



Updating Antique Kitchens & Baths

by Walter Jowers

I take completely different approaches to kitchens and baths in an old-house renovation job. First, my kitchen theory: Except for a few period details—such as a fine antique cabinet, or period-inspired patterns in cabinets and countertops—putting anything that resembles a pre-World War II kitchen into a house makes no sense.

Gut the Kitchen

Before the mid-1930s, when mass production and marketing of standard-size cabinets and appliances began influencing kitchen design, kitchens were torture chambers. They were full of separate, free-standing cabinets and tables, even free-standing sinks as big as Buicks. Work surfaces were all different heights. The icebox was on the back porch. The phrase “slaving over a hot stove” was fitting, since the lady of the house (or her servant) spent most of the day doing just that.

Times, of course, have changed. On any old-house renovation that is worth doing professionally, there’s no point in trying to save a pre-war kitchen. The only way to tackle it is to gut it. Furthermore, there’s no good reason to try to save a post-war kitchen if it needs serious work, because modern cabinets, plumbing, etc., will in most cases only be updated versions of the original design. If you find an old copper sink or some extra-nice cabinetry in an old kitchen, you should try to keep it. But these are rare exceptions.

When it’s time to select new materials for the old kitchen, think about how they will fit aesthetically into the house. First, avoid trendy kitchens. The allure of an old house is a sense of timelessness, and you don’t want to muddy that up by putting in stuff that is chic today, but will go the way of the avocado-colored refrigerator tomorrow. Use understated tile or vinyl for the floor, something that the owner won’t tire of.

One last suggestion regarding kitchens: Let plastic be plastic. Vinyl floors and plastic-laminate countertops are perfectly good, even superior

materials. Using vinyl that looks like quarry tile or laminate that looks like butcher block is phony and ruins that sense of timelessness. To tie the kitchen visually to the rest of the house, you can select sheet goods that have a period touch. There are vinyl flooring products, available from many manufacturers, that suggest some of the stylish geometric designs from the 1930s and 40s. Some of the original materials have been included in museum shows. Plastic laminates for countertops are available in patterns ranging from 50s-style geometric designs (such as Formica’s “Boomerang”) to art deco-inspired zigurats.

Once a Bathroom...Always a Bathroom

In bathrooms, I take a different approach. You can put in a period-inspired bathroom with no loss of function or aesthetics. People do the same things in bathrooms now that they always did. Barclay Products Limited (424 North Oakley Boulevard, Chicago, IL 60612; 312/243-1444) markets a line of reproduction bathroom fixtures. Their “Victoria” pedestal lavatory and water closet are good Victorian reproductions. They also market a high-tank toilet that has a functional aspect—in these days of low-water-use toilets, you get a better flush when the water starts off from about six feet up. Barclay also sells a “repro” footed tub. All of these fixtures will work as well and as long as other modern fixtures, so there’s no reason not to use them.

Reproduction faucet sets are available from any number of manufacturers, from Barclay to Penney’s. I particularly like the Sears kit for turning a footed tub into a shower. Compared to the \$500-and-up prices I’ve seen for trendy brass kits, the \$40 price on the Sears product really gets my attention.

Tennessee Tub (207 Donelson Pike, Nashville, TN 37214; 615/391-3828) refinishes old sinks and tubs and will ship them anywhere in the country. Refinished footed tubs from Tennessee Tub run from \$665 to around \$750 (the customer pays



Reproduction high-tank toilets work well with modern low-water-use standards, due to the 6-foot drop. (Barclay Products, Ltd., Chicago, Ill.)

freight). Pedestal sinks run from about \$200 to \$600 and can usually be shipped UPS. You should be aware, however, that bathroom-fixture refinishing is a process that some find questionable because by any other name, it is just a high-tech epoxy paint job. That’s good in that you can get a refinished fixture in whatever color you want. But how durable is the finish? If the job is properly done (Tennessee Tub guarantees their finishes for one year) and properly maintained with non-abrasive cleansers such as BonAmi, it can last a long time. After five years or so, most fixtures need “re-refinishing.” Refinished tubs last longest in adult baths, whereas people who paid for them will remember to brush grit off their feet before they get in the tub.

Period-inspired, fully functional bathrooms can be unique and can distinguish an old house.

So renew the bath, but update the kitchen, and you can’t go wrong. ■

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The pre-1930s kitchen featured free-standing cabinets and tables—designs not readily adaptable to modern lifestyles.