



A Class Act—and a Good Deal

by Richard Lind

What was required was clear, but I dreaded facing it.

The 1935 vintage colonial we were rehabbing had an up-to-date floor plan. It was consistent with and typical of much newer, four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath, two-story colonials. But the house was old enough that it had terminal water pipe problems. The badly stained ceilings made that evident to even the most casual observer. Expensive replacement was imminent – no doubt about it.

It wasn't just replacing the pipe that was troubling. It was the overall havoc that generally accompanies such work – the access holes that would likely be punched in the ceilings and walls, and the broken plaster that always gets tracked around and ground into the strip oak floors, in spite of preventive measures.

Almost everyone in the building business gets involved in rehab sooner or later, it seems. It's where the action is these days, with big bucks in contract work, particularly in areas where new house construction has slowed and homeowners are staying put and improving.

It Comes With the Territory

But this was a different story. We found ourselves in a position that confronts many builders: involved in a rehab only because we bought a property that included an existing house on subdividable land. The house required attention to become attractive and marketable. Leaving it unimproved would only have the potential to lower the value of anything built adjacent to it.

The plumbing contractor we were using at the time was a class outfit and a pleasure to do business with: competent, dependable, and efficient. There was just one little problem: He was very expensive.

The job, however, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the plumber's confidence and innovation didn't cost me money, but saved me money. What I thought at first were excessive prices turned out to be worthwhile investments.

The plumber said his crew would be on the job about 8:30 in the morning and be finished and out of there by mid-afternoon. That sounded great by itself. But best of all, he said there would be no broken plaster for us to repair and no patches – the ones that always leave those telltale outlines

through several coats of paint.

The second-floor baths were the typical back-to-back layout: the main bathroom with tub and overhead shower off the hall and a master bathroom with stall shower off the master bedroom. The first-floor lavatory was directly below.

The sinks in each of the two baths and the first-floor lav were updated wall-hungs. I planned to replace them with new Formica vanities. This decision became the key to what was accomplished.

Providing Access, But Leaving No Signs

After removing the three old sinks, the plumber used a sledge hammer to make generous-sized access holes at those locations. The plumbers fished and snaked Type L flexible copper tube (flexible plastic could have been used) just as an electrician would run wire. He ran the tube through an access hole in the common wall between the two baths and down the cavity wall.

He used the access hole in the first-floor lav to help move the tube along right into the basement. There, he connected with the water meter for a cold-water supply. The same thing was done with a second pipe, which was connected to the hot-water heater in

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the basement. This, in effect, brought new hot- and cold-water supplies to the baths and the lav. Connecting to the kitchen sink was simple – he just brought new supply lines up from the basement into the cabinet under the sink.

The second step was to make individual connections to the fixtures. The toilets were okay and did not need new supply lines. Since the new hot- and cold-water supply pipes were now brought to the sink locations, short, horizontal stubs were easily piped in for final connections to the new sink faucets.

To get new pipes over to the tub in the main bathroom, the plumber lifted the oak threshold under the bathroom door and cut a hole underneath. The hole provided additional access to help snake the flexible copper water lines. Workers connected the tub/shower diverter valve through an access panel at the rear of the hall linen closet that backed up to the tub.

A lifted threshold also provided access to bring new water lines to the stall shower in the master bathroom. This time, however, the rear of the master bedroom closet that backed up to the stall shower offered no access panel. The trusty sledge hammer quickly provided one, and the connections were made. Plywood with some quarter-round edging covered the hole and allowed for future access.

The Great Cover-Up

One after the other, the damaged areas began to disappear. The two oak thresholds, once fitted back into place, covered those access holes. And the three new vanities with their strong plywood backs were set hard against the walls, covering the holes that were made there earlier.

No other holes were needed. The long lengths of flexible copper tubing that were snaked through the wall eliminated the need for intermediate splices or connections. Rigid tubing would have needed not only the connections, but also additional holes in the walls and ceilings to make them.

True to the plumber's word on all counts, the crew finished before 4 in the afternoon, leaving me with new water pipe throughout and little, if any, to clean up or repair.

As time passed, that plumber followed other related but diversified interests and dissolved his plumbing operation. But I learned a great deal from the relationship, and two points in particular:

- If there is a job to be done, work with a pro.
- If you want a class act, expect to pay for it.

When faced with what seems like an excessive fee, add up all the alternatives. A quality sub who saves you work after he's out the door may very well save you money, too. ■

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