



Making Green Remodeling Work for Your Old House

Leslie A.M.

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You are not likely to install solar panels on your beautiful slate roof. After all, the Historical Society might frown on such a visible modern intrusion. But your old house is not ruled-out from all green remodeling projects. In fact, it already has a lot of green going for it.

Green Remodeling Projects: Green Qualities of Every Old House

First of all, recognize that an old house has inherently [green housing materials](#) just by virtue of being old and re-used. There are a few other green attributes that your old house possesses that you probably didn't even realize.

According to Wes Harding, owner of [Harding Construction & Sustainable Solutions](#) in Long Beach, California, old houses have zero off-gassing of hazardous fumes like formaldehyde that are prevalent in newer construction. As well, Harding points out that the issue of community plays a part in the energy-efficiency of a home.

"Historic neighborhoods were built tightly with resources nearby. People who live in these historic neighborhoods use cars less often," he explained. "They can walk or ride a bike to the store."

Harding started his business in 2006 and is a "Build It Green" Certified Green Building Professional, a GreenPoint Rater for new and existing homes, an Energy Star Home Performance Contractor through the CBPCA, and an Efficiency First Founding Member.

Green Building Materials

Harding said that any materials needed in your old house can be substituted with green housing materials.

Mike Caltagirone, owner of the Furniture Medic in Reno, Nevada concurs. "I use water-based materials almost exclusively for my refinishing," Caltagirone said. "They are a bit more labor-intensive since the coats connect to each other by adhesion--there's more sanding between coats--instead of just melting together due to the solvents used."

Caltagirone said there are water-based materials that meet most needs--strippers, stains, finishes, lacquers, acrylics and urethanes. He pointed out that the benefit of water-based over solvent-based materials is that they are not considered toxic and there is decidedly less pollution generated in manufacturing, use and disposal.

There is a push in the green movement to use sustainable materials. Bamboo appears to be the darling of the green movement but the experts agree it will never look quite right in an old house.

If you are considering bamboo, check into how your floor planks are manufactured.

We're curious: When was your house built?

- After 1970
- 1946-1969
- 1900-1945
- 1800-1899
- Before 1800

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There have been some critics of the formaldehyde used in the manufacture of bamboo planks. Formaldehyde is often found in plastics and resins used to bind manufactured wood materials.

"Bamboo is distinctly modern," said Caltagirone. "You could always try faux-painting a more traditional grain onto bamboo but I doubt it would work out very well. There has been a bit of a movement toward using narrow-plank woods for flooring."

Caltagirone also explained that narrow-plank or narrow strip flooring uses pieces that are around 1 1/2 inches wide. This means that the trees from which these are cut don't have to be as old or as large. "It also means that the trees can be harvested from 'dog-haired thickets' in which the lack of periodic fire has allowed the trees to grow very close to each other and remain relatively small. These thickets can be thinned and the wood used in narrow-strip flooring to the benefit of both the homeowner and the forest itself."

Harding had another idea. "Recycle wood from an old barn for a floor," he suggested. "A reclaimed floor, refinished with non-toxic materials and resistant to holding contaminants is one of those ideal green remodeling projects."

Traditional Old House Maladies Need Green Restoration Projects

"Old houses are leaky," said Harding. "I mean with air."

A lot of "holes" in the house can create a lot of air movement that can bring pollution into the home and disrupt the temperature, causing your energy costs to go up.

"The first thing to do is plug the holes--weather stripping, replacement windows, etc. and then insulate," Harding suggested.

Harding warned that insulation will not stop a draft, it will only filter the air coming into crawl spaces, attics and interstitial cavities of the home.

"If your insulation has changed color, that is from the air going through it. You need to stop the air to make your home more energy-efficient."

In the end, an old house has a great deal of green character--and some advantages over some new construction--but may still benefit from a few green remodeling projects using green housing materials. Enjoy your modern green traditional old house!

Sources

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