

HillRag



Looking Out for Your Historic Windows

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If you Google “windows” these days, you find more about Microsoft software than about the character-defining features of your house. Yet soon we will be facing the drafty days of winter, and now is the perfect time to tackle the issue of replacing or repairing windows. Fortunately homeowners on Capitol Hill have a number of experienced firms to choose from, and can get more information from resources listed in this article.

Windows: Key to Preserving the Historic Quality of Your Home

Owning an historic home comes with special privileges and obligations. Capitol Hill is the largest historic district in the city, and part of its charm is the preservation of Victorian and Colonial rowhouses. Windows play a big role in the ornamentation, scale, and design of many Hill homes.

DC's Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) has issued “Window Repair and Replacement Preservation and Design Guidelines” to help homeowners and contractors with the technical and aesthetic considerations for window repair and replacement (www.preservation.dc.gov).

The Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS) has prepared “Windows: The Eyes of a Building,” written by Judith M. Capen and illustrated with photographs and drawings of Capitol Hill windows (<http://chrs.org/history-and-preservation/chrs-historic-district-guidelines/>). The sheer size of these publications is a good indication of the complexity of the job.

Alex Szopa, owner of Windows Craft Inc., has been working on Capitol Hill for over 15 years, and his specialty is historic windows and doors. Originally from Poland, he brings a knowledge of Europe's centuries-old buildings to the Hill's hundred-year-old homes. “I work with Capitol Hill residents to preserve the beauty and historical nature of their home,” says Szopa. “Often replacement, when done by experts, is a better investment than refurbishing the window.”

The Capitol Hill Restoration Society prefers that original material be saved if possible. Its windows booklet says that “complete replacement of historic windows should only be a

last resort.” The importance of windows to the architectural styling of a home make this decision one that should be made after careful review.

The HPRB says that permits are granted for both refurbishment and replacement, and that it is the duty of their office to make sure that homeowners and contractors are upholding the high standards of the historic district. A permit is not going to be granted unless “no harm” is done to the integrity of the building.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Part of the charm of historic homes is their unique nature. The flip side is that nothing ever seems to be of standard size, meaning homeowners always have to pay extra for custom-made. Windows Craft uses a national brand company, Marvin Windows, for its manufacturing because of the quality of the firm’s products. Szopa says he has used lesser-known brands but often finds that the work has to be returned, which costs time and proves frustrating to homeowners.

Renewal by Andersen is another company working on Capitol Hill with historic windows and doors. The company prides itself on its ability to control the work from start to finish. In fact, says showroom representative Ruth DeHart, the firm is hosting a one-hour seminar, “Hassle Free DC Window Replacement Seminar,” on Sept. 8. It will take place between 6:30 and 7:30 p.m. at the firm’s center at 5081 Nicholson Lane, Rockville, Md. It’s an opportunity to learn more about the permitting process and the options homeowners have in replacing windows and doors.

The Andersen company has been in business for more than 110 years and says it has installed over two million windows and doors. Its windows differ from those of other companies in two ways. First, Andersen uses a wood composite, Fibrex, rather than hard wood in the framing and window treatment. The composite meets historic preservation requirements in DC. Second, the company uses a different mixture of gases between the two glass panes, to provide longer-lasting insulation. It helps reduce heat loss and blocks ultraviolet rays.

Both Szopa and DeHart advise that measuring the window space is paramount in doing the job right. The HPRB is strict that new windows be the identical size of the replaced ones. Unfortunately many homeowners take a shortcut. By doing so they devalue the house and take away from its historic quality.

Quality materials are important to preserve the historic character of the house.

Materials used in the front, visible from the street, may be required to be wood-type materials to match the period when the home was built. Vinyl or aluminum can be used in the back of rowhouses, because the additions are not historic. For instance, some rowhouses have sliding glass doors to patio areas, where metal and vinyl framing is preferred.

The cost of replacing windows can range from a \$1,000 to \$10,000 depending on the size and the amount of deterioration of the frame and brick. Many Capitol Hill homes also have features like Italian-style “eyebrow” rounded windows and Romanesque transoms that require special orders. Work is guaranteed by the manufacturer and the installer for 20 years or more.

Gathering All the Details

The good news is that you can do basic repair to historic windows without a permit. For

instance, if you need to replace glass or glazing compound, repair wood damage, paint, or apply weather stripping, no permit is required. The HPRB also allows installation of window screens, security bars, and window air-conditioning units as long as they do not permanently alter the windows or the openings.

For all other work the HPRB must review the project in advance. In the permitting process the homeowner must show photographs of existing windows and the building. If the windows are going to be replaced, the homeowner must photograph the deterioration to demonstrate the need.

An experienced firm will help expedite the permitting process because they will do the photographing, produce the required drawings that provide the measurements of the existing and proposed windows, and provide the manufacturer's specification sheets. These sheets tell the HPRB what kind of materials are being used, dimensions, and other key data.

Window replacement is a very important home improvement, and done right it can help protect the value and improve the livability of your home. Take advantage of all the expertise in our neighborhood, and you will be smiling through the coldest days of winter.

