

Giving Old Homes New Life

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niche market has gained momentum in the pandemic, following the national trend in overall home sales.

"In January 2020, the median days on market for these homes was 86 days, eight days slower than the same time in 2019," said Danielle Hale, chief economist for Realtor.com. "However, as of December, these homes were selling in 79 days, 10 days faster than last year." She added that it's "an impressive feat considering the diligence required for purchasing one of these properties."

Recent data provided by Zillow showed homes built before 1940 garnering nearly as many saves per housing unit as houses from the early 2000s.

Erin DiFazio, a broker with Chrome Realty in Sarasota, Fla., who specializes in historic properties, said she believed that more buyers now want homes that "reflect a more authentic self, individual character, and a bit of story." The craftsmanship of older homes is often a primary selling point, she said.

While legislation pertaining to historic preservation varies from place to place, there are often specific incentives and protections for locally designated properties, including tax credits and exemptions, and flexibility in the building and zoning codes to preserve historic features. Insuring an older home, however, can be challenging depending on the state, Ms. DiFazio said.

"More and more first-time buyers are admiring what makes these homes timeless," said Michael Robleto, a Los Angeles agent

'The old adage is true: They don't make 'em like they used to.'



KAREN JERZYK PHOTOGRAPHY



LEFT, CENTER AND ABOVE, JANE BEILES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

with Compass who specializes in prewar homes.

Many buyers are tired of the overtly neutral living spaces that seem ubiquitous in flipped homes, he said, adding that in addition to a potential investment benefit, the construction quality of older homes is often unmatched. "The old adage is true: They don't make 'em like they used to, and you can't rebuild history," Mr. Robleto said.

In the past two years, Mr. Robleto has detected a noticeable change in the willingness of buyers to take on an older home that needs major mechanical work, and to preserve the original elements of a home, including windows, custom built-ins, glass doorknobs and hardwood floors. "Home improvement TV shows and social media profiles have a massive effect on our historic housing stock," he said.

"This Old House," which trailblazed this category of home improvement television starting in 1979, continues to carry and attract an immense audience on page and screen.

"This Old House" and "Ask This Old House," a long-running offshoot program that tackles home improvement issues with homeowners, are two of the highest-rated home improvement shows on television, according to Nielsen data provided by "This Old House." On YouTube, the brand reaches 1.55 million subscribers, and the magazine has a robust subscription base of 5.3 million monthly readers.

THE RESTORATION OF old homes, to some, is merely eye candy — a chance to ogle beautiful spaces with pedigree. To others, it's a way of life and, for now, the perfect pandemic hobby.

For Rebecca Lineberry Galko, who works in the career development office at Yale School of Management, her old house provides endless opportunity for keeping busy. "I struggle with getting overexcited about projects and wanting to tackle everything A.S.A.P.," she said. "But this house is helping me learn to slow down, to manage my expectations, and to go room by room."

Ms. Lineberry Galko, 36, grew up in a house from the 1860s that came with a root cellar and an outhouse, and she delights in old details like gorgeous radiators, chilly drafts, single-pane windows and plaster and lath walls.

She is slowly restoring a 1755 Colonial-style single-family home in Higganum, Conn., which she bought last July for \$265,000 and shares with her 3-year-old son, Hudson. The four-bedroom, two-bathroom house has modern plumbing and heating systems but also relics of the past, including two beehive ovens, a fireplace crane for holding pots, and a meat smoking chamber built into the chimney on the second floor.

It takes you straight back to the 18th century, said Ms. Lineberry Galko, who treasures the fact these elements date back some 265 years.

She anticipates needing to budget about \$30,000 for house projects over the next three years, for a blend of D.I.Y. repairs she'll tackle alone and those she will outsource to more experienced home experts. Tasks include pulling down a ceiling in the parlor to expose hand-hewn beams, and installing a historically accurate front door.

"It is a balance of making updates that make sense for the 21st century without disturbing the pieces of the 18th century that remain," said Ms. Lineberry Galko, who goes by the Instagram moniker @my_1755_story. "You should create a space that helps you absolutely love where you live, but in this case, it needs to be done in a way that is respectful to the house."

Ms. DiFazio, the real estate agent, said that with ownership of old homes, there comes responsibility: "Old houses carry tremendous significance to their communities, and when you become the steward of a historic property, you are agreeing to care for and maintain the property to the best of your ability."

Scott T. Hanson, an architectural historian and author of "Restoring Your Historic House," a sweeping 700-page tome that stresses the preservation of a historic home's character-defining features, said that a love for old houses typically includes an appreciation for the quality of design, materials and workmanship in these houses, along with a sense of connection to the history and the people who previously lived in these spaces.

People and books used to occupy the 1827 Greek Revival house Mr. Hanson now calls home with his husband, Andrew Jones, and four Maine Coon cats. The home became the town library in 1941, and remained as such for 60 years. "When the town built a new library and moved out, I bought it," Mr. Hanson said of the landmark property known as Whitten House, which is in Topsham, Maine. The house is a contributing building in the National Register Topsham Historic District, which is deemed historically and architecturally significant as a largely intact Maine village from the circa 1765-to-1900 period.

To Mr. Hanson, buildings are the most visible surviving documents of the past, making them crucial to the future.

"Historic preservation, and keeping old homes functioning and inhabitable, is possibly the least recognized tool available for addressing climate change," he said, noting that historic buildings are typically constructed of high-quality, locally sourced, natural materials. "Throwing these materials, and the energy expended to construct and maintain the buildings, into a landfill, whether for complete demolition or

Top, Elizabeth and Ethan Finkelstein have 1.4 million followers on their Instagram account, @cheapoldhouses. They recently bought and plan to restore this 1800s farmhouse located between the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains. Above from left: Rebecca Lineberry Galko is restoring a 1755 Colonial-style home in Higganum, Conn., which she bought last July for \$265,000 and shares with her 3-year-old son, Hudson. Right, Robert Hartwell bought his home in Massachusetts on Juneteenth last year. "Once I learned more about the history, the home captured my heart," he said.

Below left, Scott T. Hanson's home has the original Gothic Revival wallpaper from France in the front stairwell. Below, Mr. Hanson replaced and reconstructed the missing fireplace, hearth and brick oven.



LEFT AND ABOVE, STACEY CRAMP FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



DANIELLE COHEN

a 'gut rehab,' is hugely wasteful."

FOR SOME, THE arrival of the pandemic spurred a leap into property ownership and the celebration of new beginnings in old homes.

This was the case for Robert Hartwell, founder and artistic director of the Broadway Collective in New York City, an online training academy for future generations of Broadway artists. Last year, after losing his aunt to Covid-19, Mr. Hartwell began scanning old homes on Zillow when he found his dream home. The house, which has two front doors, "was the third house I saw," Mr. Hartwell said of the Massachusetts property, adding that he's searching for a historically accurate shade of red for the entrances.

It may have been the Greek Revival columns and stunning white facade that drew him in, but the history of the six-bedroom residence, which features 4,500 square feet of living space "captured my heart," said Mr. Hartwell, who purchased the home on Juneteenth last year. "There is something so compelling walking through the home knowing that there were rooms that I, as a Black man, wouldn't have been allowed in when it was constructed in the 1820s."

Addressing the fireplaces and original

windows is a top priority. "The entire home feels like a huge restoration project," explained Mr. Hartwell, who said it has been a joy discovering pieces of the home's history, and engaging in discussions with the local historical society. Turns out, one front door was to the family's residence, and the other to the family business, a doctor's office, he said.

OTHERS ARE DEEPER in the home restoration process. Dave and Brittany Rademacher, of Greater Lansing, Mich., have restored several older homes and are using the Instagram handle @rademacher-revival to showcase their latest home-revival project, an Italianate farmhouse, to 30,000 followers.

The couple purchased the four-bedroom, two-bathroom home, and 20 acres of land, for \$300,000 in December 2019. "We definitely sweat the details," Mr. Rademacher, 38, said of the circa 1894 structure the couple is refurbishing while raising their two young children, Roy and Dove. "We've taken down walls that were added, took up flooring that covered the original flooring and incorporated period correct doors and hardware so they look like they've always been here."

Regularly, the pair provides their fans with real-time peeks at ongoing restoration ventures or their latest scores of vintage wares — from doorknobs to light fixtures, antique sinks and more, often nabbed at a salvage shop, estate sale or even from the side of the road.

"Our kids will grow up learning how to fix things rather than buying it new," said Mr. Rademacher, who works in sales for a building materials distribution company and holds a degree in residential design and is also a licensed builder in the state of Michigan. Ms. Rademacher, 34, works in marketing.

The experience of restoring an old home together is meaningful for his children and the future, Mr. Rademacher said. "The memories they create will have a backdrop of something with history and character," he said. "If we do our job right, the history and memories will live on a lot longer than we do, inside of this home."