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Life in Phases

Homeowner finds Stillwater fixer-upper challenging but fulfilling





BY MOLLY GUTHREY
PHOTOS BY PAUL KNUTSON



BEFORE

A fixer-upper needs a person, but does a person need a fixer-upper? Yes — if that person is Janet Jezior of Stillwater.

"I wanted a project, I needed a change," says Jezior, who back in the early 2000s was a single mom.

At first, though, Jezior thought her change up would come in the form of new construction.

"I was going to build a new house," Jezior says. "I even bought a lot at Liberty on the Lake."

But before her project could get started at that newer subdivision in Stillwater ...

"A friend said I should buy a house overlooking the river," Jezior says.

So Jezior went to look at an existing home — perched atop a bluff overlooking the St. Croix River — that was for sale in the city of Stillwater.



BEFORE

"The view was unbelievable," Jezior says.

Believe it or not, she bought it.

"I bought it for the view," she says.

As for the house ...

"I wanted a project," Jezior says, "and I got one."

It was still a good investment, though. Because, as the head of the Janet Jezior Insurance Agency, Jezior is a naturally cautious person.

"It was not a 'falling down' kind of fixer-upper," Jezior says. "It was in good shape — it had been maintained — but it was dated in terms of the cosmetic stuff."



PHASE ONE

The re-imagining of the midcentury modern ranch house began with the interiors. To assist her in the task, Jezior worked with Paul Knutson, owner of Knutson Residential Design.

Jezior definitely needed the help of this St. Paul-based residential designer.

"There was a wall between the kitchen and the view," Jezior recalls. "And there were no sliding glass doors, so we couldn't access the patio from the house."

Also: "the fireplaces were funky — one of them had a grill that smoked up the house so it wasn't usable, and the other one had never been used."

"The flooring — which included everything from wood floors to tile to carpet — also needed updating, as did the windows," she says. "It just needed a lot of updating."

It was certainly updated — including the removal of both the popcorn (on the ceilings) and paneling (on the walls) ... and so much more.



"There's a big, open living space that you see right when you walk in," Knutson says. "And the view of the St. Croix River is now what you see right away, too. I increased the size of the existing opening between the living space and entry foyer to highlight this view. The kitchen is off to one side and there's a big fireplace."

A stone fireplace.

"We used St. Croix Valley stone," Jezior says. "I can look across the river and almost see where it came from."

The fireplace — both of them, actually — work now.

"There's one wood and one gas fireplace," Jezior says.

The stone and fire accents blend nicely with the home's softer elements.

"I put in wood floors," Jezior says, "except the bedrooms, which are carpeted."

The kitchen is also new, as well as most of the windows — and there are sliding glass doors now that lead to the patio.



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BEFORE - FRONT OF HOUSE



PHASE TWO

After a reprieve of about a decade, it was time to begin phase two of the re-imagining: The exterior. Once again, Jezior enlisted the help of Knutson, as well as a new partner: Cates Fine Homes, a family-owned company that focuses on higher-end residential building and remodeling projects in the east metro.

"She wanted a massive stylistic change," says Jennifer Cates Peterson.

More like adding style.

Explains Knutson: "The house was a 1959 ranch — very long and with very little detail. Not much style. While Janet imagined the interior to have a cottage feeling, the outside didn't have any of that flavor."

To understand his client's vision, they went way beyond looking at photos on Houzz and Pinterest (although they did that, too).

"We took multiple field trips to 'shop' for the elements that she wanted to incorporate," Knutson says. "She wanted it to look like a large cottage."

"She liked Arts and Crafts ... that bungalow feeling."

Ultimately, what the homeowner sought is what many owners of fixer-uppers seek.

"I just wanted it to look more updated," Jezior says.

She did have one must-have on the list, though.

"Yellow is my favorite color," she says.

She picked a sensible way to wrap up her house in yellow.

"Cement board," says Jezior of the type of siding. "It's more resistant to hail and fire and it can still be painted in different colors."

It was not the siding but the roof that was the trickiest part.

"Figuring out how we were going to put a higher pitch on a low-pitched roof was the biggest challenge," Cates Peterson says. "We ended up going right over the old roof."

Once it was done, it was memorable.

"It catches the eye of people driving on the north hill of Stillwater," Cates Peterson says. "They know the house if they see it on our website or if I describe it. They'll say, 'You did that house? I love it!' It's just the kind of house that you remember."



PHASES THREE AND FOUR AND ...

Jeziar's home is now a much different place than it was in 2002. Inside, it's a warm, open and inviting place that incorporates the river view. Outside, it's no longer a plain rectangle.

The dated ornamental iron columns that previously heralded the entry way in the middle of the rectangle have been replaced by solid wood columns on stone bases. There's also porch lighting and a new, textured concrete walk and steps — as well as new plantings — to bump up the curb appeal.

The rectangle itself has been jazzed up with gables and dormers. The siding, while all cement, is both lap and shingle, and in varying sizes, to give it a visually diverse appeal.

It really does look like a different home was built here.

More importantly, it matches now.

"She had spent 10 years with a gap between the inside and the outside," Knutson says. "So she was thrilled to get the outside and the inside to come together."

Since Phase One, life has changed: Jeziar's children are now both grown, and she has remarried. During Phase Two, Jeziar also added to the bedrooms and the garage. And now, Phase Three is in that dream phase.

"The bathrooms are next," Jeziar says.

That's the thing about fixer-uppers ... there's always more to fix. And that's OK with her team.

"Bring it on," Knutson says. "We're ready whenever Janet is."

Molly Guthrey, a Pioneer Press reporter, is a frequent contributor to Spaces.