

Renovations polish a once-hidden jewel

But historic preservation comes with a price, and sometimes a compromise.

Monica Scandlen | Special to the Sentinel
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The house at the corner of Ridgewood Street and Broadway Avenue, one of the oldest in the neighborhood, was considered an eyesore by many -- more worthy of a bulldozer than a renovation.

Built in 1909 as a home, it later housed offices for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orlando. Nearing 100 years old, its cypress siding was rotting, and most of the windows were in disrepair. A builder wanted to tear it down to make room for an ultra-modern showcase home.

No way, said city officials. The Florida vernacular bungalow, white with blue trim, had historical significance to the Lake Eola Heights Historic District. In the end, the city agreed to let the house be moved from its corner lot to make room for the new home.

The old bungalow is now The Renewed American Home, an eye-catching, light-yellow blend of historic architectural features and updated amenities. It enhances Broadway Avenue, neighbors say, and passersby stop to take photos of it and the modern New American Home 2007 nearby. Both were showcase homes for the International Builders' Show, which ended Saturday.

But success didn't come without a few ruffled feathers.

Jumping hurdles

Extensive renovations of classic homes pose challenges to builders, residents and those overseeing historic districts around the country. At the core: how to preserve the past using today's resources and technology.

John Hildreth, director of the southern office for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, has seen the battle between materials and memories over and over again.

"Historic districts are trying to preserve, to the best they can, the character of the area. The community has determined it's an area worth protecting," says Hildreth, who is based in Charleston, S.C. His region includes Florida.

"There are compromises made all the time in which people can get functional use from their properties and still preserve historic neighborhoods."

Builder Stephen Gidus, whose company, PSG Construction, took on the renovation of The Renewed American Home, says he would like local historic districts to become more flexible. He would like them, for example, to see that modern composite materials could be used without compromising historical integrity.

He sees several advantages, including that such materials might last longer than wood used today; are better for the environment because they don't require acres of trees to be harvested; and are less expensive to buy, which in turn would encourage more people to move to historic neighborhoods and revitalize them.

"It's becoming more difficult, but while I'm a little bit discouraged, I'm not completely discouraged," says Gidus. "I still want to see these historic districts preserved. I think it's necessary we preserve these districts. But I think we can do a better job of educating [people about using new materials], so it can be a win-win situation."

Modern materials are not welcome in most historic-preservation circles. Different, more flexible guidelines are in place for new construction projects in the historic district. But requirements for renovations are strict.

The road to change

Raymond Cox is chairman of Orlando's Historic Preservation Board, a volunteer board that reviews applications for modifications to historic structures and for construction projects. He is working on a master's degree in historic preservation.

He also lives in the Lake Eola Heights Historic District in downtown Orlando, one of six such districts in the city. It has been a historic district since 1989, and its 580 structures are an eclectic blend of bungalows, Spanish revival, Victorian, Italian revival and new construction.

Cox likes the way The Renewed American Home turned out but loathes any suggestions to loosen guidelines regarding materials used.

"What's historic about plastic?" asks Cox. "If anything, I would support rewriting the code to be more strict."

Gidus faced numerous challenges while working on The Renewed American Home. First, the house was moved three times -- once from the original site, again to dig and build the basement and a third to set it over the basement.

Cox says the idea to move the home didn't get the board's unanimous approval, but it garnered enough support to allow the move.

The debate didn't end there.

Gidus says much of the original cypress siding was rotted beyond repair, as were the original wood window frames. So he custom-milled a composite siding to match the shape of the original siding and substituted the wood windows for an Anderson composite and vinyl-clad product.

Neighbors noticed the changes and alerted Orlando's historic-preservation officer Richard Forbes. Representatives from PSG Construction again met with the historic-preservation board and an agreement was reached.

Gidus replaced the composite siding on the original house with new cypress siding from the Southern Cypress Manufacturers Association. The Georgia-Pacific composite siding remains on the detached garage and on the addition to the house, Gidus says. He plans to replace the two windows in the front with wood-sash windows now that the builders' show has ended.

He says he was not trying to evade the district's requirements.

"I was not aware of the rule for having to replace existing materials with the exact type of material," Gidus says.

Holding on to the past

Preservationists say the materials used on the outside of historic homes are precisely what set them apart.

Wood siding feels different from composite siding. Glass used in old windows has a different, wavy texture not found in new windows. Plus, preservationists add, it's better for the environment to preserve and repair old materials than to discard them and manufacture materials.

"Generally, these [historic-preservation] boards take a conservative approach -- and I think rightfully so," says Hildreth. "We don't know how new materials will stand up over time. You don't want to sacrifice historic materials for something in the end that might not be as good or as durable."

Forbes, Orlando's historic-preservation officer, puts it more simply.

"We're trying to maintain the integrity of the district as old houses," Forbes says. "We're trying to save the old buildings."

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