

Remodeling that Pays: How Far to Upgrade a Lamorinda Home

By Ken Ryerson, Sales Associate Pacific Union Orinda

For homeowners contemplating a remodel project, an important consideration is how much to do; that is, how much work is appropriate for a kitchen makeover or landscaping upgrade? The cardinal rule of real estate applies here: It's "Location, location, location" that determines how much effort pays off and how much is too much.

In general, the best remodeling returns are realized by projects that bring a substandard house up to the standard of its surroundings. Lamorinda is predominantly a bedroom community of families here for the quality schools. The standard for a house as a whole is a stylish master suite plus two or three smaller bedrooms, good landscaping, living room, and connected kitchen-informal dining-family room space. In our community, projects that address these spaces realize the largest returns on remodeling, to 125% of costs or better.

But for an individual project, how much is enough?

As is the case for a house as a whole, an individual project shows the best payback when it suits the community. In our area, this means family-friendly remodeling that takes into account our beautiful setting and gentle climate. For example, one of the most cost-effective projects nationally provides relatively poor returns in Lamorinda: refacing a home with vinyl siding. In most parts of the country homeowners appreciate the tough, easy-care qualities of vinyl, but here in our mild area, natural siding is preferred.

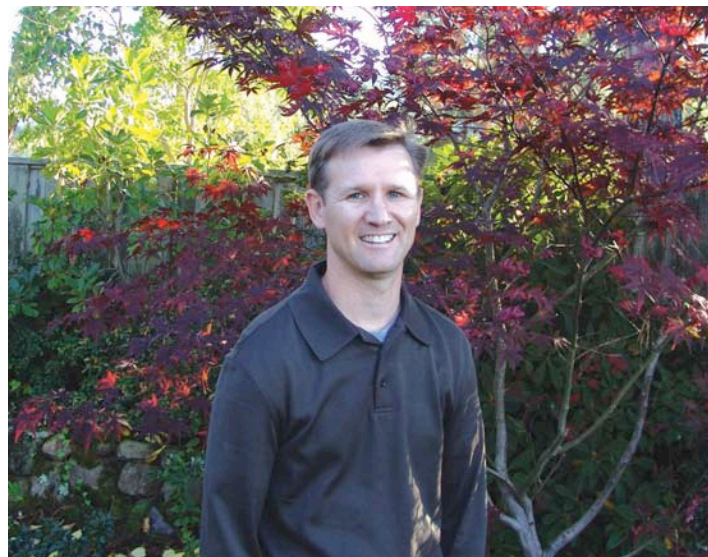
Landscaping work here offers the best returns when it enhances the natural setting of a house, while at the same time offering space for children to play safely outdoors. Landscaping that fills a yard with ornamental plants or rockeries is less attractive to family buyers and thus returns less value.

Adding an outdoor pool generally provides a very low remodeling return, in Lamorinda as elsewhere. A pool dominates the outdoor space of a typical lot, and it may be considered an unwanted hazard by families with small children. Of course for large properties or dedicated swimmers, a pool may be a very desirable addition, but for our community in general, pools offer the least remodel value of any project. Indeed, some homeowners with older pools prefer to fill them in rather than upgrade them.

Family factors likewise dominate inside a Lamorinda home. For remodel projects this consideration commonly means choosing sturdy, reliable finishes and fixtures over the latest fashions. And flow is important, to channel the activities of energetic children.

"To get a good return or payback on a kitchen remodel, for example, a good design is more important than overspending on the highest end appliances and finishes," says Orinda's Rick Kattenburg of Kattenburg Architects. "We see many projects where people pay quadruple what's necessary, either because they are status-driven or just unaware they are paying too much."

Kattenburg continues, "Stainless steel finishes on residential appliances cost more but are popular because they offer the 'commercial look' promoted in home magazines. Stainless, I believe, is generally a bad idea in a home with children. Smudges made by sticky fingers on a stainless steel refrigerator door are less than attractive and tough to clean."



Ken Ryerson

Accordingly, very high-end luxury upgrades return less value in Lamorinda than do mid-range makeovers. But homeowners needn't scrimp on budget materials.

"Cabinets, granite, tile, and plumbing fixtures have a wide range of costs," says Kattenburg. "You don't have to save as much as the typical tract developer does with their finish selections, but if you're going for payback on a remodel, take a lesson from their approach to finish selection. Select products with inherent value. Not having an overrated brand name won't be a critical factor when you sell. Good flow and general appearance will."

Of course each remodeling project differs as much as people do, and the final value of any project depends on the situation. The concepts presented here provide general guidelines for approaching a remodel in a typical Lamorinda family home and won't apply for all. In the end, the real worth of a remodeling job is judged by the homeowner alone, and almost any work can return real value if properly considered.

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