

The “Old Fashioned” Wood Window



Photo: Jonathan Fine

Overview:

Everybody wants to save money on their heating bills, and we've all been told that replacing those old wood windows is the best way to do that. But the fact is, traditional wood double-hung windows are more cost and energy efficient, more durable, easier to maintain and simply more attractive than most any replacement window on the market.

Threat:

The multi-million dollar replacement window lobby has convinced the general public that it is in their interest to pay more for an inferior version of something they already own. This explains why residential and commercial buildings all across Chicagoland are sprouting new vinyl and aluminum replacement windows. And why thousands of wood windows are being relegated to landfills. This neither conforms to the “green” movement, nor does it present a money-smart solution in these challenging economic times.

**The “Old Fashioned”
Wood Window**
Throughout Chicago
1870s through 1930s

Chicago 7: “Old Fashioned” Wood Window Continued

History:

The double-hung wood window had been slowly evolving in Europe since the 1400's. After the Civil War here in the U.S. and particularly in Chicago, star architects, industrial designers and manufacturers applied their ingenuity and business acumen to the problem of the window. They took the simple, traditional wood window and in a few short decades transformed it into one of the most sophisticated and successful building technologies of the industrial age. By the 1920's a wood window had more than sixty individual parts produced by more than twenty separate crafts and trades. The basic components were manufactured at scores of competing millwork shops spread all across Chicago. On site, carpenters assembled and installed these complex wooden “machines” that beautifully solved the old problem of how to keep cold out and let light and fresh air in.

However, our architects, engineers and manufacturers weren't interested in just windows. During the same period they revolutionized the entire way buildings were built, not just inventing tall buildings, but radically changing and improving the way our houses and apartments were built as well. The modern wood window was a small part of a finely tuned building system.

Recommendations::

Preservation Chicago recommends the following to anyone who wishes to save energy and money on windows:

SAVE YOUR OLD WOOD WINDOWS!

There are three tricks that make old windows function better overall:

- Caulk that gap between the wood frame of the window and the brick or wood outside wall of the building
- Scrape, paint and weatherstrip the sashes so they go up and down easily and fit tight
- Keep your old aluminum triple-track storm windows or get the new wood storm windows that stay up permanently and have glass and screen panels that are switched from the inside.

Most of this work is easier and less expensive than commonly thought, and much of it could be done by oneself. But there is an ever increasing number of qualified window repair and restoration contractors who can expertly do the job. Compared to aluminum and vinyl replacements, properly updated original wood windows can result in windows that are less expensive, more energy efficient, easily maintained and cleaned, less drafty, longer lasting (another 100 years) and more aesthetic. From a historical standpoint, they keep all the harmonious parts of traditional buildings in tune, and preserve a part of Chicago's brilliant building technology legacy.

Additional Press Contacts:

Doug Gilbert, AIA Harboe Architects 312-977-0336

Mike Jackson, Chief Architect Illinois Historic Preservation Agency 217-785-5013

Neal Vogel Restoric, LLC 847-492-0416

Ray Drazen Restoration and Preservation Enterprises 815-549-6518

Gail Wallace Restoration Works, Inc 815-937-0556

Vince Michael, Chair Art Institute of Chicago Historic Preservation Department 312-629-6680