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For some, downswing has an upside

Remodelers and redecorators pick up work as homeowners wait out the housing downturn

By [Tom Bayles](#)

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The housing market may be down, but the spirits of some of those who remodel and renovate homes are up.

The heady days of 2004-05 may not be seen again for a lifetime, but the downturn in the housing market is not hurting remodelers the way it has stung builders and real estate agents.

"We have work in front of us, and we are still getting phone calls and getting customers," said remodeler John King, owner of Rampart Homes Inc. "We've had some clients who were able to get into waterfront homes because of the downturn in the market and then they went ahead and put their leftover money into the house."

King has increased ceiling heights, added lanais and built rooms. Business is up about 15 percent when compared with this time last year.

Not every remodeling firm is as busy as King's, and some home builders who have turned to remodeling to stay alive are struggling. But longtime home renovation companies are making the best of the real estate market as people decide to improve their living spaces while riding out the housing downturn.

"People are putting more money into their homes instead of trying to sell them because of the difficulties of the market," said Jessica Tobacman, spokeswoman for National Association of the Remodeling Industry, an Illinois-based group representing 7,700 companies nationwide.

It is not just remodelers and their associations who are saying this is a good time to be in the home renovation business.

A recent study by the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University found that \$220 billion was spent on home renovations and repairs in 2000, \$280 billion in 2005 and, in 2010, the total is expected to top \$338 billion.

"This last six months is proving people are staying in their homes and are anxious to update and remodel," said Marsha Scott, who has owned her Venice interior decorating firm for 26 years. "I'm getting a lot of that. They've said, 'Let's do those things we've been wanting to do for a long time' and this is the time. Business is wonderful."

None of the region's permitting departments tabulate residential remodeling applications the same way or include the same items -- one county may include new garage doors as a renovation while another may not -- but a broad comparison shows the home improvement business is up.

Residential remodeling permits in Charlotte County are up 52 percent in the last three months compared with the previous three months.

In Sarasota County, permits for home improvements or repairs for the last three months were up 38 percent.

In Manatee County, permits were up 26 percent.

JoAnn Parker has been redecorating homes from Longboat Key to Lakewood Ranch for 15 years.

"I had a really outstanding January and February," Parker said. "I have a 15-year client base, and they aren't scared to spend their money."

Parker said her typical client has been in his or her current home for nearly 10 years and has been saving all that time for the redecorations under way.

The sluggish housing market is helping her in a different way: It has forced newer competition out of the market.

"This might just be shake-out period, and it might be good for business," Parker said.

"There won't be a new builder on every corner competing for a slice of the pie."

Parker also is doing well because she never teamed with builders as a way to increase her client base, something she considered along the way, she says.

"I'm patting myself on the back because a few builders did want to connect with me so I didn't reap any of that crazy reward a couple of years ago," Parker said.

"But now I'm not bankrupt, either."

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