

HOME & GARDEN

Old Windows Find a Following

By KATIE ZEZIMA JULY 27, 2011

NEEDHAM, Mass.

BARBARA JONES had one stipulation when she was renovating her 1794 farmhouse: keep the original windows.

“For me, it’s aesthetics,” Ms. Jones said as she opened a white wooden window, the summer sun bouncing off its wavy glass. “Keeping the importance of what you have.”

Old windows have acquired a bad reputation over the last few decades as drafty, inefficient and ecologically suspect: fixtures that should be replaced rather than refurbished.

But over the last decade or so, homeowners like Ms. Jones are becoming more common. Many people are keeping their old windows, fixing what they have in the name of appearance, history and, for some, cost savings, according to architects, preservationists and window restorers.

As the host of “This Old House” and “Ask This Old House” on PBS, Kevin O’Connor has a front-row seat on this shift. Nowadays, he said, when he talks to people about home restoration, windows are the “first and most frequently talked about subject.” Mr. O’Connor and his wife spent years fixing the distinctive windows (some arched, others

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“They were as integral to the house as any other component,” Mr. O’Connor said.

Amy Harrington McAuley, who owns Oculus Fine Carpentry in Portland, Ore., agreed that homeowners with old houses are more focused on saving the windows, but, she added, “Sometimes where they get stumbled is, ‘How do I fix them?’ ”

Ms. McAuley is a speaker this week at the first National Window Preservation Summit in Bledsoe, Ky., where about two dozen people have gathered to help people answer that question by drafting national standards for old-window restoration. Organized by a collaborative of window restorers, the conference is sponsored by, among others, the Preservation Trades Network, a group supporting traditional building trades, and the Kentucky State Historic Preservation Office.

“It needs to be put into a standardized book,” said Duffy Hoffman, one of the drafters and a window restorer in Elkins, W.Va., about basic window-restoration techniques. “You can’t replace the wood. You can’t replace the craftsmanship that was put into it.”

The National Trust for Historic Preservation has also made protecting old windows a priority, devoting a section of its Web site to such topics as making old windows last. The group’s site offers a model letter for individuals to use to urge the United States Senate to pass Home Star, an energy bill that would provide tax benefits to homeowners who make old windows more energy-efficient. (The House passed its own Home Star bill this year.) Homeowners can already receive tax benefits for installing efficient new windows. “We’re just trying to spread the word, so people can make good choices,” said Rebecca Harris, a program officer at the trust, who pointed out that installing new windows in old homes, whose original windows often have unusual shapes, can distort the overall architectural design.

“They don’t automatically have to go to replacement,” Ms. Harris said of homeowners.

Robyn Brothers is one homeowner who regrets that impulse. A previous owner of Ms. Brothers’s 1857 Greek Revival home in Marshfield, Mass., had ripped out the original windows and replaced them with new ones. However, “You could hear the traffic more” through the new windows, Ms. Brothers said, and that annoyance, combined with

other problems with the replacements, led her to buy new replacements. But she paid a "shocking sum" for those windows, she said, and they were "not even high-end."

Moreover, Ms. Brothers said, there is also a vague feeling of loss when the originals are gone. "It's really striking when the windows have been replaced," she said. "It's like the house loses some of its character, its soul."

When Ms. Brothers decided to renovate a 1940s home she owns nearby, she insisted on keeping the old windows.

The proponents of preserving old windows are trying hard to buck the still-strong belief that new windows are more energy-efficient and environmentally friendly than old ones. They say that preserving old windows means those windows will not be tossed into a landfill, adding to the waste stream, and that old windows are usually made from old-growth wood that can, and often already has, withstood the test of time. New windows, they say, with their many synthetic components, may not be as durable.

Old-window advocates do admit that it is hard for an old window to match the energy efficiency of a new one. But with the right steps it can come very close, said Paul Button, an energy auditor in Manchester, N.H.

For example, Mr. Button recommends installing a boxed cornice, a horizontal box above a window that hides the curtain rod, to help circulate the heat from room radiators around the window area. Also, he said, a good storm window is crucial for maximizing the window's efficiency.

Mr. Button and others have also noted that the maintenance of old windows that are in decent shape can cost as little as a gallon of paint, while new high-efficiency windows can cost thousands of dollars each.

"Stay on the paint, that's really all there is to it," said Steve Quillian, the owner of Wood Window Makeover in Tampa, Fla.

Of course, refurbishing may also require other minor tasks, such as caulking, and some window jobs can be complicated. Lead paint must often be completely removed, for example, and salvaging rotted wood, while possible, often requires the help of a professional.

In some homes, a previous owner may have painted or caulked the windows permanently shut in the hope of blocking drafts; undoing that measure can be tricky. And some windows are in such bad shape that they simply can't be saved.

At Ms. Jones's farmhouse, the windows were not in great condition and had to be stripped down to bare wood, cleaned of lead paint and fully refurbished. While she is pleased with the look, the work was costly and the windows can sometimes be hard to operate, which makes her worry about her children opening them in an emergency.

"It's obviously not a seamless operation," Ms. Jones said as she tried to get one of the windows to stay open, a tricky procedure involving an original pin-and-groove mechanism.

But to Ms. Jones and others, preserving the character of their homes is worth it.

Joe and Rebecca Titlow bought their red 1721 farmhouse in Bedford, Mass., four years ago, planning to restore it. New windows weren't even an option; the home is on the National Register of Historic Places.

On a muggy morning this month, the window holes on the ground floor of the Titlow farmhouse were covered with plastic sheets, the windows themselves having been popped out for repair. A crew for "This Old House," which is planning an episode about the home, was preparing to film for the day.

The previous owner had caulked and painted the windows shut, Ms. Titlow said, and a major goal was to be able to open them. Alison Hardy, the owner of *Window Woman of New England*, who was refurbishing the windows, said that they were in reasonably good shape for such an old house, but that some wood rot had to be addressed and some paint stripped. She is also repainting the windows and reglazing them with a soybean-oil based putty.

On this day, Ms. Hardy was upstairs, reinstalling a fully refurbished window in its original opening. Its white frame slid up and down easily, just as it presumably had in the early 1700s.

"I'm so excited," Ms. Titlow said.

For Ms. McAuley, the window restorer in Oregon, the payoff for such intensive work is both making the homeowner happy and restoring a sense of the past.

She put it this way: “You can’t get much closer to history than looking through that glass knowing the people behind you were looking through that same glass, looking at the world.”

What to Look Out For

WHILE the prospect of refurbishing an old window can be daunting, it is usually not difficult if the window is in decent shape.

“It’s as easy as going outside and mowing the grass,” said Steve Quillian, the owner of Window Wood Makeover, in Tampa, Fla.

Making sure the window has a fresh coat of paint is the most important step, window restorers say, because it ensures that water rolls off the wood and won’t seep in, causing rot.

Homeowners should also check the glaze, the puttylike substance that holds the window in the frame. Glaze can crack and peel with age, allowing wind and the elements to penetrate the window.

All paint should be stripped off the jambs; except for weatherstripping, the jambs should remain bare wood because a painted surface makes opening and closing the window difficult.

If the window has a pulley system, remove all paint from the ropes to help them slide easily.

Locks are not just for security; a good one will make the window tight and keep out drafts. If the area around the window is cold, a thick set of curtains can prevent the chill from seeping into the room.

Small areas of wood rot can be easily repaired with epoxy, window restorers say.

If it all seems daunting, there are many people who specialize in historic windows, often with a less-is-more ethos.

Correction: August 4, 2011

An article last Thursday about renovating old windows described incorrectly part of the changes made to Robyn Brothers's Greek Revival house in Marshfield, Mass. It was a previous owner — not Ms. Brothers — who ripped out the original windows and replaced them. (Ms. Brothers was dissatisfied with the replacement windows and replaced them, but was unhappy with these second replacements, too. These experiences contributed to her decision to preserve the original windows when she renovated another home she owns nearby.)

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