Should Your Old Wood Windows Be Saved?

We weigh the options with cost, complexity, efficiency, and preservation in mind

BY ROB YAGID
Old wood windows are as charming as they are maddening. While they offer appealing craftsmanship and an authentic sense of home, they typically leak like a sieve. With rising fuel costs, an unstable economy, and a cata-tonic housing market, it’s simply becoming more and more difficult to look at those old units with pride.

If you live in a historic district, you may not have the option of installing replacement windows. If you live elsewhere, however, you may be tempted to ditch the whole preservationist mentality and hop on the vinyl replacement train in hopes of reaping all the green rewards and cash savings of a modern home. Don’t—not without carefully considering your options first.

By assessing your existing wood windows and making the right upgrades, you might be able to restore them to rival the performance of a standard replacement—at a fraction of the cost.

**Consider the potential of your existing windows**

You might make a window-replacement contractor’s head spin if you tell him that you’re going to repair rather than replace an old, drafty wood window. After all, thanks to progress in building technology, tight windows with astonishingly high insulating values—Serious Windows, for example (www.seriouswindows.com)—are now available. But not every advanced building solution or product makes sense for everyone. For many, repair work is a desirable alternative to replacement.

In a collaborative effort, the Vermont Energy Investment Corporation, the University of Vermont’s Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, and the U.S. Army Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory set out to test the value in wood-window repair. In their 1996 paper, “Testing the Energy Performance of Wood Windows in Cold Climates,” they assessed the performance gains accrued through various wood-window upgrades, including the addition of storm windows. Through testing and modeling over 150 windows across the state of Vermont, they found that the difference in annual energy savings between a properly restored wood window and a typical replacement unit amounted to only a few dollars.

The findings that were published in that paper are still supported by experts researching the issue. Michael Blasnik, an independent consultant for over 25 years specializing in energy efficiency, building science, and weatherization-program evaluation, has looked more recently at the energy impact of replacement windows. “The numbers just aren’t as high as you would hope to see,” he explains. “There is actually little data that supports the idea that replacement windows save any significant amount of energy in typical homes.”

Blasnik studied the energy bills of a small sampling of houses in Upstate New York. He looked at their energy bills before and after replacement windows were installed. No other building improvements were made. The findings were less than impressive. On average, the homeowners saved about $40 on their annual heating bills. Consider the expense of replacing all the windows in a house, which could cost as much as $10,000, and replacement hardly seems sensible or economical. By dividing the total investment by the annual energy savings, you get a shocking payback period: The owners of these Northern homes won’t see net cost savings for another 250 years.

Other experts agree. Jim Bunting, senior adviser with Canam Building Envelope Specialists—an Ontario-based firm that has focused on the energy efficiency, health, and durability of homes for 25 years—has reported on window repair: “As windows age, there will come a time when window replacement becomes a preferred option, driven by aesthetic, functional, and property value considerations. The payback from energy savings will, however, be much longer than with repair.” His prediction? “[Repair] can be carried out with relative ease and low cost. Combine this with potential energy savings and the forecast has to be for more repairs than replacements in the future.”

**What window manufacturers say**

Manufacturers often stress the energy-saving value of replacement windows. The purported savings vary by manufacturer but range from a 15% to a nearly 50% reduction in heating and cooling costs. While window replacement certainly makes sense in a lot of applications—for example, when sloppy window installation contributes to rotting walls or when a homeowner wants the luxury of easy-to-clean modern windows—it’s best to look at the numbers carefully and to ask lots of questions.

“We see a reduction in energy cost from 15% to 30% when replacing double-glazed wood windows with our most energy-efficient ZO-E products,” says Chris Schield, brand manager for Weather Shield Windows. According to Schield, those numbers are calculated with modeling software, though he couldn’t say if the baseline wood window was airtight or had a storm window attached to it. And while a $1500 federal tax credit for installing new energy-efficient windows will help to decrease the payback period of replacements, Schield recognizes that “payback periods can be lengthy.”

Brian Hedlund, a product manager at Jeld-Wen, suggests looking at factors besides energy savings when considering payback...
Assess the existing window to determine the best upgrades

There is good news if your old home still has its original wood windows: They were built to be repaired. According to Jade Mortimer, a window-restoration specialist who operates Heartwood Restoration in Hawley, Mass., “The joinery and construction of old wood windows lends itself to repair.”

Restoring and upgrading old windows isn’t cheap, but much of the expense is paid in sweat if you’re willing to do the work yourself (see “New Life for Old Double-Hung Windows,” FHB #192 and online at FineHomebuilding.com). According to Mortimer, a professional may charge around $200 for a complete restoration and upgrade of each window—maybe more, depending on the damage. However, if you do the work yourself, you can generally expect to pay less than $100 for materials. A storm window can cost as little as $80 or in excess of $300. Again, the upgrade can cost much less if you build your own.

Rob Yagid is an associate editor.
**Problem:** Too much paint has rendered the window inoperable.

**Solution:** Expect to encounter lead-based paint when stripping old windows (see “Lead-Paint Safety, at Home and on the Job,” FHB #150 and online at FineHomebuilding.com). Once the window is completely stripped, repaired, and ready for paint, keep in mind that the pulley, sash cord, jamb, parting bead, and sides of the sash should not be painted.

**Problem:** The glazing putty has deteriorated, which is adding to the leakiness of the window.

**Solution:** Remove all the existing putty, and take out the pane of glass out. Clean up all the rabbets, and treat the wood with a conditioner and preservative before reinstalling the glass. As a preservative, Jade Mortimer likes to use a 40/40/20 mixture of boiled linseed oil, Penetrol, and turpentine. Her glazing putty of choice is made by Sarco.

**Sources:** Sarco Putty (800-969-7889), also available at www.winnmountainrestorations.com

**Problem:** Wood damage, such as gouges, dents, deep scratches, and rot, compromises the structural integrity of the window and its overall appearance.

**Solution:** While some scratches, gouges, and dents can be fixed simply with epoxy and epoxy filler, others demand more extensive repair. A dutchman is a time-tested fix for rotted or otherwise damaged portions of rails and stiles. In other instances, a complete replacement of the part may be necessary. Look for wood that’s the same species and age.

**Sources:** Mortimer suggests asking a local window-replacement contractor. She finds lots of quality old wood windows in their Dumpsters.

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**Problem:** After all the appropriate upgrades, the windows are still too leaky.

**Solution:** Install a weatherstripped storm window on the outside of each window. Many old-window owners like single-lite, or one-over-one, storm windows since they offer protection without compromising the look of the home.