

# The greenest house is the one already built

**W**HAT IS GREENER THAN AN OLD HOUSE? If you are thinking about how much “green” it will cost to heat your house this winter, well, that’s not what I am talking about. I’m talking about the continued and growing concern for making our buildings more environmentally friendly, healthier to live in and

less consumptive of natural resources. If “green old building” sounds like an oxymoron, consider this: What is more green than sustaining something already created when the costs of building new or conducting major renovations in the name of “efficiency” may actually cost the environment much more?

Sustainability means different things to different people, but I believe maintaining existing buildings, where the energy and resources to create them have already been expended, offers a tremendous contribution to reducing our impact on the environment. Why expend more “embodied energy” – the energy required to manufacture, transport and dispose of materials – by starting over again? As the National Trust for Historic Preservation succinctly puts it: The greenest house is the house already built.

According to the EPA, 48 percent of America’s greenhouse emissions are produced by the construction and operation of buildings. Maintaining historic properties – by which I mean old buildings, not just historically significant ones – takes much less embodied energy than replacing or building new. Today’s building materials are most commonly rated with an expected lifespan of 15 to 25 years. This means we will be continually replacing parts and rebuilding our new buildings or the old building we thought we *had* to renovate. The worn out modern materials will go, of course, into the landfills.

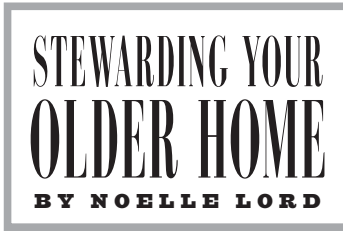
Many new products and materials include plastic or vinyl components, nonbiodegradable materials that give off toxic byproducts when manufactured and add dramatically to landfill waste. Every time we tear into historic fabric, by replacing siding or windows with vinyl or simply palm-sanding the life out of woodwork, we are intro-

ducing inferior products. Now consider your wooden windows, plaster or granite foundation that are 150 years old and still going strong. Sure, they require upkeep, but by maintaining them you are contributing to the environment in one of the best and most significant ways possible.

Here is a list of things you can do to “green” your home while maintaining its historic quality.

- Install proper weatherstripping around doors and windows
- Make sure glass in doors and windows is tightly glazed
- Use door and window locks to keep them shut tightly
- Install storm doors and windows
- Seal gaps in structural and foundation materials with caulking or spray foam
- Have your furnace or boiler cleaned and maintained annually
- Replace furnace and boiler filters regularly
- Limit draw from chimneys by keeping dampers closed when not in use
- Caulk gaps in siding and around doors and windows
- Repair rotten siding and keep paint and sealing coating in good condition
- Make sure gutters and drainage are working
- Close gaps in HVAC, chimneys and fireplaces
- Tape ductwork seams with aluminum (or duct) tape, keep exhaust pipes tightly fitted to chimney
- Install good window treatments that seal drafts
- Lay rugs over drafty floor areas and in front of doors
- Insulate your attic floor
- Seal and insulate attic access
- Install programmable thermostats
- Buy energy efficient appliances
- Replace a tank hot water heater with tankless and save 50 – 70 percent on your water heating bill
- Use fans and portable electric heaters for problems in isolated areas

Noelle Lord operates Old House C.P.R., Inc. and shares her passion for helping owners of older buildings discover how to take good care of them through consulting, teaching and writing. She can be contacted by visiting [www.oldhousecpr.com](http://www.oldhousecpr.com).



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