



Larry Weinberg, CEO of Bowa Builders, left, and Josh Baker, the company's president, have made their business one of the nation's largest remodelers because of customers' big plans.

Tool time big time

Home improvement in Washington area becoming popular on a large scale

BY TANIA ANDERSON, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

They like the neighborhood. It's an easy commute to work. And the children are content with their school. But the family has outgrown the house.

Rather than move to a bigger house someplace else or to a plot of vacant land where they can build their dream home from scratch, more and more Washington-area homeowners in that situation are undertaking substantial expansions and renovations to their existing property.

They're shelling out on average \$150,000 to \$700,000 for a "whole-house" remodeling that enables them to hold on to a location they like.

"It's interesting to see that people in Greater Washington are willing to extend that kind of money," says John Byrd, president of Home Fronts News Service, an Alexandria-based firm that helps market the remodeling industry. "The size of projects has really gone up."

Although there's no precise definition of whole-house remodeling, a renovation on that scale might include major additions, tearing down walls or other changes in layout as well as a kitchen upgrade and new floors, doors and fixtures.

A whole-house remodel is usually so extensive — involving more than 50 percent of the house in some cases — that it forces the homeowner to relocate while the work is being done, which could

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JOSH BAKER
President, Bowa Builders

take five to eight months.

A LOT OF WORK

Over the past decade Americans have been pouring increasing amounts of money into remodeling and additions in general.

Nationally homeowners spent more than \$121.5 million on renovations, including additions and major alterations, in 2002, up more than 50 percent from \$79.8 million in 1993, according to the D.C.-based National Association of Home Builders (www.nahb.org).

Kitchen work gets more money than any other type of project, about \$6.6 million in 2002, up from \$2.8 million in 1993.

Washington is one of the top remodeling markets in the country, along with San Francisco, Denver and San Jose, Calif., according to Jonathan Sweet, managing editor of Qualified Remodeler (www.qualifiedremodeler.com), a magazine that covers the residential remodeling industry from Fort Atkinson, Wis.

The publication's annual list of the country's top 500 remodeling companies, based on their sales volume in dollars, includes 33 from the Washington area, nearly 7 percent of the list, which was published in September.

"A large number of the top remodelers come from the D.C. area," Sweet says. "You guys have a lot of older homes in the area and a lot of people with good money."

Other factors shoring up the Washington area's remodeling industry include the lack of undeveloped land near the District for new construction, traffic snarls that discourage long commutes from outlying towns and rising property values that enable homeowners to recoup the money spent on a remodeling project if they decide to sell later.

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Remodelers help new and old live together in harmony

REMODELERS from previous page

"What makes this a big market for [whole-house remodeling] is simply the fact that there's not a lot of open land, and neighborhoods, especially those close to Washington, are in demand," says Josh Baker, president of Bowa Builders (www.bowa.com), a 75-person McLean-based remodeling company that did \$24 million in sales last year.

For people who already have houses, he says, "it makes sense to invest significantly in those homes."

A NEW HOME WITHOUT LEAVING HOME

Most of Greater Washington's whole-house remodeling is taking place in Potomac, Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Northwest D.C., Arlington, Alexandria, Great Falls and McLean.

Remodeling homeowners are adding significant square footage to their houses, according to the metro Washington chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. Some owners, for example, are turning one-level houses into two-level structures.

Bowa Builders, whose projects average \$700,000, is increasing the size of an Arlington home nearly 100 percent to 10,000 square feet by expanding it on all four sides.

"What people are attempting to do in this area is get more value out of a very expensive piece of real estate," says Anita Lacy Boles, executive director of the chapter, which has its offices in Alexandria. "There's some really good housing stock available."

Investments in remodeling do particularly well in certain communities, such as Arlington and Bethesda, although homeowners across the Washington area often can

Remodeling work from top to bottom

Whole-house renovation, which might involve major additions or changes to more than half of a house, has become one of the most popular remodeling projects, an industry survey found. It was the fifth most common job reported by remodeling companies in 2002.

1. Kitchen remodeling
2. Bathroom remodeling
3. Room additions
4. Windows/doors replacements
5. Whole-house remodeling
6. Bathroom addition
7. Roofing
8. Enclosed/added porch
9. Handyman jobs
10. Siding
11. Add a deck
12. Finished basement
13. Plumbing
14. Insurance repair
15. Second-story addition
16. Finished attic
17. Historic preservation

SOURCE: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF HOME BUILDERS SURVEY

recoup their renovation dollars quickly in the added value to their house.

"A bathroom or kitchen upgrade recovers over 100 percent [of the upgrade's cost] the minute it's put in place in Washington," Byrd says. "About five years ago, an addition could take five to 10 years to get the money back in a resale."

Over the past five years remodeling companies have seen more close-in residents decide that even though they want a larger home they don't want the longer commute from areas such as Prince William and Loudoun counties.

People are willing to spend money to stay put, Baker says.

"You used to talk about a starter home,

Building a place for themselves in the industry

Washington-area companies took 33 of the spots on Qualified Remodeler magazine's Top 500 list last year. Here are the 10 local remodelers — ranging from whole-house to specialty companies — that placed highest on the list and where they ranked, based on sales in 2002.

RANKING	COMPANY	2002 SALES
4.	Case Design/Remodeling, Bethesda	\$52.5 million
15.	Bowa Builders, McLean	\$23.7 million
19.	Metropolitan Siding & Windows, Waldorf	\$20.1 million
27.	Mid-Atlantic Waterproofing, Laurel	\$16.2 million
85.	Metropolitan Bath and Tile, Upper Marlboro	\$7.76 million
88.	Peterson and Collins, D.C.	\$7.46 million
104.	Modern Remodeling, Burke	\$6.52 million
158.	Creative Energy, Fairfax	\$4.93 million
177.	Wadden Construction, Alexandria	\$4.53 million
184.	National Energy Conservation, Olney	\$4.44 million

SOURCE: QUALIFIED REMODELER

and then you talked about moving up," he says. "Now people are finding a wonderful place to live, but they don't want to leave."

IN LINE WITH EARLIER DESIGNS

In the past many homeowners who wanted to stick with their property were more than ready to abandon its original architecture when they remodeled.

A remodeling project would slap a modern style onto a historic design, making the alteration obvious even to the casual observer.

"Builders grafted on an addition to the back of the home with no real important set of integral elements of the original house," Byrd says.

But one of the emerging trends in whole-

house remodeling is greater attention to the architectural look and the preservation of history, he says. "Washingtonians have increasingly come to appreciate architecture, particularly in certain value ranges."

Homeowners are seeing the value in preserving the original design and making the changes blend in more discreetly, says Bruce Wentworth, an architect with Wentworth-Levine (www.wentworthlevine.com), a remodeling firm in Silver Spring.

"Occasionally you'll get a client that wants a contemporary addition," he says. "But more often I hear people saying that they want to be sympathetic and respectful to the existing house."

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