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# This old house is a chore

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**How hard could it be to replace a 90-year-old toilet? It seemed like something a plumber could handle, maybe even the one standing in my bathroom in 2013, telling me a crack in my tank meant that mine was toast.**

**This is when I learned Rule No. 1 for owners of old houses: Never utter the phrase “just swap it out.”**

I will not belabor the details of early 20th-century plumbing, but trust me when I say that if I had simply replaced my commode, a new model would have been perched roughly half a foot from the wall. To get to the shower, I would have had to climb over the new fixture.

The solution? Rip up the original tile floor and move the plumbing. Other problems would have followed: The mint-colored wall tiles would have likely been damaged and needed replacement, too. I might have had to open the kitchen ceiling to access the pipes above. In other words, to replace the toilet, I would have had to gut my vintage 1924 bathroom to the tune of \$25,000.

And this, my friends, is how I found myself on a website called This Old Toilet, which sells, as you might have gathered, old toilets. Lids and seats are its specialty, but I scored a tank in my size and model, although not in the same off-whitish hue. A two-toned look was not my first choice for bathroom décor, but one day I'll get around to reglazing the bowl and pedestal sink, a task I've been told is doable.

Owning an old home when you don't really know what you're doing means you might bond with fellow homeowners on Facebook groups like Montclair

Rehabers: Group Therapy for Old Houses & Clueless Owners. (This really is a group, and I really am a member.)

Yes, some people grow up with a sledgehammer in hand, and perhaps those are the ones posting photo brags of their impeccably restored Tudors on more established Facebook groups like Our Old House. But for those of us who were more likely to call the super whenever the faucet in our apartment dripped, homeownership can come as a shock.

Buy a newer house and, for the most part, replacement parts are available at your local Home Depot. Not so with an old home that still has its original charm. Plumbing ages, for example, and can crumble when you try to replace a fixture. Champions of older homes will tell you that the structures were built with high-quality materials meant to last, and that is certainly true. But when something does reach the end of its life — like a decades-old crystal doorknob that falls off in your hand — you'll spend days surfing eBay looking for a replacement, because nothing like it exists on Wayfair.

“We're just a bunch of stupid city dwellers thinking: ‘Oh, no big deal! I'm going to buy a 150-year-old house and fix it,’” said Stella Gilgur-Cook, who started the Montclair Rehabers group in December after she discovered that repairing the grand staircase of her “Victorian-ish” four-bedroom in Montclair, New Jersey, was actually a big deal.

Gilgur-Cook, 41, a health care administrator, and her husband, Josh Cook, 41, who works in video and film production, moved with their two children from a rental in Forest Hills, Queens, last August. The couple did not set out to buy a fixer-upper but ended up with a house that needed some work. (Don't they all?)

As their first project, they wanted to remove carpeting from the staircase and sand off layers of old paint. But carpet has a way of hiding secrets, and removing theirs revealed serious damage to the top steps. “You could put your hand between where the step ended and the next riser started,” Gilgur-Cook said. “We freaked out.”

That's when they decided to call a professional, and promptly learned Rule No. 2 of homeownership: Good luck finding one. (Especially one who knows how to restore, not just replace, parts in an old house.)

"A good man is hard to find," said Mary Kate Spach, a member of the board of directors of Pasadena Heritage, a preservationist group in Pasadena, California. "A good contractor is even harder to find."

Gilgur-Cook interviewed "a whole parade of people." Some said they could do the work but then never came back. Others insisted the whole structure had to be ripped out and replaced. She hired one contractor, but the crew quit after sanding the first step. Finally, she found a company that specialized in old staircases and, for \$8,000, fixed hers.

Old houses woo you with character. Step into a center-hall colonial, and you swoon over crown molding and carved woodwork. But it is the antique kitchen or bathroom that is the real conversation piece. (You think my toilet is funky; I haven't even told you about my shimmery bathroom wallpaper, a rather bold update made by the previous owners. As I have no idea what lurks behind that sturdy paper, I have resisted removing it and bringing the bathroom back to its original state. Besides, the bling has kind of grown on me.)

"Houses with authentic parlors are a dime a dozen," said Ken Roginski, who writes Old House Guy, a blog that laments the prevalence of vinyl siding and other ill-advised updates. "But if you could have an authentic kitchen or bathroom, it's a museum piece."

Roginski also works as a consultant to homeowners, chastising the ones who have succumbed to the lure of newness and replaced their rattling wood windows with silently sliding, but charmless, double-paned ones, and advising others on how to avoid such a fate.

Wondering what to do about your shabby shutters? Read the Old House Guy's exhaustive treatise on the subject, prefaced with an ominous warning: "What one thinks is a simple mistake will destroy a home's curb appeal. Don't let this happen to you!"

When you're done, you'll either roll up your sleeves and get to work, or need a Xanax.

Which brings us to Rule No. 3: Do-it-yourself is harder than it looks.

Sure, Nicole Curtis can scale a ladder and bring an ornate gable roof back to its original glory in 30 minutes flat on the DIY Network show "Rehab Addict," but try that project with your better half on a Saturday afternoon, and you may discover that you're lacking in this particular life skill. Or, as Gilgur-Cook put it, "You suddenly realize all the adult things you don't know how to do."

Call in the pros, and chances are they will tell you to toss, not fix, your old stuff. "There's this phenomenon in the recent world where people don't try to fix it," said Gary Tjader, owner of This Old Toilet, which is based in Los Altos, California.

Of course, you could always learn how to be handy. Kelly Hobby-Bishop had never done home improvement until 2010, when she moved in with her soon-to-be husband, Sean Bishop, who owned a 1911 Craftsman-style house in Pasadena with original built-in cabinetry and a very long to-do list of repairs. "Let's say this: We were the ugliest house on the block," Hobby-Bishop, 36, a storyboard artist, said of the five-bedroom bungalow.

But she and Bishop, 46, also a storyboard artist, set out to restore the house to its once-respectable state on a \$100,000 budget. Rather than hire a general contractor, Hobby-Bishop oversaw the work and relied on a skilled handyman, Manuel Chavez, for many tasks. "He's my renovation guru," she said.

Hobby-Bishop devotes hours to tasks like sourcing old-growth wood to match the existing wood, or arguing with window installers over how to replace a 100-year-old pane of broken glass so it has the same seasoned look as the other panes. "You have to fight for the character," she said.

If your house is old enough — built, say, before the American Revolution — character is unavoidable. "Nothing is square, nothing is even, no window is

the same size,” said Lindsay DiGiacomo, 35, whose 1756 four-bedroom home in Mendham Township, New Jersey, still has its original windows. Forget sash pulleys; hers are held open with wooden pegs.

The house, which DiGiacomo owns with her husband, Brian DiGiacomo, 43, a lawyer, has three fireplaces, one with a built-in bread oven and a caldron to boil water. “It’s so ‘Little House on the Prairie,’” she said. “If you go into my attic, the beams that hold up the ceiling are a legitimate tree with bark still on it.”

The couple’s two young sons like to drop bits of “treasure” into the cracks between the wide, unfinished plank floors. With a flashlight, the DiGiacomos can spot other artifacts beneath the floorboards, perhaps deposited by other children decades ago.

Lindsay DiGiacomo has uncovered her own treasures, including a tackle box stored in the attic that held letters, some written in the late 18th century by two brothers named, oddly enough, Will and Bill; a 19th-century receipt for a horse carriage; an election ballot from 1880; and guidelines for how to operate a distillery, once part of the now 3-acre property.

Modern conveniences like recessed lighting or an open floor plan are not options in a house this old. “Everything that you do, you have to think about — and really, really think about it,” Lindsay DiGiacomo said. “Will this work for this space? What’s behind this wall?”

When the 60-year-old wood-shake roof needed to be replaced, she had to hunt down a supplier in Canada who could make the shingles and then try to find someone who knew how to handle such a project. “I’m kind of a research-aholic,” she said.

Spend enough time trying to figure out what is behind a wall, and eventually you get good at it, even if you didn’t think you ever would. Or at least, that is what I have been told.

In 2009, Jennifer Wroblewski, an artist, moved from Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, with her husband, Dave Diomed, 47, a television director, to a six-bedroom Victorian house in Montclair. Once a boardinghouse, the 1903 home needed so much work that the inspector told them to walk away.

“We had no idea what we were getting into,” said Wroblewski, 44. The roof, foundation and fireplace all needed repairs. “We thought the work would be a chore but that it would be worth it in the long run,” she added.

Instead, Wroblewski discovered that she actually liked the process. The turning point came, she said, when the couple removed salmon-covered asbestos shingles from the exterior, revealing gorgeous Victorian cedar shingles beneath. “It looked like a dollhouse,” Wroblewski said. “It was a magnificent thing.”

After that, they were hooked. “When you realize that with the right people you can bring a house back to life and back to its stately place in the town, it feels like a good use of my energy,” she said. It also helps that she found a good contractor.

In 2016, the couple moved with their two children to a six-bedroom, 6,000-square-foot house built in 1894 on Upper Mountain Avenue, a grand road of stately homes in Montclair. The house, Wroblewski said, “is untouched by the passage of time.”

Time did, however, leave its mark on the boiler and air-conditioning system — neither worked when the family moved into the \$1.289 million home. A structural beam also needed immediate attention. But where an unseasoned homeowner might be visited by a panic attack, Wroblewski sees a project. “I never thought I was this person,” she said.

As for me, I’m still not convinced I’m that person.

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