

In Historic Homes and Buildings Does Window Replacement = Defacement?

When it comes to replacing original windows in historic buildings, the short answer is: Yes, often it does. And it could cost you more money, to boot.

Of all the preservation concerns right now, window replacement is the one the HPLO is most often called upon to address. Recent government incentives and aggressive marketing by window manufacturers have fueled a growing zeal for replacement based on an assumption that old windows are “bad” energy wasters, and that the only “green” window is a new window.

This is simply not true. There have been many studies published that debunk these misconceptions, showing that alternate approaches achieve nearly the same efficiency. Here is a net-down of some of the most important points to know:

1. **Repair** your original windows (weather stripping, caulking, re-glazing) to block air leaks, the primary cause of cold infiltration.
2. **Add storm windows.** Period-appropriate storms are readily available and there are even interior options. They also qualify for 2010 Federal tax credits.
3. **Use low emittance (low-e) and/or laminated glass** to boost efficiency in storm windows and original sashes.
4. **Insulate roof, walls and floors first.** According to the Dept of Energy, windows account for only 10-15% of energy loss.
5. **Think your old windows are too far gone?** They’re probably not. Areas of decay or layers of old paint can often be addressed with stripping, wood epoxy, and elbow grease.
6. **Most new windows are highly energy-consumptive to produce**, stamped out of aluminum, vinyl, and other manmade materials. They also have a **far shorter lifespan** (note the short warranty period

on most new windows—and how little is actually covered.)

7. **Reduce landfill waste.** Most old windows were hand crafted, made of old growth timber, and have plenty of life left in them.

8. **Replacement costs more**— up to 3 times more than repair + storm windows (\$500 - \$1000 vs. \$50 - \$1000 on average).

9. **It could take up to 40 years to recoup the cost** of installing new windows. Avg. energy bill savings = \$50/month X 6 months/year = \$300/yr. Avg. cost of high-quality new windows = \$12,000 (24 windows X \$500 each)

There are numerous companies that specialize in historic window repair. A partial list can be found on the State Historic Preservation Office website.

Of course, there are times when an old window really is too damaged to be repaired. In that case, the goal is to replace it with a window that replicates the original design and materials.

As the saying goes, windows are the eyes of a building, and particularly in historic buildings, window placement, shape, configuration, and profile are absolutely integral to its architectural integrity.

To read more: Embracing Energy Efficiency, Old House Journal, Sept/Oct 2007; Outlook on Windows: New Threats, New Strategies, Forum News, Jan. 2010; The Real Cost of Removing Historic Windows, APT Bulletin 36:4 2005; Historic Wood Windows Tip Sheet, by the National Trust for Historic Preservation at preservationnation.org or visit the HPLO website historicpreservationleague.org

