



Chiseled good looks

New stone and brick veneers give suburban homes some much needed facelifts

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Michael and Linda Goone had tired of the cedar siding on the exterior of their 12-year-old Buffalo Grove home. However, rather than moving to a new house, the couple contracted North Star Stone Inc. to install a stone veneer treatment this summer.

"It looks great. It looks much better, and we are very happy," Michael Goone said.

Because of structural concerns, installing actual brick wasn't an option for the Goones. In new construction, the architect can specify a brick ledge in the foundation that will support the weight of either brick or natural stone. In existing homes without this foundational support, however, renovators have to find a "workaround" solution to the weight and thickness issues of natural stone. In these situations, stone veneers offer a cost-effective way to change a home's appearance.

The upside was that the quotes the Goones had received for installing real brick were three to four times the cost of the thin veneers, Goone said.

Stone veneers have been around since the early 1960s but are growing in popularity. Lighter weight and lower cost than real stone, they provide homeowners options for having the look of stone where real stone can't be used, said Alan Andrews, the owner of the Libertyville-based North Star Stone.

Many older homes that have a dated look can benefit with a facelift using stone veneers. Sometimes homeowners just like a change.

Lori and Terry Cox wanted a different look for their 1969 Northbrook ranch. They had lived in their home since 1993 and liked its location and interior. Lori, a Realtor who trains other real estate professionals, thought the home's exterior might benefit from an update.

"We enjoy working on projects and started renovating in 2000 by replacing the roof. I researched ways to bring the warmth of stone to the exterior and came across North Star," Lori Cox said.

They combined the look of stucco and stone for a unique look.

"It's more European and we've had so many positive comments. Some say it looks like a Spanish villa, while others say that it looks like it belongs on the West Coast," Cox said.

The project began the last week in May and was completed before the Fourth of July. Part of that time was due to a wait for new windows to be installed, Cox said.

"Improving your home's exterior is very cost effective. It does increase its value over the lifetime of the home," Cox said.

Inside the home, homeowners also use veneers to update the look of existing fireplaces. An existing fireplace can be transformed into the focal point of the room. North Star can cover the dated brick or install veneers over existing drywall.

North Star also assists clients with decisions about installing flat screen TVs over the fireplace, or possibly a mantel or both. With many styles of stone and custom colors available, North Star can easily customize a fireplace design. Installation typically takes one or two days depending on the size of the fireplace.

North Star's masons also use veneers to build fireplaces, accent walls, theme basements and wine cellars. Outside, they've created backyard patios with grills or fire pits.

Andrews has been busy throughout the year, often with a waiting list. "I think people believe that investing in their homes makes good financial sense," said Andrews, who opened his custom stone veneers business in 2004.

North Star uses Portland cement and an aggregate in its veneers, which is both cheaper and easier to work with than real stone, Andrews said. Custom colors also are possible.

Stone veneers are typically one to 1 inches thick and come in a variety of sizes, shapes and styles. Over the last 40 years, manufactured stones have become so realistic that it's very difficult to discern what is genuine from what is a veneer.

"The reason we have a niche is that we manufacture stone in our Libertyville facility. People can customize the look - we have stone that has a prairie feel, as well as a château blend stone. We also can customize colors. People bring in a pillow for instance, and we can match the red in the pillow. Through the years, I've developed a good eye for color and I won't let people make a mistake," Andrews said.

North Star also provides one-stop shopping, providing the stone and services of a mason, an architect and an installer. North Star also creates a digital mock-up of the home with the proposed renovations, another aspect that clients like.

An average exterior update, according to Andrews, costs from \$10,000 to \$30,000.