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News from the Neighbors

Stephen & Brenda F.
Meridian-Kessler Neighborhood (Indianapolis, IN)

Remodeler's Corner

by Lisa Floreancig
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April was a very good month for Stephen and Brenda F. They welcomed their second child, a healthy, strapping boy and, what they consider to be their “new” home — an overhaul of their 1920s, two-story colonial located in the Meridian-Kessler neighborhood.

The couple came to Indianapolis seven years ago from a commuter neighborhood on the East Coast where, Stephen said they never knew their neighbors’ names.

“When we moved here, we made a point of walking the dog and walking the baby to meet the neighbors. It’s been wonderful, and we’re staying,” said Stephen.

As the family settled in, thoughts turned to the growing need for more space. Last year, the master bedroom and sun porch made it onto their remodeling “must-have” list, a project that introduced the family to Joe Stilwell, president, Stilwell LLC, Architectural Design & Custom Remodeling, an award-winning design/build company.

“We searched everywhere for a competent person to do the work, and I tell you, the one who was always on time and always the most professional and courteous was Joe,” said Stephen.

As the project neared completion, the couple anticipated additional remodeling needs for the future. A year later, the couple learned a new baby was on its way and the future was now — a future that included a kitchen/bathroom/bedroom remodel as well as a new garage, basement addition, family room, mud room, half and full baths, two bedrooms, bonus room, and second-floor laundry.

“We wanted a big home that was functional, but it had to fit the uniqueness of the neighborhood,” explained Brenda. “We didn’t want to put up just a wooden house so we made sure we used our money economically.”

Stilwell returned to direct the remodel, Part II.

Given the task of creating a workable strategy, he was met with a challenge — how to nearly double the size of a home with tight property lines. Undaunted, Stilwell creatively used a stairstep design, providing the necessary space for the expansion.

While Stilwell was developing the inventive plan, Stephen and Brenda searched for ways to cut costs that would allow the use of brick and wood, an expensive venture, on the home’s new



before



after

addition. The couple decided to integrate Stephen's past construction experience into the plan.

In October 2003, Stephen and four female friends picked up their sledgehammers. The mission? Destroy the garage. "We were like ants. We were all over it," remembered Stephen with a laugh. "I had to compete with the women and they were going crazy."

The garage fell in a mere weekend, but Stephen's work was just beginning. As he tore down the interior walls of the home, Stilwell's crew went to work on the galley-style kitchen, which grew to nearly twice its original size. The unappealing cabinets were replaced by Shaker-style cabinetry, designed and built by Stilwell, and a large kitchen island with a prep sink was swapped for the small, cramped center block.

Although the first-floor remodel did not change the home's original room layout, Stilwell's design called for a more friendly circular flow accomplished by removing the entry closets and relocating the boxed-in stairway to open into the house. Minor changes to the dining room included the installation of a built-in buffet and knocking out a door to open into the new 19- by 17-foot family room and a new half bath.

As the project moved along, however, another challenge began to rear an ugly head — how to replace the single-panel interior door with unique molding common in Meridian-Kessler, but not commercially available. Stilwell met the challenge head-on and won.

"We run into this situation often enough that I decided to set up a millwork shop and start making our own interior trim and doors — as well as cabinetry — so we can match them exactly instead of having to fake it with commercially available pieces and parts," said Stilwell.

With the first-floor work complete, Stilwell moved upstairs, and not a minute too soon. Brenda's due date grew closer and anxiety began to mount.

"They were so close to delivering the baby and everyone had been anxious for the last month. We were coming right down to the wire in terms of having this place livable by the time the baby came. But I knew we were going to make it," Stilwell said.

The second-level guest bathroom was remodeled and an existing bedroom was converted into a guest room. An original bedroom was lost, becoming the hallway leading to the new large addition that housed two, roomy bedrooms with walk-in closets, bonus room, and second-floor laundry.

As the upper-level dust settled, the new baby arrived on time with a new bedroom to call his very own.

"My dad was a builder and as a kid I worked with him all the time so I know what good stuff should look like," said Stephen. "Stilwell's quality is superior. A lot of people have come by, and without a doubt, including those who have spent a half million dollars have said, 'Boy, I wish ours came out this nice.'"

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Architectural Design & Custom Remodeling

317.254.9098

info@stilwellremodeling.com

www.stilwellremodeling.com