
PRESERVATION

Practical Preservation

The longtime editor of *Old-House Journal* explains why preservation is often more interesting and budget-friendly than remodeling.

By Patricia Poore | Issue 340 - July 2026



Old House, New Chapter: A familiar and timeless form, this foursquare house with a front-facing gable and Colonial Revival details was built in 1912 in St. Paul, Minn. For a rear addition, the owners designed a kitchen updated in the early-electric era of the 1920s. The result is a convincing blend of nostalgia and function.

Drawing on decades of experience with *Old-House Journal*, editor Patricia Poore argues that old houses should be appreciated not just for their charm and

craftsmanship, but for the history, design intent, and materials they preserve. Rather than advocating for strict restoration or period-perfect interiors, the piece encourages homeowners to approach renovations with restraint, respect, and an understanding of architectural style.

Through examples of old-house styles and approaches toward restoration and preservation, Poore explains how preserving original details, repairing instead of replacing, and learning the “language” of a house can help maintain both its character and its place in the larger neighborhood and historical landscape.

More Than Housing

I still remember my Irish grandmother’s reaction, many years ago, when I told her about my job. As I explained the concept behind *Old-House Journal*—people fixing up their homes to look original, not modern—she said, “You mean people buy old houses on purpose?” To her generation, and my parents’, settling for an old house meant you weren’t rich enough to afford a new one. So, you tried to make the old house look newer by remodeling.

I grew up in suburban houses without pedigree—just housing, really. My parents were buying a roof and just enough room, and what they considered to be “a decent yard.” Maybe they would carpet a bedroom or hang wallpaper in the dining room. Then, we lived there, with no further thought to interior design or fine collectibles. Enlightenment was gradual.

In first grade, my friend Barbara inhabited one of the original Dutch Huguenot houses in Bergen County, N.J.; its core dated to 1693 and the “new” kitchen to 1810. It gave me little-girl chills to follow the hollowed-out treads up the dark stairs to her bedroom tucked into the eave of the gambrel roof. Later, my heart pounded when I visited a relative staying in a First Period house in Ipswich, Mass., an antique hardly changed but for rudimentary electrical service and indoor plumbing.

In my 20s and 30s I lived in brownstone Brooklyn, discovering not only an aesthetic previously unknown to me—12-ft.-tall mahogany pocket doors, massive brass gasoliers, intricate parquet floors—but also the concept of livable, human-scale housing density. Then came *Old-House Journal*, a Brooklyn brownstoners’ newsletter I joined in 1978, becoming its owner as we grew into a national magazine with several title extensions, including *Old-House Interiors* and *Arts &*

Crafts Homes.

I found myself in an ever-expanding world with a vocabulary that engenders deepening appreciation: ashlar, belvedere, catslide, dentil, entablature, fretwork, finial, jerkinhead, lintel, modillion, oriel, pilaster, quoin, scagliola, wainscot. (My favorite one to say out loud is “Wissahickon schist.”) When you learn the words, you see more. And you start to care.



Photo by Troy Thies.

What Is an “Old House”?

It is not easy to define. Guidelines say an antique is over 100 years old, while the Dept. of the Interior says a historic building is at least 50 years old. I prefer to ask, what is an old-house person, or owner? Plenty of people who own old houses think of them as little more than affordable shelter; they don't wonder about architectural style or history. They are not old-house people, they're people who happen to own old houses. Someone might buy a 1970s architect-designed Organic Modern house and instantly know what he or she should do to honor it. That's an old-house person, even if the house isn't very old. Other people build new houses using traditional building practices, employing local craftspeople and integrating salvaged elements. They, too, are old-house people. It's an attitude.

The houses I've showcased in OHJ date from three centuries plus. Some have

been period pieces, largely original or restored to a particular time, even decorated according to period conventions. Others were preserved with later changes left intact, or renovated in an interpretive manner. Still others were a

study in bringing minimalist decorating to an interior redolent with antiquity, the underlying architecture intact but for white paint. Some have been over-the-top mansions, but others were restored on tight budgets.

A common theme has been preservation of original elements, even if they are worn. Another thread is the creation of a “scenario”—an imagined timeline or backstory that suggests a continuum between what was part of the original building and the often-needed addition or renovation. The imagined scenario might inform today’s design of, say, a new bathroom in an outhouse-era Colonial, or a Depression-style kitchen fitted into a Victorian row house.

Indeed, old-house people buy old houses on purpose—for their charm, their evidence of the past, their unique details, their craftsmanship, and their embodied energy. (We have long said that the greenest house is one that already exists and that doesn’t go to the landfill. One might quibble over specific cases, but it’s generally true.) Old-house people leave things better than they found them.

Often, an apathetic owner converts to being an “old-house person” with very little persuasion. It might happen when a neighbor tells them theirs is Sears kit house. Or when they realize their house has a style that fits into a certain era. Or when they find archival photos of the house, perhaps before some unfortunate changes were made.

Defining an Approach

Preserving what you can doesn't require historical restoration and certainly doesn't require a museumlike interior. Let's face it, replacing elements that have failed or gone missing is often prohibitively expensive, if not impossible. Furthermore, making things "better than the original" is not necessarily virtuous. Simply put, preservation means taking it easy on the house (something you may wish previous owners had done!).

Once you've gotten to know the house a little better—its age, style, history of remodeling, neighborhood context—the next step before planning is to refine your approach to the work. Will you preserve what's there, restore what's missing, renovate systems and the kitchen, remodel the rear façade to add a mudroom and deck? In most residential cases, you'll probably combine multiple approaches. With a nod to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, here is how I've defined these approaches for homeowners in *Old-House Journal*.



Before

Adaptive Reuse: Recycling an old building for a use other than that for which it was originally constructed—like a grange hall into a residence, or a school into apartments. A neutral term, it might involve a sensitive rehab that retains much

of the original character, especially on the exterior. Or it can mean extensive remodeling of the structure and details.

Interpretive Restoration: A less scholarly approach than the historic restoration employed by museum houses, this involved keeping original architectural features intact while reconstructing missing elements as faithfully as budget allows. The decoration and furnishing of interior spaces may be appropriate to the style and era of the house, but there is no attempt to duplicate what was there originally. It's a "might have been" approach—what might have been if the original owners had your taste, say. Most homeowner restorations are interpretive.

Modernizing: The intention is clear in the word itself: to make the exterior or interior of a building more contemporary in use or appearance or both.

Preservation: An umbrella term these days, it has meant keeping an existing building in its current state by a careful program of maintenance and repair. Such organizations as Historic New England, in the forefront of preservation practice, prefer this approach to more invasive ones, including restoration. Essentially, preservation means leave it alone and do no harm.

Reconstruction: Re-creating a historic building that has been damaged or destroyed by erecting a new structure or part of a structure that resembles the original as closely as possible.

Renovation: To "make new." This approach is often more extensive than rehabilitation in that a greater proportion of new materials and elements is



rehabilitation in that a greater proportion of new materials and elements is introduced, along with changes to accommodate modern expectations.

Rehabilitation: To make a structure sound and usable again, without attempting to restore the original appearance. Sensitive rehabilitation respects the character-defining features of a building and retains them when possible.

Restoration: The term has a specific meaning in the museum world: the meticulous return of a building to its exact appearance during a chosen period. It may even involve removing later additions. Historic restoration is a scholarly approach adopted by house museums. When the word is used in the context of a private house, it usually means sensitive rehabilitation. See Interpretive Restoration, above.

Remodeling: Changing the appearance and style of a structure, inside or out, by removing or covering original details and substituting new materials and forms.



Restored With Intention: After years of abandonment, this ca.-1870 brick townhouse in Newburgh, N.Y., was fully restored by Office Mien Ye. Outside, the cornice and windows were carefully replicated. Inside, the building now houses four occupied units. Historic features were preserved, while rooms were finished simply for durability and everyday use.

Photos courtesy of Office Mian Ye

Persuasive Arguments

OHJ's message has been simple and consistent since 1973: Don't destroy the good work of the past. That guideline has more than one underpinning: Don't destroy craftsmanship you can't replicate, don't destroy materials that no longer exist with such quality or affordability, don't destroy what the next owner may have cherished, don't destroy the historical record.

Consider, too, that a cluster of old houses defines, and often protects, the neighborhood. The house may predate you by a century and will undoubtedly outlive you. Preservation—that is, retention of original elements and regular maintenance—maintains property value. Continuity maintains the local sense of place.

I can think of some practical, everyday reasons for preservation. First, to protect the quality. Old-growth hardwood, sound- and fire-resistant three-coat plaster, fine craftsmanship, and surviving folk graining represent intrinsic value and for that reason are worth saving.

Second, to avoid design mistakes. In an unremodeled house, many elements represent the intention of the original design. A new owner might be forgiven for tearing out something that seems sullied or feels anachronistic. But what does that element tell us about original proportions or style? Cleaned up, that very item—a mantel, a stained-glass window—may restore a focal point. Removed, it's lost to history and often too expensive to replace.

A third practical reason for preservation is to enhance the neighborhood. Old houses have a context in the streetscape and for the neighborhood. For example: Despite the difficulty and expense, neighborhood pride may lead owners to restore their Victorian porch, a public amenity. Yet those same owners might prefer a white interior furnished by West Elm, and that decision is compatible with their preservation of architectural elements.

And finally, one reason for preservation is to anticipate the future. Before a house became historic, it was merely vintage, and before that "used." Preservation even

became historic, it was merely vintage, and before that, used. Preservation even of houses built after 1945 assures that they last long enough to represent a moment in building history.

Identifying Styles

When a phony-colonial fiberglass entry treatment goes on a midcentury-modern house, or a rustic lean-to joins a house neat with white clapboards, cacophony (or hilarity) ensues. Even when historic colors and period interiors are not the preferred treatments, additions and major changes should speak the original language. Understand the defining traits of a home's style to avoid confusing changes.

Greek Revival

Dubbed the “national style” of the new Republic (1825–1855), this style touched civic buildings, mansions, and cottages alike. Hallmarks include a temple form with a front gable and columns or pilasters (half-columns engaged in the wall). Classical motifs occur.



Carpenter Gothic

An American version of the 19th-century Gothic Revival, these wood-framed houses often had vertical board-and-batten siding, as well as Gothic-style “gingerbread” at the porch and eaves (bargeboards). Look for finials and hood molds over windows.

Tudor

This English Revival style (ca. 1890–1940) takes cues from Tudor and Elizabethan period architecture. Look for steep roofs, prominent chimneys, decorative half-timbering, window bays and oriel windows, and multi-light sashes. Stucco and brick are prominent.



Queen Anne

The quintessential Victorian house with nooks and crannies was popular from 1874–1910.

Asymmetrical, often with a verandah and tower or turret, it was adapted from the English Queen Anne movement. Multiple surface textures include clapboards and fancy-cut shingles.



Bungalow

Low-slung and with exaggerated structure, the Bungalow in its heyday (ca. 1898–1930) was prized for its exotic, Anglo-Indian associations and for the artistic naturalism that tied it to Arts & Crafts. Other hallmarks include the use of natural, local materials, battered piers, and knee braces.



American Foursquare

These cubic houses ca. 1890–1930 provide lots of space in an efficient, affordable envelope. Early examples have Craftsman or Prairie details; in the 1920s they're Colonial. Most of these houses have at least one dormer in a hipped roof, and a front porch.

Dutch Colonial

Essentially a new suburban style at the turn of the 20th century, its gambrel roof was associated with rare Dutch or Flemish originals in New York and New Jersey. Long dormers allow a full second story. Colonial Revival elements include cutout shutters, a portico, and a sunporch.



Contemporary

A popular iteration of midcentury-modern design, such postwar houses appealed to families with their low, embracing rooflines, expanses of glass, open interiors, and use of new materials. The style dates to the late 1940s and into the 1970s.



Drawings by Rob Leanna, courtesy of Old-House Journal

In a Nutshell: Let It Be

To clear up one misconception, taking a preservation approach is not the same as calling for period rooms. Many people don't want the fuss or expense of a revival interior. Preservation still allows for painting the plaster walls white and

hanging modern art. Furthermore, preservation doesn't demand putting back what already has been lost.

Unlike restoration, which can be conjectural and expensive and is rarely a mandate, preservation is an easy call. At the core, it means "let it be." Whether the work at hand will involve restoration, rehabilitation, or remodeling, a preservation mindset is good because it helps avoid destruction.

Much of our old housing stock holds rare material, magnificent craftsmanship—and our cultural history. Old houses often suggest what has worked over decades or centuries. Their building systems, from wood and plaster to masonry, are long-lived and designed to be refinished or repaired—this is a lesson for what has become a disposable society. Mantels and staircases are a tangible record of historical styles and craftsmanship. Consider the retractable pocket doors that slid between the parlor and the dining room: Aren't they proof that an open plan sometimes needs to be closed?

As temporary inhabitants, we should resist destroying things, especially the good work of the past and anything that managed to survive decades or centuries of use. We should respect the workmanship we find, and honor materials that may be no longer available or affordable. It's best to repair rather than replace elements, because eventually, after generations of replacement, a house is no longer original, and probably not coherent.

It's critical to understand the difference between what is permanent (ripping out the main staircase) and what is ephemeral (painting a bedroom blue). Not that it's always so clear, of course: Painting original, natural-finish quarter-sawn oak comes to mind. It's reversible, sure, but only after pain and suffering, and with an environmental cost.

We'd have more preserved old houses if generations of owners had taken to heart that, in the long run, their own taste doesn't matter. I have seen a carved Eastlake mantel discarded "because it's fussy" and endless original bits thrown away for being "old-fashioned" or the "wrong" color. A house represents a particular time and style. It's easy enough to live around that. As we learn more, our changes are likely to be in keeping with the original design intent. The mid-

20th-century proclivity to turn Victorians into Colonials, for example, did not work out. Stripping off the gingerbread trim and painting out these houses only succeeded in making them ugly “white elephants” that would prove very expensive to restore. From repairs to additions, any new work should enhance and clarify the original design intention, or at least not detract from it.

A harder sell is retaining elements that make the house a cultural artifact. Perhaps the current owner doesn’t use the narrow, boxed stair at the rear of the house, or the cold pantry, or the fireplace in the dining room. Take them all away, though, and the house has lost the significance of its history. We should be careful about how much we change—because there is a tipping point. Most of us fell in love with an old house, not a new house made of old materials.

Victorian Minimalism

It may sound like an oxymoron, but it is possible. Architect John Altobello balanced exterior restoration (including a polychrome paint job that brings out texture without being flamboyant) and preservation of original interior details with clean white walls and restrained furnishings.



Photos by Greg Premru

The Significance of Style

Owners who just bought an old house universally want to know, “what style is it?” People love labels—for plants, dogs, clouds. Having a name for something opens the door to learning more. And that’s the real point: Knowing something about the style and era of a house directs renovation and helps avoid mistakes.

Homeowners ask about style because they’ve seen something they like or don’t quite understand: an odd roof shape, tapered columns resting on stone piers, round-arch windows. They recognize that these are clues but can’t yet read them. Already their interest is piqued.

This pursuit leads to an understanding of design intention that will guide renovation. An owner (or designer or contractor) who recognizes original, style-defining details will be less likely to remove them in ignorance. If the front door needs to be replaced, it’s more likely that the choice will be in keeping with the house. The integrity of the architecture depends on respecting the language.

Style markers abound not only on the exterior but inside, in such built-ins as buffets, mantels, and staircases. Original wood trim, flooring, and tile offer more clues. It’s likely that an architect-designed house will have been treated well by subsequent owners. These examples are easier to label and attract buyers likely to preserve or restore them. But even “regular” old houses had an original architectural concept. Understanding that helps an owner figure out what is original, what has changed, and what is missing.

If an old house is of indeterminate pedigree—or if it’s had its pedigree remodeled right out of it—you can use an understanding of period design to enhance what it does have to offer. This doesn’t require adding period-correct replications. It just means adhering to the general style sense and proportions. Basic knowledge also prevents ridiculous anachronisms.

How many of us have seen a phony-Colonial entryway added to a midcentury ranch, or a pseudo-Victorian door with curlicue appliques used on a Prairie-style bungalow? Take the idea inside, where judicious choices during renovation can create a cohesive interior where once blandness or confusion reigned.

Modest Made Memorable

The smaller builders' houses found in early-20th-century suburbs are often discounted as "nothing special." Reasonable restoration efforts and a compatible paint job, as seen on this owner-designed Dutch Colonial in New Jersey, can bring out such houses' inherent charm.

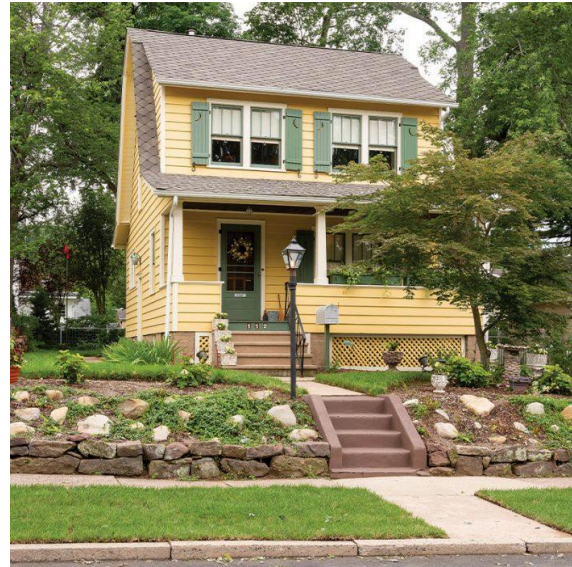


Photo by Gridley + Graves Photography. "Before" courtesy of the owner.

Are There Any Rules?

Is there general advice that might save an owner from obvious traps and expensive mistakes? As in most creative endeavors, the best work is done by people who have learned the rules and thus when to break them. Over the years, OHJ has repeated some guidelines, however, that may help.

Knowledge is Power: Understanding the period and style of a house mercifully narrows choices, giving a head start. More importantly, that knowledge teaches us to differentiate between what is original and what was remodeled, guiding future work.

Respect the Architecture: Future owners will curse big changes that obscure the original design and period integrity in favor of individual taste and passing trends. You saw that when you were house hunting. Paint the plaster walls chartreuse or fuchsia if you like, but don't be the first one to paint 140-year-old figured mahogany intrinsic to the 1880s opulence of the dining room.

Live in the House: Wait months, or a year, before making any big plans. Trust me, you will learn more, and possibly change your mind.

Try Cleaning or Stripping: Whatever it is may be salvageable. Once general surroundings have been brought up to a consistent level of cleanliness and repair, what was once "old and dirty" becomes "original detail."

You Get What You Pay For: Do without, wait and save up, rather than subbing in short-lived materials or settling for poor craftsmanship.

Personal Taste Has Its Place: In your home, express yourself through paint colors, wallpaper, textiles, lighting, and furniture. Don't alter main features.

Don't Discard History: If you do choose to swap something out, such as a light fixture or a built-in cabinet, preserve and store it away for the future.

In a practical sense, preservation is different from nostalgia. It is stewardship. We are temporary caretakers of buildings that continue to prove their worth. Yes, an old house demands attention, but it offers durability and character not easily replaced. I've also found that the learning is a lot of fun for the owners.

— Patricia Poore is editor emeritus of Old-House Journal. Then a hands-on restorer, she joined OHJ in the late 1970s, when it was a Brooklyn-brownstoner newsletter, and over the years has been its owner, publisher, and editor-in-chief.

From [Fine Homebuilding #340](#)

RELATED STORIES

- [How To Research Your Home's Past](#)
- [Preservation Meets Today's Tastes & Modern Lifestyle](#)