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What do you dare change when updating a home by an iconic architect?



Vintage appliances in this Marina del Rey home didn't work, but the homeowner couldn't part with them. (Joshua Targownik)

R. Daniel Foster

Renovating a classic home — when the notable architect is deceased — was not a barrier for a buyer of a John Lautner residence. He simply conjured the spirit of Lautner and his otherworldly opinions via a series of seances.

“That’s not as silly as it sounds,” said Barry Sloane of Sotheby’s International, who represented the buyer. “It’s not unusual for people who purchase classic architecture to feel a heavy responsibility when updating their homes.”

Renovation-minded homeowners sans Ouija boards, however, can walk a precarious tightrope: how to retain the creator’s original spirit while updating with modern conveniences? Replacing midcentury Formica countertops with trendy quartz can mar a name architect home; keeping a 1950s toilet may turn a residence into a house museum.

“Why is it important to retain Formica?” asked Dion Neutra, seated in his 1950 Silver Lake home designed by his father, Richard Neutra. “If for no other reason that these homes become like art pieces. Would you change the color scheme of a Picasso?”

Recently, the younger Neutra, 90, gave a tour of the 1,620-square-foot home he has occupied for 50 years, indicating design changes made by father and son — a case study in what to keep, toss out, or modify in such homes.

A lower pantry wall was replaced with glass, extending the horizontal line of the home’s wall-window frontage. Wall mirrors were added. Neutra, who is himself an architect, ripped out ceiling-tracked drapery installed by his father to delineate kitchen and living room spaces. A cabinet was deepened to accommodate a dishwasher.

Some details have remained untouched.

“My wife gives me hell because I’ve kept the original 1950s Case toilet that doesn’t flush right,” said Neutra, adjusting a modernist bolo tie. “Listen,’ I tell her. ‘This is the toilet that Richard Neutra sat on — I’m not getting rid of it.’”

Bathrooms and kitchens, in fact, are among the hardest to update while preserving a classic look. Neutra and other period architects treated the smallish rooms as utilitarian postscripts, often consigning them to assistants. Modern design demands the opposite: spacious kitchens and bathrooms reign.

But that presents challenges for homeowners who want to modernize homes designed for an earlier era.

“No one wants to be the philistine who tears out a Neutra kitchen,” Sloane said.



A Marina del Rey homeowner loved the look of this midcentury-modern so much that for years he lived with broken kitchen appliances that he couldn't get parts for. (Joshua Targownik)

Some homeowners expand the rooms by knocking out utility spaces; others keep the spaces pristine, as found in Glendale's 1926 Baird house designed by Paul Revere Williams.

"If a bathroom can have a spirit, this one does," said Williams' archivist Deborah Brackstone. Two alcoves harboring a narrow shower and a bathtub were kept, along with original wall tile — a ready-made set for a 1930s Cary Grant screwball comedy.

Design decisions may bow to demands of modern livability — or not. Several of Sloane's clients insist on retaining 15-watt bulbs in their 1920s houses even if the dim ambience creates a few stumbles.

Realtor Tami Pardee had a client who loved the vintage midcentury-modern kitchen appliances in his Marina del Rey home so much that he refused to part with them, even though they didn't work. Instead, he endured four years without being able to use the striking pink, built-in oven and refrigerator, while he searched for rare parts. They never arrived.

Altering lighting, windows, surfaces and exterior siding can easily defeat an original design.

Dion Neutra expressed satisfaction that two homes up the hill from his residence on Neutra Place preserved his father's redwood board and batten siding — despite the fussy task of repeated oiling that's required.

While architecture can be timeless, classic homes are built to adapt to contemporary needs that shift with passing decades, said experts.

"You can get stuck in a time warp," countered Christopher Carr of Wiehle-Carr Architecture and vice president of the John Lautner Foundation. "Architecture is there to embrace the experimental. Homes are designed to move into the future."

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