

HOMES

► Remodeling Guide

Ramble On



Photo courtesy of Orfield Design and Construction, Inc.

By opening up the kitchen in this Edina rambler, Orfield Design and Construction brought more natural light into the space.

Thanks to their convenient construction and location in prime neighborhoods, ramblers are ideal for remodeling.

June 2006

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June 2006 Special Advertising Section

If you grew up in a first-ring suburb, there's a good chance you lived in a rambler. Built between the 1950s and 1970s, this popular home style featured a main level with three small bedrooms, a bathroom (two if you were lucky), a galley kitchen, a dark basement with exposed mechanicals and duct work, and a long, narrow layout that seemed to stretch—or “ramble”—forever.

By today's standards, this kind of layout is not conducive to how people live in their homes. In fact, ramblers are ripe for remodeling. Baby boomers are drawn to the ease of one-level living and staying (and aging) in their familiar neighborhood, while families like ramblers for their spacious remodeling potential, their location in quality school districts, and their proximity to work. Additionally, ramblers' easy floor plans present few structural and design challenges, and often they are situated on lots with spacious backyards that allow for substantial additions to the rear of the home.

Bloomington. “We add French doors, porches, patios, great room space, large windows, and doors. Putting additions into backyards...creates a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor living.”

Whether homeowners reconfigure their space or build on to it, they have plenty of options. One of the most popular changes to the rambler is increasing the size of the kitchen. "Most of our rambler projects seem to center around a new, spacious kitchen area with an adjoining family space, either a living room or a porch," says Dave Monte, president of Damont Design-Build Remodeling in Spring Lake Park.

This adjacent informal space can be created either by removing an extra (but rather small) bedroom or by building an addition on the home. In many homes, owners are jettisoning traditional dining room space in favor of a family room or great room to which the kitchen opens, says Laura Orfield, vice president/owner of Orfield Design and Construction, Inc., in St. Louis Park. "For the family lifestyle and ease of use, the formal dining room is going by the wayside," she says. "For people who can afford to keep that in a large home, that's fine, but in a rambler, it's such a small, confined area. The dining room is becoming part of the kitchen, which is becoming larger. Now that the walls are taken down, you can afford room for that big island, and you can still have a table in there."

Like many new homes, remodeled rambler kitchens feature luxury amenities. "I've seen a trend in the last five years of kitchens going from adequately appointed to top of the line, including higher-end cherry and maple cabinetry, solid-surface countertops, second sinks, professional appliances, and well-thought-out lighting schemes," Monte says. In addition, owners who like to entertain are requesting butler bars and "conversational" islands with seating on three sides and a place for wine storage, according to Tamra Mueller, a designer with Alanson Design, LLC in Apple Valley.

Bathrooms, particularly those attached to the owners' suite, are another point of contention with homeowners before they remodel. "These bathrooms were small and tight, with not enough amenities," says Mark Peterson, owner and lead designer of M/A/Peterson DesignBuild in Edina. "Oftentimes, they'd have a small master bath that was just a postage stamp."

Upon remodeling, that postage stamp morphs into a beautiful, spacious retreat. Peterson says that about 30 percent of his clients want a tub. "If they don't have a tub, they want larger showers with nice amenities," he says. "We're seeing a larger shower...with stone or tile finishes, and some showers with a bench seat and toe ledges for shaving, built-in shampoo shelves, shaving mirrors, and clear glass doors." The two-basin master bathroom is still a popular request, Peterson adds. Secondary bathrooms in the homes are compartmentalized so that the toilet and shower area is separate from the sink and vanity.

In some cases, particularly for baby boomers who plan to stay in their rambler for years to come, remodelers address aging in place, especially in the kitchen and bathroom. "We do the wider doorways, make sure walk spaces are wide enough and that they can get around appliances, and add curbless showers and decorative grab bars in the master suite," says James Madsen, owner of James Barton Design-Build.

"Those changes are very subtle," Mueller adds. "It seems like boomers are much more active than previous generations. They're not ready to slow down just yet. They're more focused on amenities and quality of life, and now they can afford to do it."

Lower Levels Raise the Bar

Though one-level living is one of the rambler's major selling points, homeowners are now reclaiming lower levels—space that previously was nothing more than a place for mechanicals and storage. "People are realizing square footage they've never used before for living space," Madsen says.

Part of the problem with lower levels in ramblers is their linear layout that mirrors the main level. This often results in a room with an exposed mechanical system that seems to "float" and duct work hanging down from the ceiling. The first step is to reconfigure the space on the lower level to take these systems out of view.

After structural issues are addressed, homeowners request a fully modern space, oftentimes with several rooms partitioned off. "Being that it's winter in Minnesota for many months, homeowners want to make the lower level as nicely finished as the first floor," Orfield says. "This is no longer the cheap carpeting and paneling we grew up with. Some features include nice, plush carpeting; six-panel doors; recessed lighting; fireplaces; and custom built-in

entertainment centers. It feels like the first floor." Other popular uses for lower levels include bedrooms, wine rooms, play rooms, media rooms, exercise rooms, and wet bars.

For many homeowners, lighting is another important element to incorporate in the lower level. If you don't have a walkout, it can be very dark. While egress windows certainly help, it is still a lower level. Remodelers will add recessed lights and even recessed vaults to brighten the space, while decorative elements such as soffits and crown moldings soften it.

Take It Outside

Although homeowners' No. 1 priority is re-creating interior space, the exterior should not be overlooked. "Of the most common types of remodels, one simply is curb appeal," Orfield says. "You take the normal flat roof line and horizontal boring look and give it a defined front entrance. You can create nice front overhangs with pretty dormers. You can do some pillars and a front step as well."

"People are putting on siding that costs more than what they originally paid for the home," says Gary Knight of Knight Construction Design in Chanhassen. "They are now looking to be more creative with exteriors. There are other alternatives besides vinyl siding. They mix it up with brick and stone and new entries and porticos. They also change the window configuration and make windows taller or wider."

Curb appeal extends to the entrance of the home, where guests will receive their first impression of the interior. "[In ramblers] there's no entryway. You walk in and you're there," Orfield says. "People want to make the living room attractive with custom built-ins or by creating a mudroom where they can hide things. That's why people are spending so much money changing the flooring and putting in natural hardwood."

Taller, vaulted ceilings are replacing the somewhat claustrophobic 8-foot ceilings of ramblers past. Damont recently completed a project on an Arden Hills rambler in which the firm removed a 40-foot section of the existing roof in the middle of the home and replaced it with vaulted trusses. The ceiling height thus doubled from eight to sixteen feet. In other projects, Damont has also created a second level above the main one. "If there is not enough room to go out, we can go up, creating a new second-floor addition, which is another great alternative," Monte says. "Usually, most existing ramblers can support another story with very few foundation modifications."

In addition to re-creating exteriors and making other structural changes to the home, garages are receiving overhauls. The biggest challenge is finding a way to increase their volume. Horizontal expansion is usually out of the question due to city setbacks. "We may offset the garage behind the house and turn the old garage into a carport or remove it altogether," Peterson says. "But normally people will keep them attached in the existing position and expand to the back or side if at all possible." Monte reports that he will build an additional garage or create a four-car garage, making the stalls two cars deep. Work on the garage usually leads to the addition of a mudroom. Traditionally, garage entry doors in ramblers led right into the kitchen; adding a mudroom here provides a transitional space between the two rooms, as well as a place to store shoes, keys, book bags, and more.

When your rambler remodel is finished, it should flow well, look great, and feel like a valuable lifestyle asset, Peterson believes. "What's nice is that this is not only a design solution, it's an aesthetic solution," he says. "How does the furniture fit? How does the outside relate to the inside? How does all that affect your home, and at the end of the day, how does that become an expression of who you are as a person? Good planning is going to be your wisest investment."