

A Historic-District House Gets a Detail-Oriented Update

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By: DEBORAH BALDWIN, This Old House magazine



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

A Plan to Revamp

Everyone's heard stories about renovations gone awry, but how often do you hear a homeowner describe a process that moved smoothly, start to finish? The way Paula Rau tells it, finding and refining her gem of a house in Staunton, Virginia, was a real pleasure—even if it did take five years of dreaming and 18 months of hard work.

"I have to credit my team," she says, referring to a series of skilled pros who live nearby and are united by a fondness for diamond-in-the-rough properties: architect Carter Green; general contractor John Workman; and cabinetmaker Paul Borzelleca, who has worked on and off for Paula for a dozen years and, as he puts it, knows her sensibilities.

Her Folk Victorian find, squeezed into a thicket of old houses in the historic Newtown district, came into Paula's life indirectly. A friend was shopping for a deal on an in-town fixer-upper, spotted the house, and made a phone call. Yes, the owner said, the house might be for sale.

But when the two women returned to take a closer look, they had second thoughts, despite the house's lovely wraparound porch and five-digit price tag. At some point, the house had been divided into two apartments; the foyer was split down the middle, with a wall biting into a once-graceful arched opening to create two narrow front entrances. A full bath was wedged in next to the kitchen in the first-floor apartment, and a kitchenette was squeezed in alongside the bath in the apartment upstairs.

the flat-screen TV from dominating the living room.

Shown: A new soapstone surround gives extra weight to the lone wood-burning fireplace and keeps



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Buying a Hard Sell

Sandwiching the main floors were a dank basement and an unfinished attic reachable via creaky pull-down stairs. The imprint of hard times could be read in every room. Along with peeling wallpaper, green paint, and one tenant who had been ensconced for 27 years, the house had knob-and-tube wiring, aged plumbing, and no insulation. Paula's friend bowed out.

In the back of her mind, however, Paula, an art history professor, was hoping to give up the high-maintenance Shenandoah Valley farm where she and her late husband had raised their kids. She wasn't sure this house was the one. "I'm not a Victorian person, really," she confesses. But with all the work that needed doing, it meant a chance to do it her way, with a nod to the home's history.

She took the leap—and kept her tenants for five years, time enough to imagine how the house might be turned back into a single-family dwelling. Then, with the help of Green and the rest of her dream team, she moved quickly to bring the house up to date, with more light and a kitchen big enough to hold prep space for friends who, like her, love to cook. Forgoing a formal dining room, she would find space in the kitchen for an eating nook as well.



In With the Old

Another goal was to find a special spot for an 8-foot-long painted cabinet that had been in her

Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

grandparents' Houston drugstore. Paula already had the raw material for the rest of the cabinets: beautifully grained walnut milled from a tree at her farm and air-dried in one of its barns. "Working with her is a total collaboration," says Borzelleca, who also took charge of designing a perfectly concealed pull-out baking station. "She has strong ideas about the layout, I come in to do drawings,

and then we go back and forth, sometimes for two or three months."

Shown: The painted pharmacy cabinet under a trio of kitchen windows is a family heirloom.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Maintaining the Home's Historical Value

For Workman, the first order of business was addressing the house's thin walls, drafty windows, and swollen heating bills. Which led to Paula's first encounter with prickly historic-district guidelines.

Settled in the early 18th century, Staunton has six historic districts; Newtown, the oldest residential area, is on the national and state registers of historic places. The town, by granting property-tax abatements, encourages homeowners to make improvements, but within the districts, any changes visible from a public street have to be historically appropriate. State officials offer tax credits to those who renovate historic homes, but qualifying is tough because "they look inside, where they seek to maintain the original character and features," explains Sharon Angle, the town's planning director.

As it turned out, the first thing Paula asked Workman to do was remove the plaster walls so that he could insulate before putting up drywall—ah, and there was the rub. During the 18-month renovation, "the one huge surprise was being turned down for a Virginia state tax credit because I'd knocked out the plaster," Paula says. "That was a setback financially."

With an eye on local historic-district guidelines, Borzelleca built a Victorian-style front door and sidelights, using reclaimed redwood and a warm oil finish, and Workman shopped for traditional half-round, galvanized-metal gutters and a classic red standing-seam steel roof.

But with state tax credits now moot, the team was free to think creatively inside and at the rear of the house.

Shown: The new door and sidelights, made with reclaimed redwood, get their amber glow from a clear oil finish.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Creating an Open Living Space

After removing the foyer's dividing wall, the downstairs bath and its closet, and the upstairs kitchenette, Green looked for ways to open up the first floor for better light and flow. "We concentrated our alterations in back," he says, "and expanded the kitchen a little bit to create better circulation between the kitchen and living room."



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Hidden Asset

Recessed panels under the front-hall staircase conceal a coat closet.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Vintage Victorian Detail

As Paula recalls, "All the doorways were typical of Victorian houses, with 34-inch openings. I wanted to open up the entrance area and enlarge the doorway into the front parlor." While they were at it, she and Green also decided to cut a dramatic 10-foot opening between the hall and living room.

Shown: New arched openings, based on one that was damaged during a previous redo, frame the hall that leads to the kitchen.

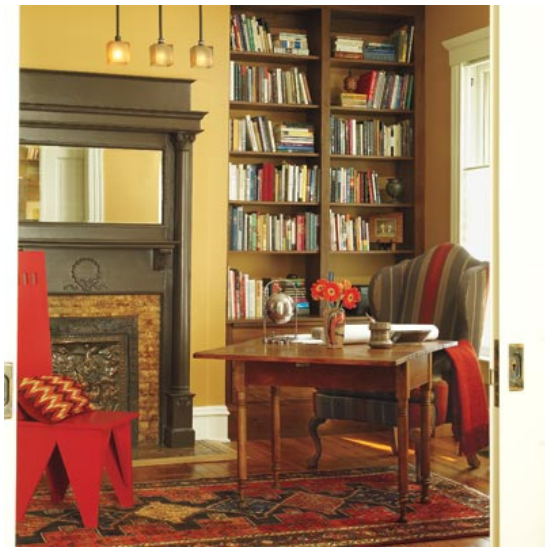


Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Paint and Polish

A back parlor became a home office with built-in bookcases. Walls painted a warm gold reinforce the original mottled-brown-tile fireplace surround and bronze fireplace front.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

A Good Kitchen, A Great Common Area

The team mapped out a new layout and finishes for the now-enlarged kitchen, with an inventive, crowd-friendly L-shaped island, a marble-tile backsplash, stainless-steel appliances, and Borzelleca's walnut-front cabinets and soapstone counters. Workman, who has his own mill shop, built an arched opening to the kitchen with period-style trim, echoing the arch he replicated in the front foyer. He also rebuilt the back wall, with windows framing a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains from the eating nook. They line up over that painted heirloom cabinet as if the whole setup had always been there.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Custom-Built Cabinets

A local cabinetmaker matched the grain on the walnut door fronts, and left the bark on one shelf as a rustic reminder of the farm the wood came from.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

A Hidden Drainboard

He made the counters from locally quarried soapstone, with grooves cut next to the sink as a drainboard.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Ready to Roll

Homeowner and frequent baker Paula Rau puts to use the pastry station on wheels, which slides back under the drawer to the far right of the range.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Design with Function in Mind

To make way for a powder room and small utility room, the team removed an exterior staircase and first-floor closet. Upstairs, they turned three bedrooms into two suites plus a laundry room and walk-in closet, and to top things off built a narrow staircase to the now tightly insulated, refurbished attic.

The only setback, beyond those lost tax credits? The fireplace in the living room. "Unfortunately, when we opened it up, it was caving in," Paula says, recalling with rue the need for a mason and a metal insert. "That was another \$10,000 I hadn't planned on."

Shown: The two-part master bath is lined in seagrass limestone tile, kept warm in winter by radiant floor heat. The wall-hung vanity is made of walnut and holds a vessel sink in a white-bronze finish paired with a coordinating wall-mount faucet.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Salvaged Style

Paula painted the house inside and out in soft shades of gray, green, pumpkin, and gold. Then she trimmed the front yard with a low stone wall. "The stones came from the foundation of a barn that used to be on our farm," she says. "It was a nice, sentimental thing to bring that history here." Just as nice, the town's historic-district watchdogs said the new wall would be just fine.

"I was lucky in so many ways," Paula says. "I had lots of ideas of what I wanted to do, and everyone was so great in helping me find ways to do them."

Shown: Doors salvaged from the house were partially fitted with reeded glass and installed as pocket units to funnel natural light into the master bedroom.



Photo: Deborah Whitlaw Llewellyn

Updated First Floor Plan

The 2,425-square-foot house's original layout was kept mostly intact. On the first floor, removing a bath and adding a bumpout allowed the kitchen to grow; the utility room and powder room were tucked into space formerly occupied by a closet and exterior stairs.



Photo: Deborah Whittlaw Llewellyn

Updated Second Floor Plan

Upstairs, a bath and kitchenette became two baths.



Photo: Deborah Whittlaw Llewellyn

Warmer Rooms, Lower Bills

When Paula Rau bought her century-old house, it was cold and drafty in winter, hot and stuffy in summer. Here's how she made her house more comfortable year-round, while also lowering her energy costs.

Created an Envelope

After gutting the interior, general contractor John Workman added a 2-inch layer of closed-cell spray-foam insulation between the studs, and less-expensive open-cell spray foam between attic rafters. The walls then got an additional layer of dense, wet-pack cellulose. Horizontal furring strips were nailed along the studs to create an air barrier between the studs and the drywall. Home-center storm windows provide another insulating air barrier. Workman cut them down to fit precisely inside the windows for a cleaner look.

Went for High-Tech HVAC

The new high-efficiency hybrid Carrier Infinity heating and cooling system saves energy by using electric heat pumps when conditions allow, and natural gas as a backup. Variable-speed air handlers in the basement and attic force conditioned air through ducts to registers in the floors and ceilings.

Used Low-Tech Air Movers

Four ceiling fans help control air-conditioning costs during Virginia's hot months by creating a

breeze and circulating cooled air.

Brought in Natural Light

Solar tubes run from the roof to the master bath and the butler's pantry, reducing the need for (and cost of) artificial light.

Shown: More salvaged doors conceal a stacked washer and dryer.

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