



THE REAL ESTATE REPORT

April 2007

Preservation, Restoration and the Muddling of Old Houses

Caring for the old, body and buildings

What to do with This Old House? That is a question we face today in equal measure with every generation preceding our own. Bought or bequeathed, old houses seem to require a face lift, or more significant improvement, in every generation, nearly paralleling the requirements which personal aging makes upon us. How do we preserve/restore health and home? Considering how ubiquitous these related issues are -- and their powerful images are in the popular media -- facades of houses and the appearance of ourselves seem to function like visual intermediaries in a game of public and personal positioning in life. It is in the myriad life choices which we make, both major and minor, that we present ourselves to the world both in our person and in our property -- thereby defining how we wish to be perceived.

But beyond such generality, individual intention and public principle often diverge. How we fix ourselves up is a matter of personal taste; how we fix up an old house is, or should be, driven by history's lessons rather than personal whim alone. In such a caldron is the boiling stew of public controversy, so willingly ladled out in historic zoning hearings, fix-your-own house programs and the usually intense preservation arguments reported by the media. Just short of the heat of political campaigning, a community's outrage over any alteration of its visual environment can become a real measure of what matters most to it. Consider that thirty years ago the effort to save Grand Central Terminal galvanized the Big Apple to a degree, and in a way, now frequently occurring in countless smaller communities as they seek to save their own special landmarks.



The Peter Van Schaack house in Kinderhook began as a Georgian brick home in 1785. About a century later one James Mix, reputed to be Albany's leading jeweler, acquired the house as a wedding present for his new wife, completely renovating the exterior in the newly fashionable French Second Empire (after Napoleon III) style with mansard roof, bay windows, wide porch, and so many details that it takes some sleuthing to discover that the brick walls are much earlier. In that sense one might say it was a successful face lift, the wrinkles of age having disappeared. From a preservation point of view, a restoration to its original Georgian style would not be appropriate.

A monthly column on the real estate market and related issues in the upper Hudson River Valley by Roderic H. Blackburn, principal of R. H. Blackburn & Associates, Inc.—Real Estate of Hudson and Kinderhook, NY. It also appears in *Berkshire HomeStyle* and *Capital District HomeStyle* magazines. If received in error notify



Preservation becomes America

Although long a part of the European consciousness, public acceptance of the principle of preservation had a fitful start in America. We were a fresh, frontier country with little structural patrimony to buttress our sense of self. When Philadelphia's Independence Hall was threatened with demolition in 1815, a novel, grass-roots idea arose to save this symbol of nation founding. When Mount Vernon fell on hard times it was saved by the disenfranchised -- a group of very motivated women. This became the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, a private group founded in 1853. It is our nation's oldest national historic preservation organization. Like these distinguished examples, until recently most great preservation efforts arose from American volunteerism.



Renovations of older homes are usually not as successful as James Mix's wedding cake. For reasons of economy, recession, opportunism, poor taste, or negligence, once fine houses are sometimes condemned as public eye soars, then to oblivion. The conscience of a community finds its best expression in saving lives (volunteer fire companies and rescue squads), preserving open space (land conservancy) and rescuing older structure (historic preservation groups and programs). As a reminder of the importance of the latter of these, here is the Capt John Hathaway Residence, formerly on Warren Street, Hudson, later stripped and holed to become a garage before being razed.

Sic transit gloria mundi

Not until the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 did government get behind preservation in a big way. This law laid the foundation for state and local codification of the principles of preservation, including requirements for the review by historic preservation commissions of both alterations to existing structures and new construction if located in designated historic districts. These provisions were not established without controversy as communities wrestled with apparently opposing principles: individualist land rights vs. the common benefits of principled planning.

Personal desires verses public interest

The nexus of this issue is that in locations of historic importance home owners may be called upon to reconcile personal

desires with community interests when creating or altering their homes. As a practical matter, the dividing line between these competing interests is drawn at the wall of the house. American preservation law is generally only applicable to property within an historic district and only those parts of a structure in the public view. Anything done inside a structure or otherwise not visible from a public way is at the owner's discretion – or indiscretion. Within these limits he may alter at pleasure or whim, without public review.

Incidentally, this is not the case in much of Europe where changes to the interiors of important buildings are subject to review. This can, of course, be a frustrating process; one owner of an historic Italian villa bemoaned how it took two years to get approval for a new bathroom in her basement! The United States remains much less demanding than Europe in its preservation requirements and less rewarding in tax incentives for owners. One result is economic: tourism in Europe is a much more lucrative industry than in America.

Notice that the 1966 law is entitled Historic Preservation, not Historic Restoration or Renovation. Both philosophically and practically there are significant differences among these terms. Almost from our beginnings we have practiced renovation: the alteration of existing structures to accommodate new styles, personal taste, and functional innovations, without special attention to how the house was originally designed. That approach is still in vogue, supplied by warehouses of new components in every imaginable style and material. Restoration is quite the opposite: it is a conscious effort to return an altered building back to its original appearance regardless of the design or usefulness of all subsequent changes. Both private and public owners of historic structures have until recent decades usually followed this approach in an attempt to recapture a lost time and place. Preservation, at least in its currently prevailing iteration, attempts to balance several of these apparently competing principles: It seeks to preserve the evolving history of a building's use as expressed in the additions and alterations made throughout its past, while conceding the removal of obviously jarring alterations from that same past. Preservation laws usually seek to discourage, if not outright prohibit, incompatible alterations whenever contemplated. Thus preservation is a delicate balance between aesthetics and history, a challenge to the judgment of property owners, architects and historic preservation commission members as they weigh the details of a given proposal – hopefully with informed experience and a dose of compromise – in order to achieve a successful and mutually acceptable result.

Raising the Bar

Which bring us back to homeowners. Most are not constrained by laws or historic consciousness as they face the fixing up of homes. Much technical information and many design issues go into deciding what to do. A newly acquired home may suffer from the last owner's neglect for want of funds or motivation, or from excessive alteration guided by overly expressive -- even idiosyncratic – taste. No matter the reason, the new owner likely wants to undo either original features or later changes to fit his own taste or what he believes the first builder had in mind. House fixing naturally appeals to a widespread urge for personal and aesthetic expression, a canvas on which an owner can demonstrate his taste and talent to friends and the public. Alas, in more than a few cases some timely feedback might have

saved said owner unnecessary expense and the public unacceptable pain.

Another reason for regrettable renovation is an increasing lack of understanding on the part of many with respect to visual balance and harmony in American building design. The principles of good design, once well established at all levels of construction, from architect to local builder, have become increasingly muddled since the 1920s. By then schools of architecture ceased to teach the history of architecture as a foundation for informed design. For generations the craftsmen trades (and accumulated design knowledge) passed from father to son.



The modern new-built multi-gable home. My first view of the “New Gable” fashion was in Florida in 1990. The first one I ever saw struck me as a novel new idea - for about 5 hours. So many were going up in crowded “exclusive” gated communities that it was hackneyed by sundown. Features added for novelty, not for function, helps us realize the difference between fashion and beauty. One relieves only boredom, the other inspires joy for living. When the innumerable permutations of giddy gable designs have run their course we will discover the next fashion or, with unlikely luck, a new sense of design based on more time-tested principles.

This tradition of inherited knowledge, however, began to be interrupted by major events in the twentieth century: a new mobility (thanks to Henry Ford), two world wars, depression, and previously unavailable opportunities for schooling and non-construction employment.

A third reason for design inadequacy is, ironically, the incredible supply and diversity of manufactured building components, most of which, however, are designed for individual appeal and not as integrated sets of visually compatible features.

I believe the aesthetic sensibility to take advantage of this cornucopia of manufacturing ability is largely missing from the knowledge base and experience of most builders and buyers. As a result many houses appear to have been designed from the inside out, with, for example, different sized windows in irregular positions, reflecting the functional requirements of kitchens and bathrooms, but disregarding exterior balance. Consider also how the fashion for whatever denotes new style has given us many houses with gratuitous, functionless gables, what I call the “giddy gable” effect.

Fortunately how country can recapture its former sense of harmonious design is a challenge being met by some architects, designers and builders. Although for the moment these professionals are too few to create a general trend, we value their

individual efforts. I am not arguing for a national style, but for principles of design which encouraged the evolution of many distinctive and distinguished styles through past centuries. From this approach freshly imagined styles can meet fundamental human needs and be buildable within personal means, while being respectful of once widely shared aesthetic principles. In fact good taste in house design has more to do with knowledge than money. Affordable, attractive houses have been built for centuries and have passed the judgments of time. Such houses can be built today; some are being built today. For the benefit of individual owners and public alike, houses which are well designed will last longer and appreciate more – because they are, and will continue to be, appreciated more. In this way, and with significant and benevolent contributions from historic preservation, seemingly opposed individual and public interests may finally be found to converge nicely once again.



. If you go on the internet looking for "house plans" you will be bombarded with thousands of contemporary house plans, actually elevations of front facades with all manner of permutations on current design fashions. I did find one house which, while newly designed, falls within the criteria of what I would call the "Sensible House." It is not decorated with extraneous gables, not sheathed in multiple sidings, nor muscled with shoulders poking out in every direction. It does have eclectic windows designs, a modest failling. But its size is appropriate to a family, its sheltering porch shades the interior and welcomes exterior summer entertainment. If you look at Andrew Jackson Davis's Gothic cottages of the 1840s (see *Berkshire HomeStyle* September 2006) you will see the inspiration for an equally sensible house for our new century.