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How to turn houses into jewel boxes

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Because his father was a land developer in Sarasota, Tim Macksey grew up around home building. He has built several homes for himself. One of them was a green building, decades ahead of the trend. In 2002, he got his contractor's license and started Old World Master Builders. Since then, he has been renovating single-family homes and condos.



Tim Macksey of Old World Master Builders.
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With a passion for beauty and creating things that last a long time, he transforms existing spaces into the things people dream about. Correspondent Chris Angermann talked with him at his home about his approach and what he calls "jewel boxing."

Q:What is your approach to renovating and remodeling?

A:The foundations are of the essence. We want to retrofit the house as much as possible to make it hurricane-proof. We'll tie down the roof and install hurricane windows or put up storm screens. I'm always trying to find the fail point in a building, so we can design a way for porches not to leak and have to come back later to fix things. Generally, I don't use wood on the outside. I want it to be concrete or a concrete siding like Hardiplank, so we can harden up the building.

Q:So what is jewel boxing?

A:Once the bones and the foundation are solid, jewel boxing is the aesthetics on the inside. We transform the space into a jewel. What we're doing is take the room out -- a kitchen, for example -- and put it back in correctly -- with the right design, the right floor plan and right materials. If you have the correct ingredients, correct design generally is ageless.

If you have a house that was built in the 1980s or '90s, chances are the cabinets have particle board and there's an old sink that's on top of the Formica or Corian counter top. I don't do particle-board cabinets. I use plywood. And I use a solid-surface counter top and an under-counter-mounted sink. We may use quartzite, marble or onyx, but in my opinion, the best surface is granite because it is the hardest and puts up with the most abuse.

I did a house near University Parkway that had one of those kitchens with a shelf up top for plants. So we took that out to get the ceiling higher and open the room up and then changed the look. We put in cabinets that were 42 inches high -- normally they're 36 inches -- so all the stuff that doesn't get used much went up top. We got that space by bringing the ceiling up.

Then we changed the lighting. Before, it was a couple of ceiling cans. We created a valence around the bottom of the cabinets, and put the lighting underneath, so that it would shine directly on the counter top or the sink -- all the work surfaces where you really want it. It was all adjustable by rheostat so the ambient light could be as mood-sensitive as it needed to be.

So the kitchen was not just a work space, but part of the whole world of the home. And we can do this throughout a house. We're always after creating something, where people come in at the end and say "Oh, I love that." But it takes a very specific kind of client to do this.

Q:Who are your ideal clients?

A:The perfect clients for me know they want to change things. And they tell me their dreams -- everything from air conditioning without ducts to plumbing without traps. They might want to raise the ceiling or take out structural columns.

For materials, I don't bring sample books and say, "Could you choose from these?" I take them to the granite store and look at 100 slabs of granite and ask, "What makes your heart sing?" So we're all starting from where they get a warm and fuzzy feeling of what it's going to be.

I look at space utilization, and, because clients usually can't read plans, I buy foam board normally used for wall insulation and do a mockup of the full layout and put it down on the floor. Now they can walk in the pathways to make sure they have enough room. And they are happy in the end, because the mockup serves not only as example, but I slide it into the work space so the electrician and plumber and cabinet maker can use it, too. It saves a lot of trouble and time.

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