. The design can be an 'homage' to the design of the existing structure, referring to it but not imitating it."

He says the worst way to do it is "without any thought of how it relates to the existing building, which is a matter of lack of personal taste."

- **Coming out on top** -- Cardillo recommends considering a multi-story addition when a one-level structure is planned. "You're paying for the foundation, for the roof, so adding another floor is not going to be that big of a job," he says. It might seem wasteful now, but he says it could pay for itself in spades at resale of the property.

- **To hire or not to hire** -- Having an architect design an addition makes more sense than it seems, the architects all insist. Builder Horn can see their point, but believes a good builder can get job done as well. The biggest element, the architects say, is that someone from their profession will supply a specific plan that a builder will have to meet. Plans from individual builders can vary greatly in how they approach the project, making them difficult to compare.

They do admit a good builder either will have an engineer on staff or be consulting with one to ensure the functionality of a non-architect-designed plan.

"You should deal with a builder who does this kind of work all the time," Horn says.

Prices for architects vary as jobs do. While total architectural design and supervision of a project could range from 10 to 12 percent of the project's overall cost, sometimes they can draw up sketches that offer a basic idea of what is involved.

"Sometimes we will do basic sketches for \$125 an hour, shake hands and walk away," Barrage says.