

June 7, 1933

PRACTICAL REASONS FOR MODERNIZING OLD HOMES

(Prepared by the Advisory Committee on
Reconditioning, Remodeling, and Modernizing,
Division of Building and Housing.)

This circular is one of a series on home modernizing. It is an abstract of material written by different members among the 17 housing experts who constitute the Advisory Committee on Reconditioning, Remodeling, and Modernizing. Its purpose is to aid the home owner in determining when and where he should make alterations or repairs on his property.

There are two good reasons for remodeling or modernizing an old house: The first is to preserve and add to its beauty and convenience -- and consequently the enjoyment of the family living in it; the second is to increase its value.

If left alone, all structures decrease in value, principally because of the inroads of depreciation and obsolescence. Reconditioning, remodeling, and modernizing will retard the rate of these two destructive factors, restore the structural soundness of a house, bring it up to date, and add to its attractiveness.

Depreciation is caused by physical conditions. Its rate of action for reasonably well built houses is generally set at about 2 per cent a year. To offset this depreciation, a certain amount of reconditioning must be undertaken periodically by the owner. This reconditioning will counteract the effects of weather and use, thus retarding depreciation. Intelligent up-keep provides an effective barrier to unnecessarily rapid declines in value.

Obsolescence is governed by social and psychological conditions. When a building no longer appears desirable as a residence to its inhabitants or to buyers, it is obsolete. Changes of style, design, equipment, character of tenancy, declining neighborhood, changes in zoning ordinances which permit different forms of use in the neighborhood -- all these may cause obsolescence.

Modernizing and remodeling will bring many obsolete houses up to date and restore their fitness and desirability for their original and best use.

There is a difference between modernizing and remodeling. It is well to keep this fact in mind when contemplating changes in a house.

Modernizing may mean simply the making of necessary repairs, removal of outmoded trimmings -- gingerbread effects -- that inelegantly marked some

earlier construction period, changing the location or style of door and window openings, minor rearrangements of floor plans, refinishing of surfaces, building in of additional conveniences, and the installation of up-to-date service equipment.

Remodeling may mean a rearrangement of floor plans and openings, addition of new rooms, porches, and the like, and a general rebuilding of the structure.

A thorough going remodeling, if the circumstances seem to demand it, may cost more than modernizing; or, to put it in other terms, may require a larger investment; but it may have the advantage, particularly in a large, well-built house, of creating new values which often more than exceed the investment required.

The only rule to apply, from an economical viewpoint, is: "Give the house the treatment it deserves." If it can be made a better home by modernizing or remodeling, and the owner is in a position to invest either a large or a limited amount, now is a good time to do such work.

Not all modernizing or remodeling of homes is justified. Ill considered work is liable to lead to unwarranted expense and disappointing results. Home owners are warned especially against being over influenced by ideas of change to the point of installing features which in ten years may be much less emphasized than they are now. Thus a sun room or breakfast nook may make many a home more attractive and more "salable" today; but a sun room in the wrong location may get little actual sunshine and spoil the looks of the house, and a hastily installed breakfast nook may interfere with kitchen work, and prove a cramped, inconvenient place in which to eat.

Sizeable modernizing programs should be undertaken only after a searching appraisal has been made both of the house and its neighborhood. The trend of the neighborhood should be taken into account, and the existing fundamentals of the structure should be considered. Sturdy foundations, sound framing and walls, and good roof frames should be disturbed only insofar as needed replacements, installations, or rearrangements make such work compulsory. If the height of the house is to be increased, or if reroofing is needed, it may be possible to salvage the roof framing, especially if its design is in keeping with the new lines of the house. A new heating plant may require cutting through walls and floor partitions, but, if care is taken to replace the strength thus cut from load-bearing members, a replacement of floors or walls is properly avoided. This economy of existing structural elements should mark the entire program.

Advice from a reliable builder or architect should help considerably in deciding on the most practicable plan and also the probable cost of the work.

Even when the best of precautions are taken in the building of a house, periodic reconditioning is necessary. It is thrifty to repair defects when they first become apparent.*

Simple modernizing, particularly on the house that may be classed as "old" may be accomplished economically by salvaging the main portion of the existing

* See "Care and Repair of the House" for sale by the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D. C. Price 15 cents.

structure, and reconditioning it to bring it up to present-day living requirements.

The spacious, well-built house constructed prior to the World War, may offer a particularly good opportunity for intelligent modernizing. The possibilities of achieving good design, and serviceable, attractive arrangement are numerous and inviting.

When undertaken and conducted thoughtfully, modernizing or remodeling should be an investment of prime importance. The reconditioned house can be brought up to neighborhood standards. It can be made more convenient and comfortable to work in. Its owners may enjoy a new cleanliness and beauty in their surroundings.

All these advantages offer a similar appeal to prospective purchasers; they create what is called "sale value." In fact, the building dollar, carefully spent for repairs or remodeling work at this time, should accomplish more than it would at former price levels, and increase the value of a house far more than the amount invested.

Further information of interest to home owners is contained in other circulars issued by the Advisory Committee on Reconditioning, Remodeling, and Modernizing, Division of Building and Housing, Bureau of Standards, Department of Commerce, Washington, D. C.

