

A Few of My Favorite Things

by Walter Jowers



When you renovate old houses, your building tools and materials are likely to be a little different from other people's building stuff. Here's a review of some of my favorite old-house building aids.

Heat Guns

If you do a lot of old-house renovation, you just about have to own a heat gun. Heat guns entered the building trades when a veteran old-house renovator figured out that these tools, originally used for shrink-wrapping, were useful for many renovation jobs. Heat guns work well for stripping paint off old woodwork, especially woodwork with intricate detail, like Victorian mantels and newel posts. They also soften the glue of old tile and linoleum, allowing easier removal. A heat gun can also soften window putty, but wear goggles for this—the glass can fly.

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There are two types of heat guns: the cheap, almost useless ones found in hardware stores and home centers; and the high-quality ones found in shops that cater to professionals. The former can be bought for about \$20. The most expensive cost \$70 to \$80. They all blow hot air, and do the job for a while. Here are the main differences: A cheap gun has a plastic body, which will break; if you drop a cheap gun, it's history. Though the heating element in any gun will probably break when you drop it, professional guns have replaceable elements, while cheaper models do not. Good guns also have metal shields around their nozzles to help prevent burns. These are not found on cheap guns so if you slip, you're likely to get burned.

And you can always use the guns for their original purpose: shrink-wrapping. When doing electrical work, I prefer heat shrink to wire nuts and I use my heat gun when rewiring old lamps. An expensive gun is imperative for this job, because they have a built-in base that holds the gun, freeing your two hands to hold wires.

Replacement Roofing Tile

Nearly all tile roofing in our area is repair work. If you need replacement tiles, here's where to start looking: Gladding, McBean & Co., P.O. Box 97, Lincoln, CA 95648, 916/645-3341; and Ludowici Celadon Company, P.O. Box 69, New

Lexington, OH 43764; 614/342-1995. Both companies publish product brochures and are well-known and respected in restoration circles.

Period Wallpaper

For Victorian or early twentieth-century houses, it's hard to find better wallpaper than that made by Bradbury & Bradbury Wallpapers, P.O. Box 155, Benicia, CA 95410; 707/746-1900. The papers are handprinted, and the designs and colors are first-rate. Many of the Victorian-style papers are true historical reproductions, and the William Morris line of papers looks good in craftsman-style houses. These papers aren't cheap, but given their quality and design, they almost seem underpriced.

Retro Formica

Plastic nostalgia — it had to come. Formica, Inc., has recently introduced a plastic laminate countertop in a boomerang pattern, reminiscent of patterns made during the late 1950s and early 1960s — only snazzier than the real thing. So maybe it has no historical precedent, but I like it anyway. I may put some Charcoal Boomerang in my new bathroom, along with some pink concrete flamingos and a lava lamp.

Moravian Tile

Beautiful ceramic tile that would look great in any house is available from Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, Swamp Road, Doylestown, PA 18901; 215/345-6722. It's perfect for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century houses, because the tile is made using the original 1898-1952 patterns. It's very earthy-looking stuff, with intricate patterns and muted glazes. It has far more visual appeal and overall quality than most of the tile commonly used today.

New Craftsman House Designs

A line of craftsman-style house designs has been introduced by Timberpeg, Box 1500, Claremont, NH 03603; 603/542-7762. For people who love houses that honor the home builder's art, there's nothing like the original Stickley-inspired houses of the early twentieth century. Since there are a limited number of originals, Timberpeg sells plans for new ones. Call or write Timberpeg for details on this new product.

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Terne and Terne-Coated Stainless Steel

I like these metals for roofs, flashing, and gutters. Terne is steel, coated with a lead-tin alloy and has been used on this continent for centuries. Terne-coated stainless (TCS) is a relatively new product and consists of stainless steel with the same coating. Either material can last a lifetime, though terne has to be kept painted. In the Mid-South, a good asphalt shingle roof costs about \$150 a square installed. A terne roof costs about \$400 a square; TCS about \$500. When oil prices rise, the price gap between asphalt and metal roofs will likely narrow, and terne and TCS will be attractive options. Terne and TCS roofing, flashing, and gutters are available from Follansbee Steel, P.O. Box 610, Follansbee, WV 26037; 304/527-1260. The company will send brochures and detailed spec sheets on request.

Gazing Balls

Finally, my very favorite item for finishing off the perfect old-house rehab: a little yard art. You can still buy "Gazing Balls," those colored Christmas-ball-like ornaments you put on top of birdbath bases out in your yard, from Marietta Silver Globe Company at Box 382, Rte. 4, Marietta, OH 45750; 614/373-4951. Gazing balls became popular just after World War II, and look swell. Antique dealers are starting to ask big bucks for them, but you can buy them new, starting at about \$10 apiece. ■

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