

ARTFUL RENOVATION 101

A well-thought-out addition can create a "continuing history" for a house—the sense that the entire house has always been there
BY JUDITH CHAPMAN PROCTOR

It took finesse to make the addition (right) to this early-20th-century house look so compatible with the original English Arts & Crafts-style building.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DURSTON SAYLOR

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This new kitchen and breakfast room is set within a c. 1913 Craftsman-style stucco house in Riverside, Connecticut. In keeping with the period of the house, the homeowner-architect McKee Patterson—chose a classic checkered floor with a contemporary twist (oversized 2-foot-square rubber tiles). The two rooms use custom mahogany, found in the original butler's pantry, and Carrara marble countertops, also a classic early-20th-century material.

Federal, Georgian, Colonial, Tudor—whatever their style, gracious old houses in need of restoring, updating, or adding-to present similar renovation challenges. Architect McKee Patterson, AIA, who has been renovating architecturally significant houses for more than 25 years, offers these guidelines to owners about to embark on the restoration of a house that merits preservation.

Don't be afraid to demolish poorly designed or badly constructed additions. Many inferior designs were propagated in the mid-20th century. Patterson's firm, Austin Patterson Disston Architects, took on one of them—a 1950s ranch that had been tacked onto a classic 1900s Shingle Style house in Rye, New York. The original house had suffered an additional deformity: Picture windows had replaced the old house's lovely original patterned, double-hung transom windows. After seeing a design sketch and taking a few walk throughs, the initially reluctant new owner saw the wisdom of disposing of the ill-conceived ranch structure in favor of design and construction matching the high level of the early-20th-century Shingle, including handsome transom windows.

Preserve beautiful detailwork. Two decades ago, when Patterson set out to restore an 1840s Federal house, he marveled at the craftsmanship of the stair details and the moldings. However, “a builder will generally say it is much easier to start from scratch,” he says. “I had to be very clear in the demolition process about where to stop demoli-

tion and what to preserve, or else the builder would throw everything away.”

Don't let the new addition upstage the original historic house. This Federal-house renovation included a large addition housing a kitchen, a family room, a boot room, and a laundry—spaces that a busy 21st-century family requires.

When an addition is necessary, Patterson stresses, don't let it upstage the old house by making it more elaborate. The addition can either mirror the style of the main structure or take its cue from a later historic period. This has been the architectural practice in New England since the 18th century. The Vermont countryside contains many examples of early houses that have additions built in the style of the (later) day, using then-new glass fabrication techniques to produce larger single-paned windows or millwork advances that allowed for more extensive detailing.

Patterson gave this Federal house the sort of simple addition that a late-19th-century architect might have designed. The dominant white-clapboard, shuttered structure, with columns and pilasters, received a vertically sided addition—also painted white, but with no shutters and few embellishments. The addition is clearly from a different period, but it does not fight with the style of the main house. Patterson calls this “creating a continuing history” that keeps the project within its historical context and gives the entire house the sense that it's always been there.

It's important that the addition to a house be set back,

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The additions (left and right) to this classic Greenwich Tudor Revival house display an appreciation for the detailing and rich materials found in the original early-20th-century house—stone, slate roofs, heavy timbers, and copper gutters.

so it doesn't dominate the original structure. Patterson and his colleagues at Austin Patterson Disston have designed a number of additions to 18th-century saltboxes. Some of these additions are constructed in stone, as building in stone was a popular aesthetic in the 19th century. The saltbox retains its gracious dominance because the addition is set back, and its massing and style are different; it plays its part as a functioning second fiddle.

Use restraint when it comes to matters of trim, and reinforce the good elements of the original structure. Keep your eye on the historic context, but it is not necessary to be slavish to it, making it feel like a museum. Patterson seeks to maintain the soul of the age in which the house was built, retaining the sweep of the stairs and the original mantels and built-ins, for instance. He incorporates the essence of the original design into a new design: For instance, a new boot room in an early 20th-century Tudor Revival house has ornate built-in chair/benches that could have been found in a great English manor house.

Restraint should be followed in the trim system, and some design elements in the addition should be carried over from the historic structure. For instance, if the informal living sections are in the addition, the trim designs should progress from more complex in the formal, original public spaces (entry foyer, living room, dining room) to less complex in the informal spaces. The fact is, a room does not

become better simply by the addition of more moldings.

Consider the site's historic elements. Often, the design of the site is not given enough attention. It can hold such important elements as historic stone walls, mature old-growth trees, picturesque outbuildings, and even rocks that anchor the property in its context. Work these elements into a site plan that brings visitors and their cars to the front door (diminishing the back or family entrance, if necessary), create an entry drive that has a direct sightline to the main house (thus applauding it), and provide ample yet minimal spaces for cars, leaving the property open for enjoyment.

When asked what historic project he is most proud to have renovated, Patterson cites a Riverside Craftsman house that had been slated for demolition, though it had been honored by the Greenwich Historical Society. It had been on the market for a few years: No one could figure out what to do with the ill-proportioned 35-foot-high, oak-paneled living room that divided the two sides of the house. Bedrooms with separate stairs were set on either side of this room, reminiscent of a tissue box on its side.

Patterson was determined to save the room, since it was the core of the house. He did so by lowering the ceiling and rebuilding only one set of stairs, therefore creating a hallway and bedrooms above the living room that properly connect the whole second floor. "The room now has a much better scale, and the plan of the house works," he notes.

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A sunroom on the upper level and a back-door boot room on the lower level were transformed into the official front entry of this Riverside Arts & Crafts residence. A new pergola, awning, and door signal the entrance to the lower foyer, staircase, and upper foyer above.

The oak beams were saved and used for built-in cabinets, the oak paneling refinished, and the Arts & Crafts light fixtures refurbished. "We even saved and rechromed circa-1913 bathroom fixtures like the wire washcloth holders. No one even makes those anymore," Patterson notes. And that's the *point*. Few new projects can duplicate the detailing in these architecturally significant houses, and no new structure can duplicate the richness age brings to a house. "It is important to know when to stop in the refurbishing process," Patterson points out, "or you'll lose the patina of age." TME

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McKee Patterson, AIA, is one of three partners at Austin Patterson Disston Architects, which has offices in Southport, Connecticut, and Quogue, Long Island. With a current focus on residential architecture, the firm, with its staff of 27, has won numerous design awards. 203.255.4031 (Connecticut); 631.653.1481 (Long Island); www.apdarchitects.com