

# Project Spotlight: Home Remodel Right on the Money

## Abstract:

Precise systems and good listening deliver dazzling project at a practical price

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The LaVassars did an about-face when they spotted a [Sockeye Homes](#) <sup>[1]</sup> billboard near their Seattle area home. So did their house.

Since moving into the 1950s house in Des Moines, Wash., in 1998, Rick and Melisa LaVassar had been planning to correct its problems. They had a clear idea of what those problems were—an outdated kitchen, a chaotic dining-family-entry area, inadequate bedroom space, limited access to views of nearby Puget Sound and Mount Rainier, and a “front door” that wasn’t in front. They also had a clear idea of what they were willing to spend on the remodel: \$125,000—or \$150,000 tops. **(Click [here to read more about the financials of the project](#) <sup>[2].</sup>)**

Over the years the LaVassars found several contractors whose work they admired and asked them for remodeling estimates. Some dismissed the job as too small. One quoted a price that was double the LaVassars’ budget. “It was ridiculous,” says Melisa. Another pushed for rooftop solar panels and other budget-busting features that did not even appear on the homeowners’ wish list.

The Sockeye Homes billboard caught the LaVassars’ attention not only because it was good-

looking but also because it offered design/build services at attractive prices. (Sockeye advertises mainly in upscale regional magazines now.) They visited the Sockeye website and were impressed by the company's designs, testimonials, and experienced project superintendents and crew. Company owner Tod Sakai's expertise commanded their respect too; though only in his 30s, Sakai had been general manager of Armstrong Lumber Co. (Armstrong Homes) for 13 years before starting Sockeye Homes, winning national recognition for building systems he developed.

When Sakai came out to the LaVassars' house, he looked carefully at the structure, assessed the tight site, and listened intently as the homeowners described their remodeling goals and budget. He took them to two current projects. Unlike the other contractors, he did not provide a ballpark price. Rather, he came back the next week with a complete, detailed estimate that was within the LaVassars' budget. He promised to have plans drawn in six to eight weeks.

At last, after years of discouragement, the LaVassars were ready to move ahead with the remodel. "Tod's proposal was real precise," says Rick LaVassar, it was affordable, and it reflected exactly what the LaVassars wanted to do to improve their home.

### **Small space, big impact**

With just a 400-square-foot addition and a 380-square-foot interior remodel, Sakai transformed the cramped, 2,000-square-foot house into an airy, comfortable home with a commanding street presence. Originally the entrance hid on the side of the house, where it dumped visitors into the jumbled entry, dining and living area that the LaVassars hated. Sakai built an addition across the front of the house to solve a multitude of problems. It contains a spacious new living room—removing one function from that amorphous area—and a bedroom for one of the LaVassar children. He pulled the entry door around to the front, centering a welcoming entrance portico between the new rooms. Both rooms feature large windows that take in the Puget Sound vistas. The old multi-use area became purely a dining room, to the delight of the LaVassars. Fitted with high windows, it captures views of Mount Rainier but not of the house next door.

Craftsman-style columns, gable roof, cedar trim and stonework lend new character to the exterior. Window trim, custom molding and the new living room fireplace surround match the old millwork and dress up the interior. Sakai incorporated ornamental columns into existing header space, adding decorative detailing without much added cost.

To unify old and new flooring, Sakai used oak shorts in the new space like those in the existing rooms, feathering the two together. He stripped the finish off the old oak and covered all in the same Craftsman-look cherry finish. The tile around the fireplace matches what's in the kitchen.

### **Eye for Detail**

The tight city lot sits high, with a steep drop-off. Sakai's estimate incorporated site excavation and geo-technical engineering to retain soil, direct roof runoff and manage surface drainage. Because the house is near the airport, his estimate also bulked up on thicknesses to meet sound abatement requirements. "The jurisdictional code has made us double everything," he says, including plywood roof and wall sheathing, insulation, and double-pane windows with wider air space between. "We never fly by the seat of our pants," he says. "No surprises."

Well, almost no surprises. One day Melisa asked the crew to cut three openings in the living room wall. The spur-of-the-moment move shocked Sakai, since the wall is load-bearing. That night he solved the problem: Instead of three openings, he framed two, designing an engineer-approved quarter wall for the third opening to provide a visual connection between rooms without compromising structural support.

Overall, precise planning and control guided the project on a smooth path to early completion.

“Tod promised that the job would be completed 120 days from breaking ground,” says Melisa, and “it was finished a week or two early.” Sakai’s original estimate was “pretty much right on,” she adds. Extras that the homeowners added, such as a surround sound system in the living room and a new driveway to complement the new entry, accounted for the extra dollars. Thanks to ongoing communication, “We knew what to expect” along the way, she says. Perhaps most important, is his design. “Tod did exactly what we wanted,” says Melisa.

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