



# Building on Beauty That's Already There

By Anthony Ekelberry

A bulldozer on a flatbed truck pulls up to the one-story Spanish-style stucco house in West Los Angeles. The neighbors, who gather across the street, sigh and lament: "Another house torn down to make way for a McMansion!"

Throughout the day, they see a demolition team tear down parts of the house. But wait! When the neighbors return in the evening to walk their dogs, they see that the pretty living room wing of the house is still standing, along with the porte cochere and most of the façade of the house. What



**Manning:** The homeowners wanted to preserve the Spanish flavor of their home.

remains of the old house are the most attractive parts: the street elevation and the tile roof; what has been removed is the original back of the house, which was a group of small rooms under a flat roof.



**Lorenzo:** In this home, a 1940s colonial look has been replaced with a south-of-France Mediterranean style by using elements that reflect that new style.

Over the coming weeks, the frame of the new look for the old house begins to emerge and neighbors anxiously await



an invitation so they can peek inside. New elements include a curved stair tower similar to what was built in the 1920s, and new spacious, well-proportioned rooms on two stories. The new spaces include a master suite, lots more



closets and an open-plan family room. The traditional living room and dining room remain with their old-fashioned coved ceilings and arched windows.

This scenario is repeated several times a year for my customers in various parts of Los Angeles, where real estate is prime and in short demand. The little one-story, two- or three-bedroom houses with one bath are giving way to four-bedroom, three-bath, two-story houses that allow present-day families to grow with all the trappings of the 21st century, but in a home that includes a nod to the past and a respect for the work of earlier craftsmen.

It reminds me of the neighborhood where I grew up in France — large

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**Ashland:** This home had to be supported on temporary steel beams so that construction could go on below and beside the house.





homes sometimes stretched back several centuries, and in one case, a wall of the old house had been built during the Roman occupation nearly 2,000 years ago. Although we do not have a need to recycle heavy building stone blocks like they used back then, reusing appropriate artistic elements from the past is a passion of mine for places where it makes sense. Remodeling old neighborhood homes is one place it definitely makes sense.

**Also, the choices and artistic decisions that are made to preserve the character of an old home do not substantially add to the cost of the remodeling and, at the same time, add perceived value to the home.**

Each project, when you're a remodeler, presents its own challenges and possible solutions. To increase the size of the house, our firm might add a second story, enlarge the one-story home with an addition to the rear, or add on a floor level *under* the house when the land slopes. And on occasion, when there is not enough of the old structure to save, we tear down the house and start with an empty lot.

The more customary project, however, is an addition of a second story over an existing dwelling. The foundations are reinforced for the additional load, the kitchen and baths are gutted, the house is rewired, new HVAC is installed, and most windows are replaced. The end result is a virtually new home with modern amenities, but one that retains the character of the earlier structure.

If the house has some elements that define a style, such as Spanish or Mediterranean, the new parts are designed to fit with the original theme (see the Manning house). If the original look is weak or dated, the process of adding a second floor alters enough of the old exterior finishes that a whole new style can be given to the house (see the Lorenzo home).

In other cases, the remodeling is done to expand the home while maintaining the original insides (see the Ashland home). For the Ashland home, for example, the owner's wish was to add a master suite and relocate the garage from the backyard to make room for a pool, all while preserving the interesting original interior finishes. My solution was to add a new floor level for parking *under* the existing house and add a master suite *over* a portion of the house.

We accomplished adding under the house by hiring a house-moving company to support the building on large temporary steel beams, building new foundation walls underneath and taking out the temporary beams once the foundation work was complete.

## WHY REMODELING IS POPULAR

In cases where substantial parts of the existing square footage can be reused, aggressive remodeling presents cost savings over tearing down an existing home. Remodeling is also a valuable strategy on narrow lots where zoning restrictions will allow existing houses to remain close to the side yard by being "grandfathered in," but would require a different placement for new construction. In many cases, a growing family can be accommodated through an expansion but without the complete destruction of earlier structures.

Also, the choices and artistic decisions that are made to preserve the character of an old home do not substantially add to the cost of the remodeling and, at the same time, add perceived value to the home.

A lot of my work as an architect is in neighborhoods of Los Angeles developed in the 1920s through the 1940s with house sizes that were adequate for families of that era but no longer fit the requirements of modern life or the expectations of space that today's home buyers demand. Adding a second story provides the opportunity for a family to expand without having to move out of the neighborhood or incur the expense of an entirely new house.

*Anthony Eckelberry is a Los Angeles architect who specializes in new and remodeled high-end homes. His residential design work can be seen on the website <http://www.eckelberry.biz>. ■*