

New deck brings a new and glamorous lifestyle

Julie Crawford jcrawford@nsnews.com

PATIOS and decks are the ultimate suburban status symbol. The guy next door with the flashy BMW may make more money, but hey -- he's alone, and you've got a patio full of fun-loving friends.

Unfortunately, our patio didn't send that message. Style-wise, it was more early Bavarian schnitzelhaus than Canadian House and Home.

Not only that, it had become a bit of a hazard. Years of wear here on the soggy shore had given the steps an extra bounce that certainly wasn't due to any kind of sprightly energy on my part.

My husband Dave, game for any tool-wielding activity, offered his services, but with visions of some sort of Dr. Seussian contraption making our '70s split-level look even more unlike Martha Stewart's, I put my foot down.

Out came our trusty North Shore News home improvement section, and Dave circled several ads for carpenters, "handypersons" (a new politically correct category) and the like.

Business must be good, because few people phoned back. Two didn't show up for their estimates.

Then came John Juzyniec.

What we needed was a new set of stairs, I explained, preferably ones that didn't lead right from our kitchen upstairs down to the street. (I had had several early-morning incidents of couriers and mailmen arriving at my back door before I was properly dressed, cradling my hi-caffeine tea. Who says 10:30 isn't too early?)

No problem, said John. He did excellent work, he told us. He worked alone; he would have it done on time and on budget. Then he got into some technical stuff that Dave seemed impressed with: something about using five stringers while everyone else uses two. Were those his helpers from the junior carpenters' farm team? I just nodded politely.

But we got talked into replacing the whole deck, for aesthetic reasons (clearly John didn't like the dark brown wienerhaus deck either). I felt like my mechanic had found another \$500 of repairs to do. Out came the line-of-credit chequebook.

The next day at the ungodly hour of sometime-before-eight I awoke to sounds of old deck destruction. I winced, remembering the times I cursed neighbours doing home renos who disturbed my sleep.

As things progressed, John found a beam almost eaten through by carpenter ants. Unsafe and nightmarish should the ants have gotten into the house. Thank goodness we replaced the whole deck.

I got used to John working busily outside the kitchen window, as I stood at the sink doing the dishes. (Now that I had an observer, I did them more often, as the gravity-defying pile of dirty dishes routinely left in the sink was embarrassing. I also got the kids out of their PJs earlier and I was nicer to the dog, who clearly preferred John and his roast chicken lunches to me and the dry kibble.)

And it wasn't long before our enlarged and reconfigured deck was done, with high-quality pressure-treated radiussed planks and stairs, and red cedar caps and posts. With non-springy stairs leading right into the yard, so I don't have to worry about finding my three-year-old escaping again and standing in his underwear and my high heels, in the middle of the street. Big enough so we can bring the large table and umbrella up and lazily soak up the view over frothy drinks with those little cocktail umbrellas. (I can dream, can't I?)

After our great experience with John, we've got the home renovation bug in a big way.

And every single contractor who's been through in the past two weeks _ drywaller, rubbish removal guy, painter, carpetlayer _ has admired the craftsmanship of our deck and marvelled at the five stringers, which I have learned are those things that actually hold the stairs up.

So now we're gutting the basement, which suffers from that Italian pizzeria/Turkish bordello look. But that's another story....

John Juzyniec can be reached at (604) 817-6093.

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