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POPULAR WINDOW REPLACEMENT MYTHS*

The Myth: “Vinyl is Final”

“Maintenance free” is a popular term used by vinyl window manufacturers; but with a product that is susceptible to seasonal fluctuations, weathering, and constant operation, how can anyone truly guarantee this claim? Vinyl windows are made with stock parts that quickly become outmoded, making them difficult, if not impossible, to repair if a spring or other suspension component breaks (the same thing holds true for wood replacement window parts). Vinyl is also prone to warping and fading in high temperatures. If your child hits a baseball in the window and the glass breaks, most likely you will have to replace the whole window. If a piece of glass breaks in a historic window, all you have to do is fix the broken lights. You can always find historic glass pieces at salvage stores for a very reasonable price. Want to repair a historic window? Tools, parts, and materials can be found at your local hardware store!

The Myth: Old Wood Windows are Drafty = Astronomical Heating Bills

Replacement window manufacturers will often compare their product to a historic wood window that has not been maintained or restored – a window that fits this description will undoubtedly be drafty and inefficient. In most cases, however, a fully-restored, tight-fitting, properly functioning window, weather-stripped wood window combined with a quality storm window (exterior, interior, or both) will have the same insulating properties as a double-glazed replacement window. Other steps can be taken to reduce heating bills, such as insulating attics and floors; the U.S. Department of Energy notes that 31% of infiltration is at floors, walls, and ceilings, and only 10% to 20% at windows.

The Myth: Replacement Windows Look Just Like Historic Wood Windows

A property owner or replacement window salesman will often make this claim that snap-in grids or simulated divided lights in the replacement model match the existing muntin configuration of the original wood windows. First of all, snap-in grids or simulated divided lights have a much different profile than traditional putty profile on old wood windows, which is difficult to replicate. Secondly, materials such as vinyl or synthetic cladding are shiny and glossy and present a much different look than traditional wood. Third, installation details for replacement windows typically involve additional framing that reduces the rough opening of the window. Lastly, replacement window glass is significantly different than the wavy look of historic glass.

The Myth: Replacement Windows are the “Greener” Option

With all the talk of global warming and LEED, replacement window manufacturers often tout the energy savings associated with their product and that a replacement window is a green choice.

While this claim may correspond to newly constructed, LEED-certified buildings, the argument that a replacement window is “greener” than a restored or maintained wood window is highly debatable. As discussed previously, a properly restored or maintained wood window combined with quality storm windows will address energy concerns. A product with a “green” label must also be sustainable. Historic wood windows, constructed of old growth wood and superior craftsmanship, will last up to 5 times longer than replacement models, namely because the wood is durable and they are easily repaired. The same can’t be said for vinyl or new growth wood window replacements with plastic parts. Moreover, the insulating glass found in double-glazed replacement windows will eventually fail and the whole window will have to be replaced.

The Myth: Old Windows are Highly Susceptible to Rot

Wood windows will rot if they are not maintained. Any natural material that is exposed to weathering and sunlight will be impacted. However, proper maintenance will ensure a long-lasting window, whether it be priming and painting or installing a quality storm window. Oftentimes, a wood window may appear to have rot, but is actually just badly weathered and needs some T.L.C. Remember, historic wood windows have a high quality of craftsmanship and were constructed from old growth lumber, which is very dense making it naturally rot resistant; they were built to last.

The Myth: “It’s pointless to restore an old wood window when it will just be covered up with a modern storm window”

While it’s true that modern storms can conceal the character of historic window sash, a few facts need to be addressed. First, storm windows have been around for over 100 years, originally made of wood, of course. Although some modern (and cheap and flimsy) storms might be an eyesore, there are quality models on the market that are more appropriate for historic buildings. Second, a metal storm window is a small price to pay for preserving original materials and character, and storm windows can be painted. Third, the installation of a storm window is reversible, while the removal of a historic wood window is not. Furthermore, as a bonus, a properly installed, quality storm combined with a restored wood window will be just as energy efficient as a double-glazed replacement window!

The Myth: “It is more expensive to restore an old wood window than to replace it”

The cost of restoring a historic wood window obviously varies due to many factors, and there is no guarantee that restoring a window will be cheaper than replacing it. Studies have shown, however, that the payback period for new replacement windows can take decades. In that span of time, it is likely that these windows will have to be replaced again, since most replacement windows only have a lifespan of 20 years. Historic wood windows that have lasted 100 years will last another 100 years if properly restored and maintained. Therefore, the payback period of a restored wood window equates to a much better bargain.

The Myth: “Old wood windows have lead paint and should be discarded”

While any house built before 1978 might contain lead paint, it is possible to remove lead paint from historic sash without posing serious health hazards. Local municipalities often have

guidelines for safe and effective de-leading, including windows, but it needs to be done by a professional. An experienced contractor or window restoration specialist should be able to identify unstable lead paint (the most hazardous condition) and treat it appropriately. Oftentimes, stable lead paint can be encapsulated with lead-free paint to comply with state laws. With proper precautions and safety measures, historic wood windows with lead paint can be remedied. For more information on lead paint hazards in historic buildings, refer to *Preservation Brief 37: Appropriate Methods of Reducing Lead-Paint Hazards in Historic Housing* from the National Park Service: <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/TPS/briefs/brief37.htm>

*These window myths were adapted from the *National Alliance of Preservation Commissions*
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