

HIRING SOMEONE TO REMODEL AN OLD HOME

When you need to make some repairs and improvements to an old home, there are ways of finding designers and contractors who is sensitive to the historical aspects of the style.

Finding people who are familiar with old houses and will do repairs that are historically sensitive can be difficult. You'd think it would be easy to compile a list of recommended crafts people who are knowledgeable in old-house repair. There are several reasons why this is not so easy to do. First, many of the really good people are busy. So busy that they don't need to advertise. They get more jobs by word-of-mouth than they're able to handle. They flatly ask not to give their names out. Second, one person's ideal handyman is another's incompetent fool. Third, there are a limited number of designers and crafts people who are truly knowledgeable about the details of old houses, and who will take the time to do careful repair and restoration. This may be because there just aren't enough homeowners demanding such work.

Whatever the reason, the market is instead flooded with designers and building companies offering one-size-fits-all, quick-fix "solutions". Applied to old houses, these cruel methods make an older-style home look like it was on the receiving end of a botched cosmetic surgery job. Now that I've thoroughly dashed your hopes, I actually do have a few suggestions.

Educate yourself! Even if you aren't able or don't have the time to tackle a project on your own, find out how it should be done—in a way that is historically authentic and therefore aesthetically pleasing. There are plenty of old-house restoration books and magazines available, and the Internet will lead you to even more information. Collect articles. Take notes. Ask around. Go on house tours. Take photographs. Now you'll be able to explain precisely what you want and have a good idea how it should be accomplished.

Next, find a designer or contractor who is reputed to be competent and fair, regardless of whether he or she specialises in old houses. Explain that you want your project done it a way that retains or replaces the original elements of your home. Listen to suggestions or recommendations, and if you've done your homework, you can be somewhat flexible while staying true to your vision and to the integrity of your house. If the prospective worker is reluctant to do it your way or insists that there's a new, plastic version of that old house that will work just as well, say "thanks for your time" and keep searching. If this happens often enough, service people will begin to get the message that there's a market for honest restoration.

One way to hire is to set a budget for your project. Then find a designer and contractor with a solid reputation, and sit down to discuss the project. Be up-front about what you want to spend. A good contractor will work with you to lay out the project so that there will be few surprises along the way. You'll eventually find someone who'll do the job right. They're out there, in all price ranges. They just take some time and patience to find.

To summarise, competent designers and builders, those who are historically sensitive and otherwise, are often difficult to find. Don't overlook the benefits of hiring an architect for your project who specialises in historic houses and will work with you to update your home, while keeping its scale and style intact. Money spent on help from a building design professional can be money well spent.

When it comes to construction, start by finding a contractor who has a good reputation for being professional and reliable. See if he or she is willing to listen and do what you want, namely, work that restores or replicates historic aspects of your house. If the contractor seems more interested in doing what he or she wants, keep looking. Modern elements added to a historic house will be outdated the day they're finished. To leave your house better than you found it (something all homeowners should strive to do), improvements should be done in keeping with the original style and proportion of the structure.