

Seven ways to NOT "remuddle" a historic home

By Marni Jameson Special to The Denver Post The Denver Post

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Every time I move into another home to stage — and I'm in my fourth in three years — I play a game of "If This Were Mine."

If this house were mine, I would rip this out and put that in, knock this down and stick that up. It's an affliction.

Fortunately, because I don't own these places, I am all talk and no caulk. All nail and no hammer. Because I live under a restraining order that comes with non-homeownership, these homes have been spared clueless improvements that could have actually harmed them, particularly the older homes.

My last three houses have been historic: a 130-year-old Folk Farmhouse, a 100-year-old Southern Plantation-style home, and currently, an 85-year-old Spanish Mediterranean. Though different in character, what each has in common is a past — and that, I have come to understand, is worth preserving.

"In an effort to upgrade old homes, I've seen people do some frightening things," said a contractor who was in my kitchen this week doing some work.

"They tear out important and valuable architectural elements and replace them with off-the-shelf items from the local big-box store all in the name of improvement."

The worker, who didn't know what I do for a pseudo living, was chatting in passing while I packed my lunch for work, but I was listening closely and thinking, "Holy Mary, that could be me!"

All this was up for discussion a couple days later when I talked with Nicole Curtis, host of HGTV's "Rehab Addict." Curtis regularly takes on falling-apart old homes — ones others would have leveled or "improved" but made worse — and restores them authentically.

We soon sounded like historic-home evangelists in need of an intervention. "People don't do the wrong thing on purpose," said Curtis. "They do the wrong thing because they aren't educated."

"Well, let's fix that," I said.

"The biggest mistake people make when improving an old home is they try to do what's hot right now," said Curtis. "But what's hot right now won't be hot in 10 years. What will always be hot, and will maintain the home's value, is keeping with the era of the home."

Her advice — tear out almost nothing, restore what's there — is not only better for the home's value, it's easier on the wallet.

On her short list of what she would add or replace in an older home are these modern conveniences: Walk-in closets "but added in a way where they don't take away from the character of the home"; updated heating, cooling systems, and plumbing systems, "so homes are comfortable, safe and more

energy-efficient," and new appliances that weren't invented when the house was built.

"No one will ever say, 'Oh my gosh, why did you put in a dishwasher?' "

Beyond that, here are some of her tips for updating an older home without messing it up:

1 Keep the cabinets. When Curtis sees people pull out solid wood cabinets to put in new ones made of melamine, or MDF (medium-density fiberboard), she cringes. "These manmade materials were not made for years of wear and tear. They don't handle moisture well. The laminate pulls away, and the pulls come off." Instead, strip and refinish the wood. It looks better, lasts longer and will save money.

2 Refinish the tubs and sinks. To give an old porcelain bathtub a new coat costs about \$400. A new tub can run more than \$1,000, not including demo and installation, said Curtis, who is especially horrified when homeowners swap an old porcelain tub for a fiberglass Jacuzzi.

3 Save wood floors. Covering old wood floors with cheaper inferior tiles or carpet is a common crime. Even worse is removing them. "I have never replaced a wood floor in my life," said Curtis. "I've worked with floors that were burnt, flooded and covered in pet stains. It is always cheaper and more authentic to refinish existing floors and patch sections where needed." You can always get the patch to match.

4 Clean old tile. Half the reason old tile floors or other tile surfaces look worn out is because they are filthy. Don't tear them out until you've given them a good cleaning, said Curtis.

5 Make counters authentic. Don't use products that weren't available when the house was built. That means nothing manmade, like laminate or Corian, and nothing modern, like glass tiles. Go for wood counters, like butcher block, or classic marble, and occasionally granite. Ceramic tiles work in homes built after 1930.

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Keep the walls up. Open floor plans are a trend, but they don't belong in old houses, said Curtis. "After a couple years of living in an open floor plan, people don't want it anymore." Before knocking out a wall (which Curtis would rarely do) live in the house for six months. "Get into the groove of the home and see how it lives."

7 Repair, don't replace, windows. They are important to the home's historic value. Old windows leak and are drafty because they haven't been properly maintained. Have them repaired and weatherstripped so they're efficient and work. Adding historically accurate storm windows outside can boost efficiency. The same for original doors. Leave them.

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