



Ten Years, One Old House

BY CHARITY VOGEL

SOME THINGS IN LIFE make the years seem to fly by, like watching your child grow up, or restoring an old house. Maybe you celebrated the first anniversary of the day you signed the title papers or the day you moved in. You may have partied when the house turned 100, or 150, or 200 years old. But somewhere along the way, what with all the projects and living your life, years vanish; then you realize you've been in the house longer

Projects begin and end, and suddenly you hit a milestone: a decade of old-house ownership has gone by. You may find yourself pondering the roads not taken—and the lessons learned.

than some of its previous owners were. You aren't just the present; you're already becoming the past.

For us, the 10-year mark was a revelation. It's been that long since my husband, T.J., and I signed our mortgage documents and took possession of an 1898 Victorian in the countryside. It was a rambling, badly decorated pile. (But we really liked the blue clapboard and shingle exterior.) Today the house still rambles, and it's still blue, though the paint job is new and the color

is more historical. Inside, we think it's less badly decorated, too, though who really knows? We're far from finished with our projects and probably always will be.

Still, a decade is real time, a milestone even, a chunk of one's life. It's a time to step back and consider: Did we make all the right decisions? Not by a long shot. Have we learned some lessons the hard way? Without a doubt. Do we have any regrets? No. We reminisce about the houses that got away, and we joke about the dollars and hours we've sunk into this place. We threaten to call the real-estate agent and move to a remote part of Canada . . . but deep down, no regrets. We're all in for the next decade. Among our old-house friends and acquaintances, we're not alone in that.

NOW FOR A FEW hard-won lessons learned in 10 years of old-house ownership. If you're new to this, maybe my tips will help you out.



GET VACCINATED. We had been in our folk Victorian in the country for all of 15 minutes before tackling our first-ever project: pulling up 1970s-era red shag carpet to

reveal the heart-pine floors beneath. Within just a few more minutes, we logged our first jobsite injury. A row of jagged, rusty carpet tacks tore my leg from knee to ankle. Oozing blood, I limped off to the doctor's office, where I sat for hours waiting for a tetanus shot. Time wasted, tempers frayed, and then a needle. Lesson learned: Be sure to have a tetanus booster—and a first-aid kit—before you tackle anything more strenuous than arranging furniture.

DON'T RUSH INTO CHANGE. When we moved in, we wondered why the previous owners had allowed a small but sturdy pine tree to grow just off the side porch. We almost cut the tree down, thinking to save the porch from future damage. A year or two later, an ice storm nearly took out the young tree, and we realized that its full branches were providing a wind-break. It keeps the snow from drifting in 5' heaps on the sidewalk and porch steps. Lesson learned: You're not the first owner, not the first to think the house through. Be patient and let the house show you what's what.

START WITH THE GRUNT WORK. The first few projects (years) won't be glamorous—no surprise to anyone who's been through a restoration. Forget high-impact, pretty things like custom kitchen cabinets and wallpaper. Your priority is the safety and long-term integrity of the building, like keeping water out. Do the plumbing, electrical overhaul, chimney lining or repointing, foundation work. If we could do it over, we would have handled all the boring stuff before finishing the library and bedroom.

Lesson learned: Big-ticket repairs don't leave you with the same glow you get from a marble countertop, but you'll be thrilled with your prioritizing later, when you don't have to cut through a professionally papered wall to reroute wiring.

KEEP THOROUGH RECORDS. Projects pile on, and so does the paperwork: estimates, invoices, business cards, idea files. These will get misplaced if you don't create a system. The time will come when you will need to know the faucet manufacturer and where you bought the thing. Keep a notebook and file drawer for a running tally of everything you buy, every paint color you

specify, every contractor and source. Lesson learned: Records are crucial for future needs and repairs, for giving recommendations to neighbors, and also for keeping track of what you've spent on improvements.

GET WITH A GROUP. Restoration can be a collaborative and collegial task. We don't regret the time and effort we've poured into talking with other owners of vintage homes—at social gatherings, at old-house fairs and preservation events, and online. Lesson learned: Investing energy to build and be part of a network of old-house owners rewards you with true friendships, and lots of advice and insight about the craft of owning a vintage house.

BELOW: The author's clapboard Victorian house in upstate New York. **OPPOSITE:** The 1898 house in a photo taken before 1920.



LIVE LARGE IN YOUR OLD HOUSE. In my experience, living in an old house amplifies life experience. Emotions seem deeper, more connected to past and present, in a place full of patina. Doubts sink deeper, but hopes rise higher. Perhaps it's the invisible presence of the past that lives in the house. Lesson learned: The day you burst through the door to say you got the job, the day you bring the baby home, seeing Christmas morning through your four-year-old's eyes—these experiences would not have been the same in a subdivision house. ✦

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