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## Serving as his own general contractor, an Arlington man transforms his home



**View Photo Gallery** — [Homeowner finds success serving as his own general contractor: Experts recommend that, unless you know what you're doing, it's best to hire a good general contractor for a major home renovation. Clayton, a retired electrical engineer and inventor, decided to take the role himself as he renovated his Colonial home in Arlington.](#)

By Scott Sowers, Published: March 13 | Updated: Friday, March 14, 7:35 AM [E-mail the writer](#)

Clayton and Margaret Depue broke a lot of rules when they bought and renovated a brick Colonial in Arlington. Economics told them to tear down the house and start over, but they chose to preserve the building's brick shell.

Experts recommend that, unless you know what you're doing, it's best to hire a good general contractor for a major home renovation. Clayton, a retired electrical engineer and inventor, decided to take the role himself.

The reconfigured space is 800 square feet larger, resulting from additions in the front and back and a new top level. The Depues now have a green home and extra room to accommodate a new lifestyle.

"My favorite thing about the renovated house is the feeling of openness, and even with all the new glass, the home's systems are performing well in this cold winter," Clayton says.

In most renovations, the homeowner, the designer and the contractor work together to form a three-legged stool of checks and balances. Even though the general contractor (GC) may not be swinging hammers or painting walls, the role of running the job cannot be underestimated.

"The GC often acts as an arbiter, making sure that everyone behaves like grown-ups," says architect Lorena Checa, 60, of Checa Architects in Northwest Washington, the designer of the renovation. "There is so much time spent coordinating the subcontractors and quality-control issues that most homeowners aren't equipped to handle the job."

Clayton's analytical thought process helped him get through the daily routine of problem solving needed on a construction site. He'd also supervised renovations on the family's prior homes, but his biggest asset was finding the right personnel. "One of the best things for me was meeting some of the people who worked on the job," Clayton says. Problematic plumbers had to be counterbalanced by talented carpenters.

In 2004, the Depues were living in a condo in Rosslyn and began looking for a house to buy in Northern Virginia, which wasn't nearly as easy as it would seem. "We'd been looking, and we were outbid several times," Clayton says. "These were the days of multiple offers and houses being sold in one day." That time was even more intense than what's happening in some areas of the Washington area today.

Their real estate agent steered them toward a 2,800-square-foot Colonial described as a "fixer-upper" that had been on the market for two weeks. "It was livable," Clayton says. "But there was no insulation in the walls, and it had the original kitchen from 1950."

One thought crossed their minds as they walked through: This house was due for a major overhaul.

But they chose to buy it and live in it for a while to see what it really needed. After three years, the decision was made. "We talked about adding a family room," says Margaret, who works for the Treasury Department. A trip to the Bogart hair salon in Georgetown for Margaret resulted in a referral to Checa.

"They told me they bought the house to renovate it. They wanted to add a family room and redo the kitchen because Clayton is a sushi chef and needed more room," Checa says. The homeowners also said early on that Clayton wanted to serve as the general contractor of the project, which is a giant red flag for architects. Even though she'd never tackled a major renovation without a bona fide builder onboard, Checa relented. "My instinct told me that it would be good to work with these people," she says.

"The first architect we interviewed told me he wouldn't take the job if I was going to run it," says Clayton, who not only oversaw the project but also did a major chunk of the wiring. He was very interested in making the floor plan work more efficiently and bringing in more natural light.

As the plans became more complex, it became clear that the most cost-effective way to get what the couple wanted was to tear down the entire house and start from scratch. "We talked about that," Margaret says, "but I didn't want to do it. I liked the traditional look of the house, the big trees, and I thought it would be too disruptive on the neighborhood."

To satisfy the wish list for more usable space, the design team decided to add a third level, pop out the front to provide space for a new staircase while adding more windows, and add on the back, which provided more space for the kitchen and family room.

Construction started in 2007 as the family vacated the premises and moved back to the condo in Rosslyn, which they had been renting out. As an engineer who holds three patents for electronic switches, Clayton wanted to make the home's mechanical systems as efficient as possible. Margaret's family is also green-conscious, and Checa builds sustainable design into all of her projects. "If you hire me, you get green," she says.

To reduce the environmental impact of the demolition and to get valuable tax credits to help defray renovation costs, the design team hired DeConstruction Services in Fairfax. "We don't use heavy machinery. Everything is taken apart using hand tools, so we can usually recycle 80 percent of the house and donate it to charity," says Amy Hughes, a manager with the firm. An independent appraiser walks through the house before demolition and prepares an estimate of how much the charitable contribution could be worth, which is weighed against the added demolition costs.

"For 80 percent or 90 percent of our clients, it makes sense to use us," says Hughes, "unless they're in a time crunch, because it takes longer to take a house apart by hand." The only thing that typically cannot be salvaged during demolition is drywall. The recycled components are channeled to organizations that include Community Forklift and Habitat for Humanity.

"I think the final figure was close to \$50,000 in net credits after we paid the appraiser and the deconstruction company," Margaret says. The home's original oak flooring was removed from the lower level, unnailed, refinished and then reused on the home's upper levels.

The design team also took advantage of green energy tax credits to install a state-of-the-art geothermal heating system, which required drilling three holes 450 feet deep to tap the constant temperature of the earth for use in the heat exchanger system. Using blown-in foam insulation and energy-efficient windows and doors added up to nearly \$38,000 in energy credits, which paid off about one-third of the new heating and air conditioning system.

The Depues moved back into the nearly finished house in 2010 but have been knocking items off the final punch list while tweaking the design and the decor for the past three years. Parts of the original brick shell of the house still remain, but the exterior is now painted a pleasant earth tone, which helps blend the house into the new landscaping. A covered front porch and a foyer were added to make the entry more welcoming. Standing-seam copper roofs contribute to the home's charm and character.

The requested family room extends along the whole back length of the house, flowing off the totally modernized kitchen that's bordered by a rectangular island perfect for serving multiple courses of sushi. Vintage, wide plank flooring that came out of a house that Margaret's family used to own warms up the downstairs as it runs through the living room and family area.

The new stairway was placed in the middle of the house and is flooded by natural light streaming in from skylights on the third floor and the popped-out atrium above the front door. The empty nesters transformed the three-bedroom, 2<sup>1</sup> / 2-bathroom Colonial into a 4,600-square-foot showplace with two bedrooms and 3<sup>1</sup> / 2 bathrooms. The top floor, divided into his and her office spaces, is structured so that it could be turned into two additional bedrooms in case the next owners need the space.

Although the project took longer than expected and exceeded the original budget of \$600,000 by 30 percent, the design team emerged intact and is happy with the results. "I had a supportive client on this job who understood the value of quality," Checa says. "They were totally in sync with me when I suggested high-quality materials."

"I really love the light in the house," Margaret says. "The top floor of the house is like a treehouse. It just feels good inside."

**Scott Sowers** is a freelance writer.