



Twelve Critical Things You Need to Consider Before and After You Purchase an Old House

by John Altobello

A former client approached me on the matter of an historic house she and her husband were considering purchasing. Enthralled with what the realtor had shown them, she exclaimed, "I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. The house I just toured is a gem. It has history, architecture, character, great spaces. And it's in a vibrant neighborhood. I think this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Should I go ahead and make an offer?"

I replied, "Sounds like you have some hesitation. What's holding you back?"

"To be honest, I'm afraid of what the home inspection is going to turn up. And that will dissuade me from going ahead."

In my architecture practice I'm familiar with this kind of exuberant response on the part of prospective buyers. It has to do with the "chemistry" one may experience when viewing tall windows that bring in so much natural light, or a curved staircase that beckons, "Go explore beyond and above." The allure of elaborate mouldings and medallions or the potential of a well-proportioned fireplace stimulate the latent wish to renovate. It all makes perfect sense and can easily induce a desire to act on impulse.

The gut reaction is important and telling. It's an instinctive response based on emotion, memory, dream, and desire. All of these factors are worthy of embracing. But they need to be tempered by facts.

Not wanting to dissuade the potential homeowner from what she saw as a golden opportunity, I still wanted to impart a dose of reality. I sat her down and told her there are some critical points and questions she needed to consider before moving ahead.





The house's bones

Does the house have good bones? What's the condition of the overall structure and foundation? In what shape are the house's systems? Get an evaluation of what it would take to upgrade electrical, heating, plumbing if needed.

Exterior

Consider the house's exterior envelope. What is the condition of windows, siding, masonry, wood trim, roof etc.? Will you need to pour a lot of money into these areas in order to bring them up to an acceptable level? Are there historic covenants required by local or national organizations? Will adhering to the rules or guidelines be a financial burden?

Past sins

Have the house's rooms been chopped up and changed unrecognizably over the years? Do you anticipate major reconfiguring of floor area to realize a blossoming plan? Try to determine an estimated cost to undo the sins that past owners have inflicted on your future dream house.

Old vs. new

Do you want to retain interior period detail, or throw it all out? Can you envision how new parts of the house will work with the old? Do you want harmony or iconoclasm? Taking an inventory of what is historic and salvageable can be a good starting point.

Cost

Do you have an ideal budget for what you'd like to spend on renovation, or on necessary repairs? Consider carefully the dollar amount you'd need to put into the house to make it correspond to your needs, vis a vis the market value after project completion. Will the house be over-improved for its location? Can the location tolerate the improvements from a value perspective?



Vision

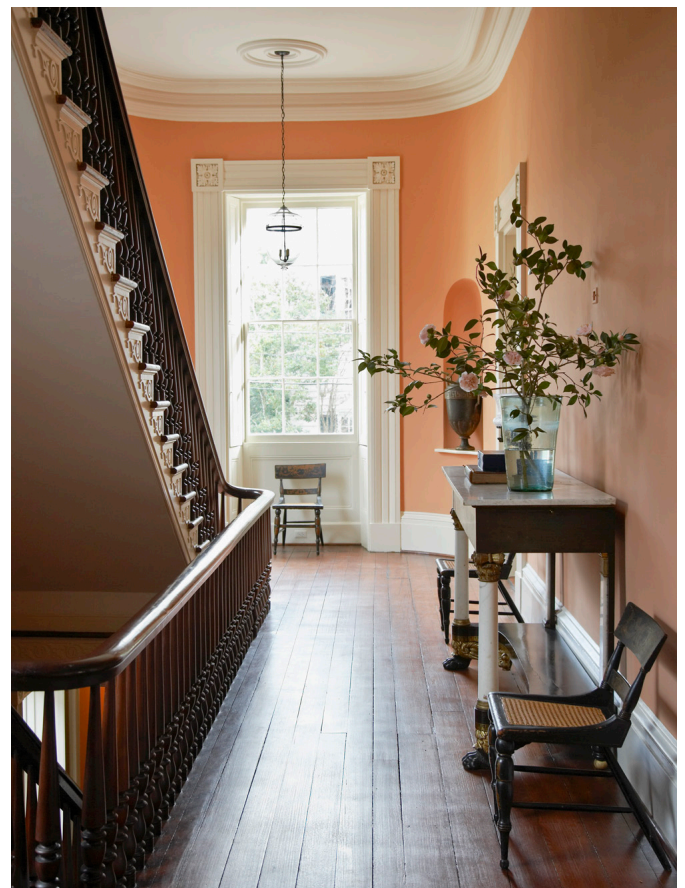
Do you have an initial idea of the kind of house you want to live in? Think about what functions you want to include. Would constructing an addition to the house allow for the types of spaces you feel are important to you? Is the structure of the house flexible enough to allow for easy reorganizing of rooms? Are there zoning or other regulatory issues to contend with in adding on?

After taking my advice to heart and addressing the concerns and questions to their satisfaction, my friends were convinced that purchase was the right course for them. They knew that beyond the initial vision they'd come up with after moving into the house and hearing how it spoke to them, they'd need to tackle the actual design of the renovations. A daunting task, they surmised. I tried to help them understand that with the right kind of thinking and laying the ground work, the effort can actually be fun.

Here's the guidance I gave them.

Working with design professionals

Talk with an architect about your ideas concerning the kinds of spaces and rooms you want, and try to determine if your vision is realistic given the condition of the house. A designer can also help you with a reality check on the big ideas, and see if their coming to fruition will correspond to your sense of a budget. Rely also on the designer to show you



different options that may be more cost effective. You may want to engage an interior designer to ensure that the spaces you've defined will lend themselves to accommodate appropriate furnishings.

Make no mistake, an expert designer, be they architect or interiors person, is crucial to the success of the project. The design professional has the ability to listen to what's most important to you in terms of how you live, and to translate those desires into concrete terms: drawings, specifications, time-line, and estimated cost.

You will be entering into an important and perhaps extended relationship that involves you, the designer, the contractor, and, of course, the house. Each of these different entities has a voice. It's paramount that each voice be heard, and that they develop a way of successfully talking to each other throughout the course of the work.

Embarking on the conversation with your designer about how you live

It's useful to think about how you plan to use the house in terms of functions, not necessarily rooms. Here are some examples of functionalities you may want to consider.



- **Cooking.** How important is the cooking area? Do you want this space to be open to other areas for entertaining, or do you want it to be discretely hidden away? What are your spatial requirements for a successful kitchen? Big or small? Are there others who will be cooking along side you?
- **Transitions.** Can you think of how transitional spaces will work for you, eg. butler's pantry, stairs and landings, the spaces within the thicknesses of walls, entryways, hallways. A generous entryway, for example, may also work for you as a place for entertaining. A stair landing may provide an opportunity for a cozy window seat or reading alcove.
- **Cleaning and Storing.** Where do you see locating storage and closet areas? Can they be carved out of existing rooms? Will you have to steal space from other rooms? How extensive will demolition of existing spaces be in order to come up with adequate storage?
- **Technology.** Do you want current technology to play a big or small role in the design the house? Think about hot-spots and where they will be located in relation to an overall design.
- **Outdoor space.** Are there opportunities to open up to a garden space at the exterior of the house? How will the historic architecture be affected by opening up? Of critical concern will be how the interior spaces relate to the exterior in terms of access, light, views.

- **Rethinking your Public Spaces.** Consider how much of an open feel you want the house to have, and how much you want spaces to flow one into the other. If formality is something you value, then you may want to adhere to a layout that was probably part of the original house plan.
- **Relaxing.** Where do you and others relax in your home? Evaluate spaces for relaxability. Consider the pros and cons of open house living.
- **Working.** Do you work at home — part time, full time? What is your work and storage style? How do you gauge your needs? Remember the special interests — crafts and specialty hobbies need space.
- **Eating/Entertaining.** Where and how do you and others eat in your home? What is your entertaining style? Think about preferences for casual and/or formal dining, and merging cooking and eating into one space.
- **Private Spaces.** One or more family members may want to designate spaces just for themselves, for reading, study, meditation and the like. Is it feasible, given the existing space of the house, to set aside discrete, individual spaces?
- **Sleeping.** How is your bedroom or bedrooms used? Is this your real living room? A crash pad? If you do more than sleep in the so-called bedroom, then all the other functions need to be taken into consideration.
- **Bathing.** What are the bathroom requirements for family and guests? Will you be able to work with spaces that have already been defined for bathing? Or will you have to carve out new areas to meet your needs?
- **Coming and Going.** What's important to you in entering and exiting the house? Can you imagine a generous entry that's welcoming to you and guests, or would you rather give that square footage over to other uses? Formality or functionality?

Choosing the contractor who's right for you

You may already have a working relationship with a contractor whom you trust. Or you may get a referral from a friend or colleague. Your designer(s) can also recommend contractors with whom they have had successful working relationships. Given the designer's background and experience, they should be in a good position to understand the chemistry that might occur between owner and contractor, and to make a recommendation on that basis.

How do you personally deal with change?

Whatever the size of the project you embark on, it will involve change to your life and your



lifestyle. Change, the unknown, and the unpredictable can be stressful. I tell my clients to keep their eyes on the end result, and to try to remember why they started the project in the first place. Having regular meetings among the principle cast of characters can help relieve stress, especially when there is a value placed on getting concerns out in the open, not being shy about expressing what might be troubling.

Expectations met, or not? Letting go

What do you do when you look at a finished room, and it does not appear the way you had imagined? There may have been a miscommunication between you and the designer in which each of you was talking about something different. The fix may be as easy as changing the paint color, or re-choosing a piece of trim or moulding. Usually talking through what specifically makes the outcome appear unequal to your vision can provide a solution.

Is that all there is?

We believe that living in an old house is a stewardship, an ongoing commitment to maintain the home you've infused with your energy, ideas and love. A house and how you live in it are part of a constantly evolving process. If you've stuck with a project from beginning to end, you know well all that's entailed. And, as your needs change, you'll be better able to live through adapting the house to new requirements.



This article evolved from conversations between Gale C. Steves and John Altobello in planning for their forthcoming book on new life for old houses.
