

Should You Restore, Remodel or Remuddle?

By Richard Stanley

Years ago, one of my clients commented that we Angelinos live in the “act of God theme park.” Indeed. At times, the abundance of dumpsters in front of Los Feliz homes might indicate that we’ve had yet another disaster. Fortunately, the dumpsters usually indicate that owners are working *voluntarily* on their homes. Lately, the owners could be speculators hoping to catch a cresting wave in the real estate market. Whatever the circumstance, sometimes there really is a “disaster”—evident only after the dumpsters leave and the results are revealed. Here’s what I mean...

Basically there are three ways to bring an older home into today. Each is a challenge, and each has costs and benefits:

Restoration: The most conservative way to refurbish is to restore. A good restoration respects the original design integrity of the home. If the style is a revival style, the historical references have an authenticity that rings true intellectually and emotionally. Restorations preserve the original character details such as hand-crafted clay roof tiles on 1920s Spanish homes. Other roofs might be slate, a costly material rarely seen today. Windows are usually wood or steel—never aluminum or vinyl as in newer houses. The goal of restoration is to preserve as much of the original as possible, while replacing old, outdated systems from within and updating worn out rooms such as kitchens and baths with newer, amenity-rich rooms that use traditional materials in a complementary way. For example, plumbing fixtures from about 1900 to 1930 were usually finished in nickel. Used today, nickel, especially with a brushed finish, harmonizes beautifully with the stainless steel of modern appliances.

Because a great deal of care must be used to work around the old while installing the new, restorations cost more than much new construction. The payoff is that the return on investment is greatest, as buyers will pay the most for well-restored, authentic character homes. We live in one of the few older, inner-city neighborhoods that has retained its original architectural integrity. Buyers seek out homes in Los Feliz because of the special, vintage, character of the area. The median house in Los Feliz dates from about 1939, and more than half of all homes are either Spanish or Mediterranean in style. These homes, plus the Tudor, French, Traditional and “Mid-Century Modern” (now a character style, too), were built in an era when custom craftsmanship made each home unique—and of high quality. Our character Los Feliz homes are classics of their types and eras. They remain prettier than those in other areas of Los Angeles—and pretty costs more to maintain and to purchase.

Remodel: A remodel takes an existing house and moves it in a direction different than where it is, or has been. An example would be the typical '50s ranch house that is made over in a very slick, trendy way by the use of newer materials and colors. Its floor plan might be altered by the removal of walls so that what had been a traditional kitchen/formal dining room/living room plan might be made into one “great room”—into almost a loft. This sort of re-do can cost less than a restoration because less care needs to be exercised to preserve original details.

Many remodels, when done skillfully, are quite successful and can command top prices. Still, some homes do not deserve to be remodeled. Why blow out walls heavy-handedly in a well-preserved Spanish house to affect a different style? When remodels turn dissonant—or go out of fashion, values go down. If you remodel, know what you are doing (or hire professionals who do), or you risk actually diminishing your property's value.

“Remuddle”: When remodels go terribly awry, we have a “remuddle”. Viz the classic Craftsman bungalow that is butchered by the installation of aluminum windows (realtors usually preface “aluminum windows” with “cheap”). The coup de grace for thousands of Los Angeles's bungalows was to stucco over their wooden clapboard or shingles. Thus, they became “stuccalows”. Other abominations exist, sometimes labeled “Contemporary”. Contemporary is the anti-style. Look for columns out front. They are prone to giantism, too: the dreaded “McMansion”! These homes command the fewest dollars per square foot—and deservedly so.

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