

American Bungalow “From Trashed to Treasured” Feathured Article - May 2005

The first time that our friend Hans Neilson asked if we wanted to buy his rental property I laughed at the absurdity and my partner crinkled up his nose as if he had just taken a whiff of a long-forgotten Tupperware left-over. Yet we were looking for a house to call our own and had found only discouragement in every other one: they were either out of our price range or already fixed up to someone else’s taste.

I am a designer and carpenter by trade, and I make leaded glass windows and cabinets and small furniture for fun. I was looking for a pet project. Of course we visited Hans’ rental. Of course we bought it. Though it was truly trashed, I convinced myself that it could be perfect. Then I proceeded to try to convince my partner.

A week after the sale closed, we discovered I was pregnant. A little reconvincing of the merit of this project was in order for both of us, especially since I was the one slated to do the majority of the work. But like every great guy with a pregnant wife, my husband supported my every decision -- or at least he pretended to. We proceeded to renovate our tattered bungalow with a fervor that I can only attribute to nesting instincts.



Hard Times



The original bungalow was built in 1920. Fifteen years of renters had taken a toll. Prior to that, the house had endured several unfortunate remodels, the most blatant of which was referred to by our neighbors as “the ‘70s wing.” The house was literally filled with junk and problems: there was graffiti in almost every room, drug paraphernalia scattered under rugs, a leaky roof, the boiler was dead, a basement piled waist-high in discarded belongings that reeked of cat urine -- you get the idea. It took us several 30-yard dumpsters, a garage sale and donations to charities to clear the house of its contents. It took four more dumpsters to rid the house of its “ick.”

The first project was purely a morale booster: getting rid of the aluminum siding. I tore it off one weekend, drove to a recycling

station and came home with \$83 in my pocket. Then the real work began. We hired two carpenters, Rod Blethen and Tobias Manthey, to work with me through the framing stage. My husband, David Huerta, worked full time at his job and did house projects on the weekends.

Tackling the leaky basement, David dug around the outside of the foundation, patched holes, laid down drainage pipe and sealed the walls properly. We jacked up the house, replaced rotten mudsills and straightened out the most offensive sagging floors.

The house was gutted down to the studs everywhere except the living room, which had beautiful swirled plaster walls that we didn’t want to lose. We saved



all of the trim, hardware and old framing lumber. Later I would remill the rafters and studs and put them back into the house in the form of cabinets and built-ins. The '70s wing was built like a fortress and came down slowly but surely. It must have originally been a garage, because the floor was foot-and-a-half-thick concrete. When the floor was gone, the original exterior stairwell to the basement was revealed: lo and behold, there was a couch stuffed into it.

The overall plan was to rid the house of its remodel mishaps and restore everything that was original. This included the living room, two upstairs bedrooms and a bath downstairs. That left us wanting a kitchen, a sunroom, an office and two full baths upstairs. A story and a half addition at the back houses the new kitchen, sunroom and office. By lengthening the wall and raising the height of the original front shed dormer, we were able to fit in two baths and make the bedrooms more spacious.

Bargain Hunter



It was important to us to create an environment for our child that had nooks and crannies, and lots of interesting things to explore. As we framed the walls, I made sure to include cabinets and built-ins that would be accessible to a child. We also decided to do tile mosaics on the floors of the new bathrooms and sunroom so a crawling baby could explore different textures and patterns.

Portland is home to a lot of great salvage and house parts stores. Ann Sacks, a local tile company, has an annual warehouse sale, and we were able to get all of our fantastic tiles for the mosaic work at a great price. Rejuvenation also has a wonderful yearly sale on its reproduction lighting -- perfect for someone like me who loves to find bargains.

From friends who work at Rejuvenation I got great tips on how to spruce up the old lights that I found at garage sales and how to strip paint from hardware. Here's the recipe: Boil water; add Arm and Hammer Superwash. Add hardware and boil until the paint is gone. It takes about 10-15 minutes and is as easy as pie.

Being pregnant through a project like this was a little worrisome at times. I felt that I would have permanent indentations on my face from the respirator, and being hypercareful about avoiding fumes and toxins probably made everything take longer. But having just nine months kept the motivation going strong.

At the end of that time, we had a new boiler and working radiators, all new electrical and plumbing and the Sheetrockers were scheduled. It was time for me to take a break.

Family House

Three months later, I returned to work on the house. Progress slowed since my hours were limited with a small child to care for. I called on friends to help, including Jennifer Gleach, a local artist. She gave us a crash course on mosaic tiling and helped us out for several weeks; what a boost of energy that was.

The kitchen cabinets were next. By then we'd run out of vintage framing lumber, so I made a trip to The Rebuilding Center, another local salvage shop, and came home with a truckload of old-growth framing lumber. Three days later I had butcher-block countertops for half of the kitchen and enough wood left





over to finish the cabinets, which duplicated the original style. Hans, who had sold us the house and was very supportive throughout the project, showed us how to make concrete counters for the rest of the kitchen. Without being asked, he came back at 10:00 p.m. and again at midnight to do the final troweling on the countertops; he's just that kind of friend.

Our family, which now included our son Gabriel, moved into the house once the kitchen was operable. We worked on the bungalow for an additional year after that. One by one, the rooms got painted, trimmed out and appropriate built-ins installed.

We tried our best to accentuate the feel of the 1920s bungalow by matching the proportions of the original rooms when possible. By adding a few quirky personal touches -- like a countertop trivet for hot pots made from bingo balls and marbles that I found in the house during demolition -- our home feels just right.

We had a recent surprise visit from the granddaughters of the original owner who were in town for the weekend and drove past the old house to see it again. They have pictures of themselves playing in the house as children and have promised to send copies. I can't wait to see them . . .

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