

BLOG

Real People Reno: Everything You Need to Know About Opening Up the Attic

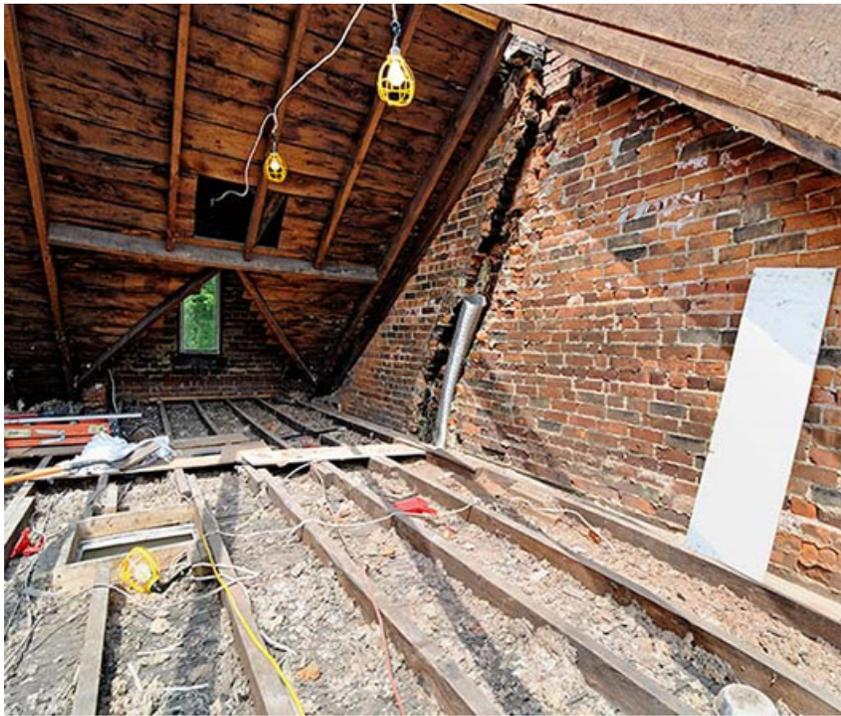
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When **space becomes an issue**, as with the addition of a new baby, do you move? Or do you ren-expand?



The master bedroom, new third floor

Many factors can affect your decision, such as the value of your home and the danger of over-renovating its value, the current state of your mortgage, the willingness to deal with a huge disruption of your daily routine and so on. But for some people, it comes down to one simple factor: we love it here (and we'll find the money). And so it went for today's Toronto couple, who added a whole **new third floor** by opening up their attic...



Attic space before reno

Elana Safronsky: In a nutshell, what did you do?

Josh G.: In terms of usable space, this is totally new. We added a staircase to access our existing, unfinished third floor attic, and dormered out the back of the house in order to create space for a new master bedroom and bathroom. The attic was also formerly shared and completely open to our attached neighbour, so we had to create a party/fire wall to partition the two spaces.



ES: Why did you do this? Why not buy a bigger house? What about the configuration of your old space didn't work for your family's needs?

Josh G.: We have a traditional, 100-year-old Toronto semi that had been renovated by previous owners to convert the standard three bedroom layout into a two, with much more generous bedroom sizes, spacious closets and a proper master bathroom. While this floor plan appealed to us when we purchased the house four years ago, as an engaged couple, a baby on the way meant an additional resident and more visits from out-of-town family. It was time to either add an additional bedroom and bathroom or consider moving.



New third floor bathroom

ES: What was your goal with regards to the space (your wish list) and how does the finished space fare in comparison?

Josh G.: We toured open houses in our neighbourhood when we were still considering purchasing instead of renovating, and the majority of the third floor attic conversions we saw, featured open staircases to the lower floors, small bathrooms and lack of closet space. While these designs resulted in larger, loft-like bedrooms, we wanted more storage and a proper door to allow for privacy. We also weren't willing to downgrade bathroom size -- double sinks are key to a happy marriage! Sacrificing bathroom space and storage would have made the room larger, but for us, the space would have been much less liveable.

ES: How did you go about finding a contractor?

Josh G.: We started our research online -- major home renovation hubs and community message boards. We ended up interviewing and receiving quotes from six or seven contractors before making the final decision, based on the proposal, interview impression and reference feedback from past clients.



Frame of master bedroom (stairs to the left, crawlspace storage to the right, neighbours' attic in background beyond framing.)

ES: Any advice on how to not choose a lemon?

Josh G.: What impressed us most about the contractor we hired -- **OnCentre Design Build** -- was their incredibly detailed quote. It went so far as to include specific model numbers for suggested fixtures and finishings. This made us feel more confident that the budget was well thought out and that we were less likely to see surprises once the job was underway. They also brought their full crew -- the electrician, HVAC and carpenter -- to the house prior to submitting a quote and included feedback from all trades in the document. It was nice to have the opportunity to meet the workers that would actually be on the job and in our home.



ES: Did you have full architectural drawings done? How deep did you go into the technical planning of the space before you broke drywall? And how much tech drawings should people expect to have to invest in?

Josh G.: We did have full architectural drawings done prior to interviewing contractors. While it was a tough expense to swallow -- we hadn't even decided if we were staying or moving -- it was necessary in order to get actual quotes from builders and to make sure we wouldn't have any permitting issues.

ES: Did you have to supervise and be on site a lot? How did you and your spouse fare with full-time work and full-time construction?

Josh G.: We did visit the house almost daily. It was reassuring for us to see the progress, and I think it was helpful for the trades to have access to us in order to get quick answers about on-site decisions. We also hoped that the regular appearance of a pregnant woman would be a motivating factor for the trades to keep on schedule -- seemed to work!



Before third floor staircase; after the addition of third floor staircase

ES: They call renovation dust, divorce dust... Any impact on your relationship? How did your marriage survive the reno?

Josh G.: Our marriage survived the reno by physically avoiding the reno -- we lived in rental accommodation for the duration of the project. While there is no doubt the process will always be stressful, knowing that you have a clean, calm place to sleep each night makes it easier to deal with the inevitable site and budgetary issues.



Dormer addition in progress, prior to deck

ES: Where did you splurge and where did you save?

Josh G.: We splurged on a walkout deck, new hardwood floors on the second floor to match the new space, stonework on the fireplace surround and a new tankless water heater (not glamorous, but true).



Dormer addition and deck, after

In order to avoid the time and cost required to tear out the drywall throughout the entire house to install new ductwork to the third floor, we decided to investigate more creative heating and cooling solutions. For warmth, we have an automatic gas fireplace with thermostat in the main living area and electric heated floors in the bathroom. For cooling, we went with a wall-mounted slimline AC unit. Both systems work very well. While we don't love the look of the AC unit, it was a necessary compromise for this project.



Second floor

We also saved by purchasing our own lighting fixtures and doing some of the painting ourselves (this physical labour may have contributed to the almost month-early delivery of our son).

ES: Ballpark cost? Would you say this was a sound investment? Are you looking at this as your long term family home?

Josh G.: The reno cost approximately \$125,000.00. While the motivating factor certainly wasn't financial, we did the "before and after" price research/comparisons in our ideal neighbourhoods and were confident we weren't paying to over-reno -- especially when we took into account the costs associated with selling and moving. We love our neighbourhood and love our street, and embarking on a reno was the only way to achieve our family home "wish list" in our most preferred location.

One thing to definitely consider before adding a new floor is how much of the budget is eaten up by hidden items -- structural, framing, insulation, roofing, electrical, etc. The visual impact for the price isn't nearly as dramatic as something like a kitchen or bathroom reno.

ES: Anything you would have done differently?

Josh G.: If we had been sure that we were going ahead with the renovation, we would have invested more in the architectural drawings. As we didn't want to unnecessarily drive up the price for a project that we may have abandoned, we purchased more basic plans. Luckily, our contractor and trades were excellent and able to help us make essential design and layout decisions/revisions throughout the construction process.

ES: Anything else in the plans?

Josh G.: There are already rumblings about starting to investigate the digging out, underpinning and completing of our currently very unfinished basement.

I am especially impressed with the creative heating and cooling solutions. New master bedroom looks to be a stellar success! Wouldn't you say?