

What the Home Makeover Hucksters Won't Tell You

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Despite a turndown in the economy, there appears to be little letting up of inappropriate remodeling, teardowns and the building of McMansions in San Diego's historic neighborhoods. Witness the 2005 and again in 2008, SOHO's nomination of "Historic Neighborhoods" on their "Most Endangered" List. The National Trust for Historic Preservation also nominated "Teardowns in Historic Neighborhoods" among their 11 Most Endangered sites in 2002. Clearly, there is a problem yet to be reckoned with.

As we explore historic communities in San Diego County, we notice far too many inappropriate changes in the features that define our historic homes. These range from removal of original wood windows; replacement of clay roof tiles; removal of original doors; replacement of wood garage doors with mass-produced inappropriate doors and gutting interiors of historic buildings. Frank Lloyd Wright had a term for this "remuddled".

Remodel or Restore? The National Trust for Historic Preservation has an interesting "Glossary of Preservation Terms" on their website, they state that "Remodel" "...*means to change a building without regard to its distinctive features or style...involves changing the appearance of a structure by removing or covering original details and substituting new materials or forms*". What we hope for instead to retain the character of our communities intact is that owners will restore instead. Again, the National Trust defines Restore as - "*To return a building to its form and condition as represented by a specified period of time using materials that are as similar as possible to the original materials*".

What they Don't Tell you is that Less is Often More

We understand how the updating craze has gone wrong. The marketing influence of home stores, television programs like Flip that House and the entire remodeling presence in the media largely makes the claim that by spending money on an update one can make a fast buck. Add uninformed real estate agents, hungry building industry professionals, and fatigued bureaucrats and it becomes the classic case of buyer beware. These collective influences are like an engine at full throttle with speculative investors, house flippers and well-meaning homeowners the proverbial deer in the headlights. Make no mistake; this well-oiled marketing machine won't put on the brakes to consider the negative impacts of "remuddling" a historic building. Instead, the emphasis is typically on an all or nothing transformation because after all salespeople get *their* incentives or commission when you buy. So it's no wonder that our historic neighborhoods in San Diego and across the country have come under siege.

As a consumer you are best served when you understand what you aren't going to be told; that cookie-cutter products offered most of the time probably won't apply to your historic

building.

As an owner, you are the advocate for preserving the original features of your house since it is the original features that are actually most valued. Why is the distinction between remodeling and restoration defined earlier so important? Our historic homes give our communities, our towns their historic scale and character and embody the distinctive patterns of our past and tell a story, they are more valuable when they retain their historic character. Whether it is an artistic bungalow, graceful Mission and Spanish Revival, proud Victorians – from simple to the most grand and elegant. Our historic homes are irreplaceable – plain and simple. When they are gone, they are gone forever. Remember our older building stock was made of materials that cannot be found today and they were made by skilled craftspeople (many who were recent immigrants). The craftsmanship of yesteryear is something that is hard to find today and we simply cannot afford to replicate.

Therefore, if you consider that maybe someone *besides you*, family members who owned and took care of your house before you did, someone who owns this house after you or even members of your community may be interested in the character and quality of the original features of your house—then it is important for you to be aware and consider that less may be more when it comes to preserving the your house.

Bad “Remodeling”

In the last few years we have seen turrets added to Prairie-School style homes, fake craftsman style rocks adhered to 1930s Monterey homes and original houses demolished with McMansion replacements constructed without setbacks or consideration of the impact to the block. Appropriate additions are possible when they are orientated toward the back of the property and when the new architecture is in harmony with the original house design (although you should be able to differentiate the new from the old). Additions should not overwhelm the original house. There is no good reason why you should attempt to make your house something that it isn't.

Bungalow author Jane Powell has written many wonderful and insightful bungalow books and her “[Bungalow Details: Exterior](#)” book covers just about every aspect of what is important to preserve – including roofs, chimneys, eaves and rafter tails, siding, foundation, pillars, hardware and lighting as well as the *architectural features that are most at risk – front doors, garage doors, roofs and windows*. She offers helpful examples on how to properly restore your home's architectural features and this book is a must read for anyone contemplating such work.

Flip and not Flop

In addition to preserving your home for present and future generations, it is also very important to preserve your older home's street appearance for it to retain its property value. Either you are buying an older home as a short-term investment flip or a long-term investment; it is imperative to keep your home's original character defining features. Nothing kills your historic home's values quicker than ripping out your home's original wood windows and replacing them with vinyl windows or other inappropriate

“remodeling”. Besides the overall design, shape and scale of the building, here are some (not all) of the important character defining features that you probably know already because they are what distinguishes a Craftsman from a Spanish Revival or Mid-Century style house.

Some Key Architectural Features

Roof tiles

Doors (front door, side doors and garage doors)

Windows

Hardware

Fixtures – fireplaces, lighting, built in cabinets etc.

Besides poor choices in remodeling changes to these key features can add up to become critical remodeling mistakes that many homeowners or investors are making today. If you ever want to become eligible for historic designation or want to make this benefit available for a future owner, then it is important to retain your home’s architectural details.

Roofs: Especially for Mission and Spanish Revival homes, the replacement of original clay tiles for cheap replacements has become something of an epidemic. We have seen several homes (mostly flips) lose their original tiles in a vain attempt to “update” the roof for a quick resale. The new tiles are obvious to the untrained eye and one can spot the mass-produced replacements from a block away. Clay tile may break but it never wears out. There is rarely a good reason to replace these tiles. Historic tiles were often shaped and then glazed by hand and are never uniform in color. The modern replacement tiles have their glazes sprayed on, they don’t have the color range and detract from the historic appearance of an older home.

Beware the window salesperson

One of the biggest mistakes by homeowners is ripping out original wood windows. The original windows can often be repaired but the old growth wood cannot be replaced. Additionally, dense old growth wood and wonderful old wavy glass has a life expectancy of at least 200 years. New wood windows will last 50 years, vinyl cannot be painted and will last about 10-15 years.

By removing the windows you will lose value of the house in the long term and the energy savings in San Diego can’t justify this change. You may also have a harder time selling the home once the windows have been replaced. Jane Powell, author of the *Bungalow Exterior Details* provides details in this book that point to a direct correlation between historic integrity and market value. The impact of this change is significant since windows make up a large part of the façade of historic homes and buildings – *“The pattern of the sash, the window framing and the other architectural detail surrounding the window was carefully designed as an integral component of the home and replacing the window destroys this”*.

Ms. Powell states *“There may be no more important feature of a bungalow than its windows. More than just openings for light and air, windows are the face the house presents to the street”*. She lists in great detail, the exact costs of replacement windows (vinyl) and rather easily demonstrates the poor math that vinyl salesmen use to sell or con homeowners. Jane states that it will take 200 years for a homeowner to reap back their “energy savings investment”. Interestingly, that is the life expectancy of the original windows and there is always a way to fix drafty windows.

Doors

The front door greets visitors and was often times designed to create an impression. Craftsman doors ranged from simple to complex in design. A salesman from Orange County took advantage of a wonderful and smart woman in our neighborhood when she sought to repair her front door. The veneer of the original door of her 1918 Prairie-school style house had cracked and there was some damage by termites. We took a look at the damage and it needed to have some veneer replaced. Instead of repairing it, which would have cost several hundred dollars, she was sold and had a new “craftsman” door installed at a cost of approximately \$6,000.00. So besides being taken in by the salesman, she threw away the original door that was made for her house and made of old growth wood. If she was not seduced by the update craze and repaired it instead, it would likely outlast the one she installed and at less overall cost. Now the change to her entry has been reconfigured and while her new door might be attractive to some, it is over scale to the rest of the house as well.

Interiors

Preserving the interior features of your historic home is also very important and often times lost during remodeling! We have seen several older homes that were the unfortunate victim of bad remodeling sit on the market longer and sell for much less money. Painting interior woodwork or removing it is heartbreaking. SOHO, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties and the State Historic Preservation Office of California are all excellent resources for historic homeowners on maintaining the integrity of interior features.

What is Batchelder Tile?

Several years ago we looked into purchasing a 1910s Prairie-School home in North Park. We saw it was being remodeled by the owner contractor and learned it was coming up for sale. We offered to buy it before more remodeling was done to it. The timing was not right, the owner wanted to get more for it and thought he would get more after he remodeled it and he did not like our offer. While remodeling continued, we learned that the owner ripped out the original Batchelder Tile fireplace because there was a crack in one of the hearth tiles. We asked if he still had the tiles but he had already had them hauled away to the dump. You should have seen his face turn red after we told him how valuable and important they were and instead the effort to install his new Home Depot tiles lowered the value of his investment.

In case you never heard to live in your home for at least one year before you do anything, take heed – living in the place can become a resource in and of itself. More bad remodeling happens within that first year – so move in and live in the space for a while. Consider these sage words from SOHO member and South Park resident, Erik Hanson from his “Bungalow Manifesto” on his Irving Gill website.

“If your house is too small, you have too much stuff”

“If a tradesman says that it can’t be done, fire him for lack of vision”

“Good restoration is a series of modest projects done well, more history was destroyed by spending too much money than by not enough”

“There is a special place in hell reserved for those who remove wood windows.”

There are a lot of contractors in your town who don’t understand the important features of your home are they are not the ones who should be working on it. Recommending the same modifications to your house as they would for a house in a tract neighborhood is likely the wrong answer but it may be the answer you get. How do you know whom to trust? There are a few craftsmen that truly understand what it takes to work on older homes. Look for experienced old home experts – they are worth their weight in gold. Get and follow up on references especially from those who have restored their homes. Don’t let anyone work on your house that insists that you have to remove anything and check bulletins from the National Trust and discuss methods before any work gets underway. We know that it takes extra diligence to resist the persuasion tactics of the home update hucksters but the historic house you preserve will not only be worth more it will continue to tell a story for future generations.

Preservation Resources

Erik Hanson, Irving Gill website: irvinggill.com

Jane Powell “Bungalow Details: Exterior” (2004, Gibbs and Smith), website: www.bungalowkitchens.com

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, website: www.preservationnation.org

Save Our Heritage Organisation (SOHO), website: www.sohosandiego.org

Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, available on the SOHO Preservation Links as a PDF file

State Historic Preservation Office of California, website: www.ohp.parks.ca.gov