

How To Restore an Older Home

By Sarah Combs

There seems to be a lot of nostalgia lately among home remodelers. Drawing on the charm of the 19th and early 20th centuries (specifically Victorian as well as the Art Deco period of the 1920s and '30s) has become increasingly popular. In part, this might be because authentic building materials are more readily available, thanks to the surge in reclaiming and recycling.

At any rate, there are homeowners who are either trying to restore their homes' original look or to transform a more contemporary house into a dwelling that reveals certain ties with, or at least an appreciation of, the past. It could be that the past seems comforting, representing what many view as simpler times. It doesn't much matter what the rationale is; these efforts can result in a more attractive and comforting place to live, and could also enhance resale possibilities.

Things to consider before starting

If you are considering a major remodeling to make your home appear more vintage, there are some things to think about before tearing anything out or making any major purchases:

- Do your research: Know what look you want to achieve, how best to do that, and whether the materials you want are obtainable. Study magazines and houses you like, take pictures, talk to others who've undertaken such projects and talk to professionals as well. It doesn't matter if you actually follow their advice. The most fundamental point is, this is your project; you should get what you want, but you also need to know what that is before it's too late.
- Check out the electrical and plumbing systems and how they would be affected by a remodel. Anything behind the walls -- pipes or wires -- must be in good shape.
- Be sure all relevant surfaces are level.
- If you'll be installing 8" or 10" baseboards, rather than using expensive straight cut fir, use an aesthetically pleasing composite substitute called MDF (a type of fiberboard) that can also be cut into decorative trim.
- Do you already have furniture or decorations that you particularly favor? If so, consider incorporating them into your vintage look. There are several reasons to suggest this. One, attempting a strictly authentic look may result in a phony effect. Two, this attempt could lead to an atmosphere that's unnatural and uncomfortable. Three, a somewhat eclectic look is more personal, so why not put your stamp on the period you favor? Here's your chance to merge the past and the present, including the best of both times.
- Don't try to cut corners: If you're adding porch posts, for instance, be sure to use ones of a sufficiently substantial width; anything less will look skimpy and inadequate. Also, be sure they have a sufficiently large flat surface if you're intending to decorate them with "appliqués."

Appliqués are carved wooden gingerbread type trim, without which a self-respecting Victorian house would not feel properly dressed.

Well, I was thinking of redoing the bathroom . . .

Ah! Art Deco, perhaps? That trend is very big for bathrooms right now. The combination of elegant pedestal porcelain sinks, mosaic floors, and wall tiles in pale pink, black and white. You could also add heated towel racks, which were first used in the '20s. Back then, they were heated with gas; today's version uses electricity. All in all, you'd end up with a beautiful while highly functional bathroom.

As mentioned above, these days, it's easy to find genuine materials. While original tiles may be tricky because they're hard to remove intact, sinks and toilets are easy to find. If you aren't able to track down the real thing, there are plenty of firms that make replicas of sinks, cabinets, light fixtures, wallpaper, tiles and trim.

Less is more. Well, sometimes, anyway.

As suggested above, just a few touches can convey the impression you want. (This could lead to the right look and be easier on the pocketbook.) It's just that they need to be the right touches, and that's where your research, perhaps combined with a professional's advice (whether a historian, a builder specializing in remodeling, or an architect) could prove invaluable.

To find the right kind of pro, look around at buildings you admire and find out who was responsible for creating that look and where they got the needed materials. Many US towns, regardless of size, have historical societies and museums, not to mention libraries, staffed with history buffs and filled with books and photos, all of which could provide the ideas you're looking for. While you're at it, you might look for a glossary of building terminology. Both in your reading, and in dealing with various professionals, knowing the industry's language will help you to get precisely what you want. You'll not only know what questions to ask, but you'll understand the answers as well.

A few last words . . .

Watch this paper and consult your local telephone directory when looking for firms dealing in reclaimed materials. Look under such headings as "Recycle Centers and Services" or "Salvage Materials." If this proves a dead end, check more traditional headings such as "Building Materials" and even "Antique Dealers." Although such places may not have precisely what you need, they ought to have enough knowledge to be able to point you in the right direction.