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BUILDER SNAPSHOT

Giving old homes new life

Donatelli specializes in renovating vintage homes

By Leslie Mann
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Many home builders prefer to start with a blank slate, sans obstacles such as aging infrastructures and historic district rules. Give them a hunk of open land and they're good to go. But Chris Donatelli prefers the challenges and rewards of a gut rehab.

President of Wheaton-based Donatelli Builders, Donatelli does new construction for clients with empty lots. But his specialty is the buyer who appreciates an older neighborhood's mature trees and parks, but wants a house with 21st-Century amenities. "These are not ostentatious buyers," says Donatelli. "They'd rather have quality than square footage."

Typical of his work is a 1920s brick Colonial in Wheaton that Donatelli recently rehabbed for a couple who liked the house's proximity to downtown Wheaton, but wanted to update it to fit their busy family's lifestyle.

Donatelli restored the house's foyer with its stairway niche and mahogany banister; its formal living and dining rooms, and its cozy sunroom. But he extended the back of the house to give it a larger kitchen/family room that opens to a patio and fountain with outdoor lighting. While the original house had a no-nonsense back yard typical of its era, the new one serves as an outdoor entertaining area.

The addition also includes what Donatelli calls the "family foyer." "I call it that instead of a mudroom because it's more than that," he says. "Today's mudroom has to be very efficient, with, for example, a recharging station, but look great, too, with the same cabinetry we used in the kitchen."

Upstairs, Donatelli created a master bedroom suite with a fireplace, his-and-her closets, and, in the bathroom, a heated floor and walk-in shower.

The whole house was upgraded with a more efficient HVAC system, plus new security and intercom systems.

Donatelli dressed the home with trimwork and wainscoting galore, using classic designs that unite the house's old and new seamlessly and will endure another century. "One of the principles of green building is to build it to last instead of using inferior materials that have to be replaced," says Donatelli. "The client who wants cheap products that will only last a few years — that's not my client."

While he subcontracts the other trades, Donatelli maintains frame and trim carpenters on staff. "I have strong



Chris Donatelli is president of Donatelli Builders. SHAUN SARTIN/PHOTOS FOR TRIBUNE



Donatelli extended the back of this 1920s brick Colonial to give it a larger kitchen/family room that opens to a patio and fountain with outdoor lighting.

belief that carpentry sets the pace in residential construction," he says. "It also establishes a presence on the job."

Donatelli learned the trade from his father, a remodeling contractor, who taught him his "accountability" rule-of-thumb when choosing subcontractors. "In addition to requiring a certain skill level, I don't accept the taxicab mentality, the 'We'll send someone out to take care of it.' I hire people who take ownership of the project," he says.

To achieve the level of quality he wants, Donatelli says he demands that his subs work above and beyond code. His trim carpenters, for example, use biscuits to secure mitered corners. His painters prime the fronts and backs of trimwork before installation to minimize expansion and shrinkage. His plumbers insulate pipes within three feet of outside walls to eliminate the possibility of freezing.

To avert delays, Donatelli conducts "pre-start meetings" with his staff, subs and vendors to review the client's product choices and the house's potential predicaments.

Donatelli draws from a pool of archi-

itects. Foremost, though, is adherence to the client's budget. "It doesn't matter if the design is great if the client can't afford it," he says.

Close-to-town rehabs such as the Wheaton project are harbingers, predicts Donatelli. "I think the days of the McMansion are over," he says. "Now people don't want to pay for a lot of space they won't use. Let's face it, even if you have a big family, do you really need 8,000 square feet? Now, people put a greater value on location and they want to walk to the train, not drive a half-hour. They can get that from the older housing stock."

If he had not become a builder, Donatelli speculates that he might have become a pilot. He counts Sully Sullenberger among his heroes. "To bring down that plane safely [in the Hudson River] — how amazing was that?" says Donatelli. "The difference between a pilot and a builder, though, is the pilot makes a mistake and he goes down, too. A bad builder passes on his mistakes to someone else to clean up. I try to build it well and build it right so that doesn't happen."