

Renovations To Dive For

Add a little "wow factor" to your landscape by renovating your pool

Dive In Taking the Plunge Into Swimming-Pool Renovation

By Dave Terry

If you avert your eyes when faced with that hole of muck in your back yard . . . if you've considered renaming your 1980s square swimming pool an "open-air bomb shelter" . . . if you're looking to add a little "wow factor" to your landscape, you might be due for a pool renovation.

A few important points are worth remembering: You get what you pay for. You can't do it yourself. And it all will be worth it in the end.

Whatever Floats Your Pool

There are only a few basic types of pools on the market. Swimming pools can be constructed with vinyl, fiberglass, reinforced concrete (shotcrete or gunite) or stainless steel. Cost usually determines the shell that retains the water. Vinyl pool liners are dug and shaped by hand and then lined with vinyl. Fiberglass is a one-piece shell fit into a hole. A concrete pool is formed with rebar, reinforced and then sprayed with gunite, a sprayable type of concrete. Stainless are formed to the site and very expensive.

"Fiberglass pools, especially the older ones, have problems cracking because when then install them, there's a void underneath the bottom of the pool," said Wally Womble of Pool Tech Services in Tallahassee. "And when they're filled up, sometimes you'll get a crack. To fix these cracks can be anywhere from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Also, because fiberglass is fairly light, if you drain it and there's a wet area below, the pool will float. The fact that the concrete pool weights 15 tons helps to eliminate this, but they can also float, just like a steel ship."

"You could design a vinyl pool to look like a gunite pool and you'd have a hard time telling the difference," said Dave Ruppel of Pool Tech Services. "The vinyl pool offers more colors, prints and patterns, but it can tear. There are polymer walls 42 inches high that protect the upper area of the pool. After the pool is constructed, to do a reconstruction, costs are significantly different. Both can be destroyed by groundwater rising. But to replace a vinyl pool, you're looking in the ballpark of \$2,500 versus \$4,500, or more, for a gunite pool."

Commercially, you can save money by doing a complete renovation instead of building a whole new pool. For instance, if the cost of a new pool was estimated at \$100,000, a complete renovation might cost only \$60,000. But beware of the differences between construction contractors, general masons and professional pool constructors.

Cox Pools' Jeff Hunt and longtime buddy Rick Medeiros are experienced, articulate perfectionists who love what they do.

"The majority of pool reconstruction is retile and refinishing," Hunt said. "To do a renovation, you've got to know swimming pools. Joe Mason off the street really couldn't do it. First off, you've got to determine groundwater levels."

Keith Arsenault, a homeowner and executive director of the Sandestin Owners Association, learned about groundwater levels the hard way.

"We had 6 or 7 inches of rain in 36 hours," he said. "The groundwater rose outside the pool and equalized the pressure against the liner inside the pool. The vinyl liner started to float up to the top."

“A portion of the side wall on the deep end collapsed,” Arsenault said. “When the groundwater went back down, the pool liner had a huge bulge in the wall. After it was all done and I’d gotten estimates and had the engineers come out, my insurance didn’t cover the repairs.”

In the final process of having the pool repaired, Arsenault had a drainage release system installed in his back yard.

“A pool will float just like a boat,” Hunt said. “We’ve done many rebuilds of pools constructed by others that had popped right out of the ground, like toast from a toaster. When they pop up, you’ve got to tear them up and redo them. It’s a mess.”

“The pool is designed to hold water,” he said. “When you drain the pool, if there’s water below the pool, the lining and entire pool can float, or bulge out, crack and destroy itself.”

“We construct release valve holes in our pools that allow the pool to relieve the pressures and eliminate any possibility of a problem. Cox Pools has been doing this for 40 years. I’ll tell you, there are a lot of builders and masons who don’t consider this simple fact.”

Showing Its Age

Signs of wear and tear on a pool typically appear first on the plaster. Often one will notice a discoloration, or the plaster will start to deteriorate. This is what happened to the 21-year-old Edgewater Beach Resort pool in Panama City Beach.

Hunt and I drove over there, and he showed me the upgrade they completed last year.

“Typically your renovation pools are from eight to 30 years old,” Hunt said. “We just finished this \$100,000 renovation on the Edgewater pool last year. Basically, we came in, stripped it down and redid the concrete. We replaced the finishing tiles and increased the size of the steps.”

The pool looked brand new.

What about redoing your old square pool and turning it into a curved pool to add a touch of class with a more fluid appearance?

“We’ve done pools inside of pools numerous times,” Hunt said, when we met at a reconstruction site on Highway 30A. “When you change the shape, basically you’re just putting a pool inside a pool. We just finished this pool. We moved the spa, added a fountain, changed some wall angles, then went back and had some glass tile put on with custom coping and some fiber optics.”

Go Pro For Your Pool

Pool builders who do renovations usually are experienced pool-construction experts who have continued to sharpen their skills, growing with their experiences and learning to value the changes.

“I head up the commercial high-end pools here in Panama City for Cox Pools, and our renovation manager, Phillip Hicks, will call me in on his harder projects for my advice and experience,” Hunt said.

“Typically, the water in this area has a large amount of iron in it, and this hurts the finish of the pools. We try and use potable water whenever we can get it. This cuts down on the amount of chemicals you have to use and saves the client money in the long run.

“Right now, a lot of the custom style pools have automation, chemical controllers, fountains and fiber optics,” he said. “That’s really the big thing in this area. You also can have automatic controllers with chemical dispersion systems. These are the biggest-selling products I’m seeing.”

Pumps, filters, heaters, fiber optics, color-wheel water fountains and total automation can be obtained from a number of sources. Automation of pool systems now is considerably easier to use than it was in the old days.

“We have a one-touch screen now,” Hunt said. “You walk up and touch the screen, and the process is actually very easy to understand. This technology is so simple, any owner can operate it.

The options for pool renovation are dazzling, and the results can be a thing of beauty. I was taken to one of Cox Pools’ high-end renovations. As I stood over the pool, a tiled turtle appeared to be flying along the bottom while a mermaid danced below the Jacuzzi waterfall.

As the sun set, Medeiros and Hunt went into the pump room. Suddenly, the entire pool went from a darkened construction project to a vivid display of changing colored illuminations beaming from tiny fiber-optic lights while laser-like fountains shot stroboscopic arcs of water and multi-colored luminosity into the pool.

Another invention that has appeared on the market recently is the use of chlorine generators.

“One of our biggest selling features is the salt-generated chlorine system,” Medeiros said. “You put the salt into the pool and the generators turn this salt into chlorine. This saves the homeowners money, time and headaches. It softens and chlorinates the pool water in one process.”

One of the newest safety features on the market today is SonarGuard. This is an advanced child-protection security system that creates an “invisible” underwater sonar “net.” It notifies parents or caretakers immediately if a child falls into the pool.

The system works on any size or shape of pool. It can be fitted on any new or existing pool or spa and can distinguish between a real event and pool toys, a dog drinking from the water’s surface or even the wind.

“Throughout the United States, certain states require you to have a fence around your pool,” Medeiros said. “But in the last few years there have been a few states that have actually stopped that law if you have the SonarGuard system in your pool. There’s been zero failure, and this device has saved several lives.”