

Old Windows Find a Following



Erik Jacobs for The New York Times

IN THE FRAME Many homeowners are fixing old windows, not replacing them. Barbara Jones restored the windows in her 1794 home in Needham, Mass.

By [KATIE ZEZIMA](#)

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NEEDHAM, Mass.

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Rehab in Marshfield, 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 tiny and on hinges) in an 1894 Queen Anne Victorian in Beverly, Mass., that they owned until recently.

“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.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

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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