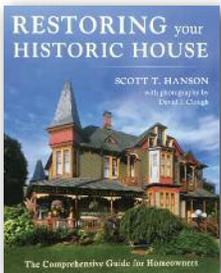


Review of *Restoring Your Historic House, The Comprehensive Guide for Homeowners* from the Spring 2020 Issue of *Nineteenth Century* magazine.



*Restoring Your Historic House:
The Comprehensive Guide for Homeowners*

Scott T. Hanson. Photography by David J. Clough.

Tilbury House Publishers, 2019.

There have been many good books over the years about restoring old houses but they become outdated; construction and preservation technology are ever-evolving. New approaches to old houses are essential and Scott Hanson's book, *Restoring Your Historic House*, is an essential volume. Consider one innovation—the Tesla Solar Energy Shingles for roofing, introduced in 2017 but rolling out very slowly. Of these shingles he says: “As with any new technology, time alone will tell if it lives up to its potential,” adding, “I very much hope it does.”

It is that optimistic, open and very personal tone which makes this large compendium an accessible trove of information. Hanson has learned much from his experience as an architectural historian, carpenter, designer, municipal historic-district regulator and active historic preservation consultant. His own home, a fifteen-plus year restoration project, is among the many informative case-studies that pepper the book. For example, his experience enriches his discussion of “cold roofs” versus “hot roofs.” He examines both sides of the debate around a technology regarding the best replacement roofing for preventing ice dams, that scourge of Northern New England. He wraps up the detailed and informative section with, “I live in an area that's prone to ice dams, but my historic house has had none since I

installed a cold roof.”

Hanson's primary goal is “identifying character-defining features” of any historic house and preserving those features. This is the backbone of historic preservation and the author centers many of his discussions around this objective. Most helpfully, the encyclopedia-sized book is logically organized into the following parts: Project Planning; Under the Surface (demolition and structure); Systems (heating, ventilating, cooling, plumbing and electrical); Exterior Envelope; Interior Finishes; and Tools and Supplies. Inevitably, the book touches on some subjects that are more thoroughly addressed elsewhere such as house-style identification or how to determine the age of certain house elements. But the topics he does address encompass all those necessary to preserve the best features of an old house while making it suitable for contemporary living.

Restoring Your Historic House will be particularly useful for the first-timer considering acquiring an historic home in need of repair, rehabilitation or restoration. It has well-written chapters on topics such as how to decide to use an architect versus doing all the drawing and planning oneself. Hanson even goes into detail about how one may measure and draw-up their structure themselves. As an architect who has measured old houses

many times, and as the owner of a historic house, I found the step-by-step instructions clear and correct. Likewise, he delves into the question of whether to engage a general contractor or do all the work oneself. This need not be an either/or choice; Hanson shows that trades and services can be hired as needed, augmenting the homeowner's skill-set and time availability. I have never encountered these options so well laid out anywhere else.

Hanson includes a chapter on inserting contemporary kitchens into historic homes. While this is a typical subject for such a book, after discussing the history of the American domestic kitchen, this author drills down into making the critical choice between modular and custom cabinetry. What is less typical is his segue into why bankers may insist on a functional kitchen before granting a homeowner a mortgage for their historic house.

Another chapter with particular insight is directed at the first-time renovator/homeowner: whether or not to live in a construction site. The author encourages the reader to take the long view—the very, very long view. One of his case studies tracks a project that lasts forty years and many other case studies are multi-year works like his own. Forewarned is forearmed, and Hanson's reality checks are avuncular in the best sense.

The book is also rich in resources for the seasoned professional. I found his detailed analysis of a deep-energy retrofit of a Victorian cottage illuminating. Well-illustrated, with original diagrams, this chapter provides

answers to questions that architects' and contractors' clients often ask—how tightly sealed should my old house be and by what means can that be accomplished? And we might all have occasion to consult the excellent list of historic preservation resources in the last chapter of *Restoring Your Historic House*.

Clearly an experienced hand at writing grants and applications for work on historic homes, Hanson provides excellent advice on navigating one's own municipal regulatory system. With thousands of municipalities in the United States, each with its own rules, this advice is general by necessity. But he provides insights into how to cope with belligerent or stubborn authorities (every town has at least one) standing in the way of approvals. Writing from lengthy first-hand experience, his remarkable advice is thoughtful and sympathetic and might well mitigate an otherwise frustrating encounter.

Which could be said of this whole book. Restoring an old house that you own can lead to hair-loss, divorce, homelessness, despondency and heavy drinking. Reading this book at the outset of a project might well allow the homeowner to escape such dire consequences.

Reviewed by Warren Ashworth

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