TOPSFIELD HISTORICAL COMMISSION

The Care and Feeding of an Old House

Owning an antique house should be a blessing, not a curse. Here are some tips on making your old home your dream home.

Old houses are old because they were well designed and built with quality, hand-hewn materials. Maintaining these parts is not especially difficult or expensive. Restoring or replacing them once they've been neglected is.

Old houses demand owners with a marathon mindset: investments in in-kind repairs are often long term, sometimes exceeding the owners' expected occupation of the house. A new slate roof, for example, will cost four times more than asphalt, but it will last four times as long: one hundred years.

Old houses are not custom. You adjust to live in them; they cannot be changed to accommodate you without destroying the very qualities that attracted you in the first place. Give them a chance before trying to change them. Cherish the differences. Being rational is one of the hardest things to do with the things we love, but we must. Your home is the largest investment you make. It makes sense to apply logic to it.

In that spirit we offer some do's and don'ts for a successful relationship with your old house.

Do nothing. Remember why you bought an old house in the first place. Live in it for a while and slow down. Appreciate its historic qualities. Don't jump in and start ripping and tearing until you have lived with your house and understand it.

You have a building that has worked for 150 to 200 years. Ask yourself how little can you do to accomplish your goals. There will always be people trying to get you to spend money to solve problems. Find out whether the proposed solution solves anything. Follow the logic trail. If it comes to a dead end, don't do it.

Don't replace windows. By all means, wash them. Just don't remove them, as the Sirens of the vinyl replacement window industry entice with promises of energy efficiency. With their limited sizes, pane configurations, and colors, vinyl replacements almost always look out of place on an old home, and they never match the originals' handcrafted details. Moreover, replacing wooden windows with vinyl ones is like, well, throwing money out the window.

Studies have shown that the seals between vinyl frameworks and insulated glazing typically fail within seven to twenty years. It, as well as other parts, cannot be repaired; time for another replacement. By contrast, double-hung wooden windows, with their ingeniously simple weight-and-balance systems, have a long performance record. Your antique windows have lasted a hundred years. With a little TLC, they might last another hundred years.

Which is not to say that vintage windows don't need attention. They do, sometimes lots of it. For some reason, window maintenance is always deferred. Wooden windows are rarely beyond repair, even when parts of the frame or sash are rotted. Do-it-yourselfers can fix them; others rely on experts. A long-term solution does cost more than a $150 replacement window. But if you install high-end replacement windows, the cost (about a thousand dollars per window) -- and the maintenance requirements -- are about the same as restoration. And with vinyl windows failing within twenty years, the long-term cost will far exceed the cost of repairing the original wood windows.

Don't be "fuelish." Old houses' reputation for draftiness makes their owners especially susceptible to sales pitches for expensive energy-efficient products, such as replacement windows and vinyl siding. But do you really have a heating problem? Look at what you're spending: if it's costing you $2,500 a year to heat a two-story building, you're probably in pretty good shape. Replacing windows and siding may not save you any money in the long run.

For those historic windows, weather stripping and good storm windows will make them as efficient as the short-lived replacements. Remember, too, the logic trail: In the average house, heat is lost through the roof, not the windows. Heat rises. It's basic science. Twelve inches of fiberglass insulation in the attic -- R-38 insulation -- is a good thing.

Blown-in insulation, a fine product for new construction, generally does not perform well in the quirky wall cavities of old houses. It ends up being very inconsistent in the way it settles. Moisture gets trapped and you get rotting timbers. Also, because it settles, it's not insulating upstairs where you need it most.

Don't fix symptoms; fix causes. Carefully define the problem you want to fix and make sure you're looking at the problem and not a symptom. Moisture is the single biggest havoc wreaker in old houses, yet keeping it out, whether by repairing leaks or changing the grade around the house, is often the cheapest repair a homeowner can make.

Another example: damaged plaster is rarely a sign of a plaster problem. Plaster doesn't just decide to fail. It has tremendous longevity. Frequently, homeowners tear down chipping and peeling ceilings when a little elbow grease -- okay, a lot of elbow grease --

would remove the calcimine paint that is the culprit. Likewise, plaster cracks not because it's old or poor quality, but because the house has moved, perhaps due to natural settling or to something else, like rotting posts and sills.

Also, beware of problems that aren't problems. People hate hairline cracks in their walls, but pretty much leave them alone. In summer they disappear when the building swells.

Repairing plaster rarely costs more than replacing it with drywall, which is less sturdy and less flame retardant, offers less soundproofing, and lacks plaster's hand-troweled texture and depth. The majority of the surface square footage of an old house is plaster. If you take it away, you lose a lot of the aesthetic.

Do resist trends. Old houses are often perceived as expensive because of the owners' lifestyle demands. Make sure you're not being talked into standards that exceed your needs. Do you really need two sinks in the bathroom? How often are you and your husband washing your hands at the same time? Do you really need a $36,000 kitchen with granite countertops? If the kitchen is really the center of your family life and you really like to cook, maybe it makes sense. Ask yourself, “How else could I spend this money?”

Do have a maintenance plan. Treat your house's systems like you do a lot of things in life, such as your car. You know you've got to care for it, or it's going to fail.

Different house parts have different requirements, but there is no question that a little regular attention can prevent major and costly work down the road. For roofs, a yearly visual inspection is recommended -- look for cracks in the gutter seams and missing or misaligned pieces of roof slate. For windows, a thorough inspection every five years. When you see chipped and cracked paint, repair it. Just don't paint in the sashes!

When there is work to be done, seek trades people who know and respect old houses. Many vintage interiors have been damaged in the course of plumbing and electrical upgrades because contractors schooled in new construction believed wrongly that they had to gut the house to do the work.

Talk with others who have old houses to get recommendations of trades people who have done work for them. They will be the best source of information!

Adapted with permission from Virginia Wright