Fixing Up Old Houses

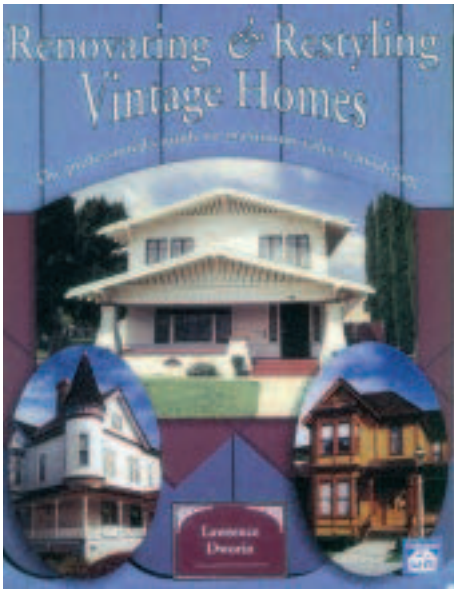
by Ted Cushman

Michigan remodeler Lawrence Dworin occupies a niche in the industry: Working mostly alone, he buys and remodels homes for resale. His 1994 Craftsman book, *Profits in Buying and Renovating Homes*, dealt with the ins and outs of making money in spec remodeling. His new book, *Renovating and Restyling Vintage Homes*, zeros in on a subset of existing homes: houses built in the first few decades of this century, mostly in the Victorian or Craftsman styles, which he says offer special technical challenges — and unique opportunities for profit.

The word "vintage" in the title, with its connotation of wine and cheese parties, is a bit misleading. This book is not aimed at aficionados of historic reproduction and restoration. The idea here is not to preserve historic landmarks but to make money by fixing up old dumps.

Often, says Dworin, a rundown Victorian house can be purchased for a small fraction of the average price of neighboring houses. And while some parts of the house — kitchens and baths, for instance — may need major work to reach today's standards, other items in the house, such as period woodwork and masonry detailing, may be irreplaceable. Restoring those items to good condition can pay off handsomely, he argues.

Dworin has written this book for the benefit of custom remodelers as well as the spec variety. But his own preference for spec work leads to some special areas of emphasis. Because he's working for himself, not for a client, Dworin tends to look for the kinds of improvements that add the most value for the least expense. His chapter on porch renovation is a good example of this approach: Where many remodelers would spend thousands of dollars demolishing and replacing a porch, Dworin prefers to save the existing structure. The patching, jacking, shoring, and painting he recommends often cost just a few hundred dollars or less; and he contends that the beauty and grace of the restored porch may add a market value far exceeding that of a "modern" porch.



Renovating & Restyling Vintage Homes, by Lawrence Dworin (Craftsman Book Company, 1996; 800/829-8123). Paperback, 8½x11, $33.50.

A thorough inspection before taking on the job is one of Dworin's keys to success. Older houses come with a host of defects — some original, some added over the years by occupants and remod-

elers. Each problem identified ahead of time lowers the price a buyer should offer for the property, and increases the scope of the restoration work — and problems that aren't noticed until after the project begins have the potential to chew up the job's profit. So Dworin devotes several chapters to preinspection of the home's structure, finishes, and plumbing and electrical systems. An inspection checklist at the end of the book runs to seven pages of small print.

This comprehensive 400-page book covers a range of structural, finish, and mechanical issues. Understandably, Dworin can't treat any aspect of his complicated topic in full depth — and in any case, learning his trade requires a double dose of experience. But the book does provide a wealth of detail, along with a coherent perspective that many remodelers will find instructive.

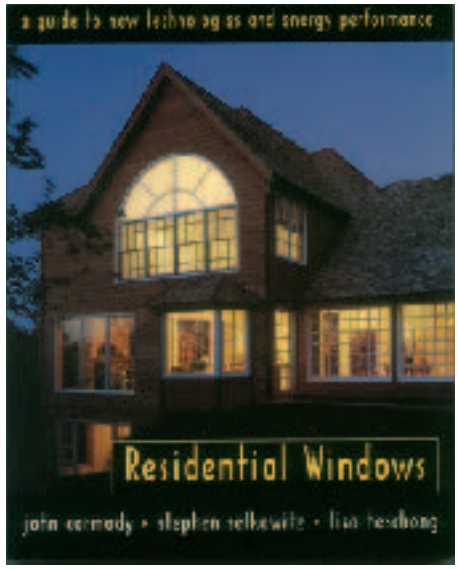
Windows in a New Light

Windows have changed a lot in the past 15 years. Along with the rapid development of new styles and shapes has come an improvement in energy performance so revolutionary that builders should look at windows "in a completely new way," argue the authors of *Residential Windows*.

Until recently, the "up side" of windows — the views, light, and ventilation they provide — had to be weighed against the "downside" — the dollars they added to annual heating and cooling costs. The energy penalty windows carried with them has been reflected in restrictive code requirements: Builders are still complaining about energy code limits on window area that they say pose a particular handicap to designers of room additions.

But the most advanced of today's windows reduce annual heating bills even when placed on the north side of a house, and can cut cooling needs when oriented to the east, west, or south. As a result, say this book's authors, designers and builders can now have more fun with glass than ever before.

Written by a university architect, a government energy researcher, and a partner in an architectural research firm, *Residential Windows* is a fairly technical treatment of window characteristics and their design implications. But the authors have worked hard to keep the information practical, and have carefully avoided using the "F word" ("fenestration"). By the time you finish the chapters on glazing materials and window assemblies, you'll fully understand how modern windows are put together and what makes them work. And graphs that compare the energy performance of various window types under different design conditions will help you appreciate just how versatile those new "superwindows" are.



Residential Windows, by John Carmody, Stephen Selkowitz, and Lisa Heschong (W.W. Norton & Company, 1996). Paperback, 7¼x9¼, $22.00.