

Replacing Your Home's Original Wood Windows: An Unnecessary and Costly Blunder?

By Fred M. Fargotstein, R.A.

In an era when we are all increasingly cognizant of the importance of energy conservation, sales pitches by window companies and the availability of home-energy tax credits have made the original wood windows of our neighborhood's venerable old homes into particularly tempting targets for replacement by their well-intentioned owners. But the fact that many replacement windows are stylistically inappropriate for older homes—and surprisingly, that installing them is almost never a cost-effective way to save energy—means that purchasing them could prove a costly mistake.

For those who appreciate the beauty and craftsmanship of old houses, the contribution that harmoniously arranged and traditionally detailed wood windows make to their architectural character is self-evident and difficult to overemphasize.

Unfortunately, owners of vintage homes are often unaware that many replacement windows on the market—whether because of their configuration, proportions, materials, colors, or detailing—are distinctly out of place in older structures. As a result, these unconvincing substitutes commonly detract from, instead of adding to, the value of the fine old houses in which they are installed.

Many homeowners are even more surprised to learn that double-pane replacement windows, despite conventional wisdom, are rarely an effective means for achieving significant energy savings. While they are indeed somewhat more thermally efficient, their cost is so high that when the number of years for an energy savings payback is actually calculated, it becomes readily apparent that other potential home improvements (insulating or draft-sealing, for example) generally deliver much greater “bang for the buck” while having no detrimental effect on the traditional appearance of a home.

Fortunately, preserving wood windows through repair and routine maintenance is often surprisingly practical and inexpensive, and also quite effective in terms of maintaining interior comfort. Simply ensuring that windows are properly weather-stripped is important, as are relatively easy adjust-

ments to make sashes fit snugly within their frames and seal tightly when locked.

It has also been found that simply adding good quality storm windows yields virtually the same energy performance as installing double-pane replacement windows, and yet storm windows can be installed for a small fraction of the cost. Traditional wood-frame storm sashes are generally quite appropriate for older homes, as are those with narrow metal frames when painted an inconspicuous color.



Even for windows that may appear to be beyond repair, the option of restoration should never be dismissed without a careful and impartial assessment. Peeling paint and even some rotting wood, for instance, should not be mistaken as indications that a window is unsalvageable. Finally, for the most severe cases of deterioration, high quality wood replacement windows are indeed available. These do convincingly replicate the appearance of original wood windows and also improve on their thermal performance, although of course they are not inexpensive.

In most instances, informed advice and some skilled carpentry are called for, but the results are well worth the effort when preserving the integrity and appearance of our neighborhood's handsome old homes is at stake. 🐿

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