



In his book "Staying Put," Madison architect Duo Dickinson makes a case for renovating a home to fulfill your needs instead of moving. In the photo above, a second floor was added to expand and update this Cape, shown "before" below, in an Old Saybrook neighborhood while staying within tight zoning setbacks.



For Duo Dickinson, home remains where the heart is

By AMY J. BARRY
Special to The Day

Even in this economy, Madison architect Duo Dickinson has found a way to see the silver lining in "being stuck" in one's home at a time when buying or building a bigger, better dwelling is simply not an option for many Americans.

In his seventh book on residential design, "Staying Put: Remodel Your House to Get the Home You Want," Dickinson helps homeowners do exactly that by giving easy-to-implement advice on everything from budgeting and phasing a project to dealing with your town's building department to real-life examples for remodeling every room in the house. He also gives a trove of valuable tips, such as venting a basement and saving a tree prior to starting construction.

Equally important, and woven throughout the book, is the holistic philosophy of the residential architect—who has designed or renovated more than 600 homes across North America over the past 30 years—that a home is much more than a roof over one's head or a financial investment. Home truly is where the heart is—something that tough economic times give people an opportunity to rediscover in choosing to remain in their homes and remodel.

"Staying Put" features before-and-after photos and commentary on 60 of Dickinson's firm's projects—more than half of which were completed after the economy tanked in 2008—both locally and throughout the Northeast.

"The working title for the book was 'My House Sucks,'" Dickinson says, jokingly, "because people truly feel trapped—they're making ends meet, but they can't sell their house, and it's not worth what they paid for it."

A big expensive tabletop book was not what the subject matter required, nor what publishers are selling in the current market, Dickinson explains.

"I wanted a book that was small, heavy in your hands, under \$25 with enough information to stretch across different dysfunctions in houses: aesthetic, functional, technological and, lastly and most hard to quantify, how to prevent never-ending maintenance nightmares," he says.

Dickinson points out that rather than "trying to make your home into a showplace to impress your neighbors or show how cool you are," people's homes are their most important possessions, the place they spend the most time and should reflect what really matters—their relationships, families and values.

Therefore, the objective of the book boils down to helping people figure out how to transition to a better fit while remaining in the same place.

And that means thinking about priorities, Dickinson says, to maximize the money you have for the things you'll use.

He suggests doing away with the master bedroom suite, since people merely sleep they don't live in the bedroom.

UPCOMING BOOKSIGNING

"Staying Put" (The Taunton Press) by Duo Dickinson is \$24.95, softcover, illustrated.

Dickinson will give a talk and book signing on Thursday at 7 p.m. at R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison. Tickets are \$5 and can be applied toward the purchase of the book. For reservations, call (203) 245-3959 or visit books@rjulia.com.



Dickinson can be heard every Sunday at 4:30 p.m. on Bruce Barber's "Real Life Survival Guide," a half-hour radio program on WNPR featuring "conversations about life's little problems."

He also recommends opening up the exteriors of an existing house to the great outdoors with windows, doorways, patios and three-season rooms, creating an effortless flow. Dickinson stresses the importance to our mental health of connecting our homes with the natural world that we're disconnecting from, as we spend more and more time in virtual reality.

The book's largest chapter is devoted to the kitchen.

"The kitchen is the heart of the home," Dickinson notes, "and kitchen remodeling is the one area of the house that almost always recoups the investment if done appropriately."

He also addresses the explosion of aging baby boomers with tips to create "the perfect retirement home" from where you are, and gives guidelines on going green in selecting building materials and design elements.

Dickinson encourages homeowners to take more initiative and be the ones who determine what they can live with and without, and that the builder, architect or designer tailor the project to match the homeowner's vision.

"Use architects as resources and as inspiration," he advises, "to see your vision and make it even better."

Time is another silver lining of an economic depression, Dickinson points out.

"You can consider more options than if it's go-go, throwing money at problems, instead of spending the precious less money you do have more (wisely)."

Essentially, Dickinson says, "The more time you spend planning and evaluating your design, the cheaper your project will be," and if you have realistic expectations before starting a home renovation, "the unaffordable perfect should never prevent the affordable good."