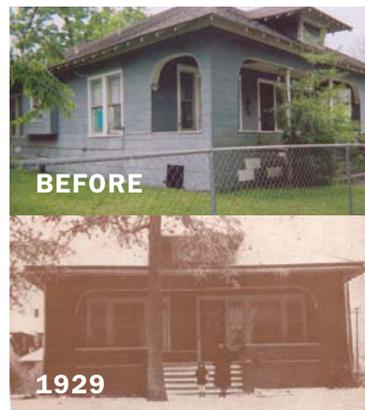


‘GOOD PEOPLE LIVED HERE’

One way to save a historic 1917 bungalow —
convert it to a rental



The careworn little bungalow with dirty blue asbestos shingles didn't look like it was going to make it last spring.

Wood around the back door and porch was rotting. The tenant there had 12 dogs she rarely let outside, and the place reeked. Forget TLC, this old 1917 family home in Woodland Heights north of downtown needed CPR. Too often the historic houses in this gentrifying neighborhood don't get CPR; they get “euthanized,” torn down to make way for new construction.

Enter high-energy Woodland Heights resident Pam Lowe who rides her bike often through the neighborhood, loves old houses and keeps her eye on ones that look like they might become teardowns. “I've lived in the neighborhood since '78, and I know the houses,” says Lowe. She'd been watching the blue bungalow.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:

After: Stripped of its asbestos siding, the Woodland Heights bungalow with a new coat of paint and new picket fence is once again a warm, welcoming place in the neighborhood.

Before: The bungalow in 2007 had seen better days.

The bungalow in 1929 after a snowstorm



ABOVE: After: A new deck designed by Laura Michaelides is a pleasant spot for tea and listening to bird-song in the morning.

BELOW: Before: In 2007, the back porch and flared, lower siding had rotted.



A former commercial real estate broker, Lowe's hobby is buying historic houses in her neighborhood, fixing them up and renting them to good tenants. She's in it for the long haul. "I more or less break even on the rent and consider these to be long-term investments."

She has two rules for her hobby: 1) The One-Beer Rule. She must be able to walk to her rent houses in the time it takes to drink one beer; and 2) The Good Enough for Me Rule. The house must be one she would enjoy living in herself.

SUDDENLY FOR SALE

One day last April during one of her rides, Lowe spied a For Sale sign that had suddenly sprung up on the blue bungalow's lawn. The sales brochure called it "a wonderful building opportunity" and said, "current home is occupied (there are dogs), so please just drive by." ▶

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Detail of living room with original fireplace and built-in niche

“That’s code for ‘It’s a teardown,’” Lowe says. She whipped out her cell phone, called her husband and said she wanted to buy the bungalow. Then she called the real estate agent. “They said, ‘There’s three contracts coming in this afternoon.’” They also told her they weren’t showing the interior, further confirmation the house would soon be history.

“I begged to get inside,” Lowe recalls. “They said, ‘There’s dogs. They’ll bite you.’ I said, ‘I’ll take a dog bite. Meet me with a full-priced contract at the house.’”

Lowe walked through the house and could see it was an original William Wilson house built by the Woodland Heights developer known for building houses better than they needed to be. Though the house is 1,604 square feet, smallish by today’s standards, its rooms are generously sized. “I don’t like a 12-by-12 (foot) living room,” Lowe says. The living room was 17 by 12 feet; the dining room, 15 by 13 feet.

She could see the wood around the windows was in good shape and all the hardware in the house was original to it. “I saw the [built-in] cabinet in the dining room and those cross beams. I said, ‘Whoa! This house is very special.’”



ABOVE:

Before: The wall with a built-in ironing board had to be torn out to give the kitchen more space. The breakfast room’s doorway was too small.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

After: Michaelides widened the opening to the breakfast room to give it more light and make it feel more spacious. A key goal of her kitchen redo was to add cabinets and counterspace. Most of the cabinet doors are glass. “If you’re trying to make a kitchen look light and airy,” says Michaelides, “that really does it.” Cabinets go up to the ceiling to lend a feeling of grandness and proportion to the space. Wilsonart laminate countertops resemble honed granite. Kitchen light fixtures are from www.schoolhouseelectric.com.



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Luckily for Lowe, the owner of the house, Mozelle Wilkes, 82, showed up as she was walking through the house. Lowe convinced Mozelle to sell it to her because she would restore, not demolish it.

Even though the house was being marketed as a teardown, Mozelle deep in her heart was hoping for a buyer who would restore it. A native of Woodland Heights, Mozelle had a strong connection to the place. Her late husband, Harold Wilkes Jr., had been born there and grew up in the house. Mozelle's family had lived around the corner. After she agreed to sell the house, she told Lowe, "I want you to know that good people lived here."

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At the closing of the house sale, Mozelle presented Lowe the original deed to the house. It showed that on Dec. 19, 1917, Otto and Anna Hauserman paid \$3,500 for the house designed and built by William Wilson. The house was sold in 1921 to Harold Duncan Wilkes and Vestal Matthews Wilkes who reared two children there, Libby Sue and Harold Jr., and lived there happily ever after the rest of their lives.

The Wilkes house was known as a welcoming place where all visitors—even strangers—received warm hospitality. "The doors were always unlocked," recalls their granddaughter, Patti Dozier, who lived in the bungalow with her mother and grandparents much of her childhood. "My grandmother was a wonderful cook. She never measured ingredients with anything but her hand. You never knew who would show up for Sunday dinner uninvited. People just showed up." During World War II, they always provided an apartment for military servicemen above the garage.

While Vestal was revered for her chocolate pies and keen sense of humor, her husband, Harold Sr., also known as Texie, was loved for his can-do spirit. In the 1920s, he raced cars cross-country with World War I ace and racecar driver Eddie Rickenbacker to promote Houston-made Ranger automobiles. Later he became superintendent of South Texas Cottonoil. "Everybody loved him," recalls Patti. "He could do anything, fix anything."

After Texie and Vestal died, Mozelle and Harold Jr. inherited it and leased it to tenants. When the last tenant couldn't take care of it, Mozelle sold it to Lowe.

CHARMED HOUSE, BIG JOB

What to do with a charmed house that needs so much work? Lowe, an experienced remodeler who has redone five rent houses, aims to restore houses to functional beauty but not to overdo them. She tries to keep period details and chooses neutral colors. And she has a crackerjack team of contractors who help her (see Resources).

After airing out the house and scrubbing floors to get rid of the dog odors, she could see that the oak floors in the living and dining rooms were badly stained. Her easy solution was to ebonize the floors.

An inspector deemed the house structurally sound, but the dirt underneath the house had sunk. "That happens with these older houses," Lowe says. "The thatch builds up around the house over a hundred years, so the yards build up and become higher than the foundation." The bungalow had 6 inches of standing water under it, so Lowe had two dump trucks of sand brought in to fill ▶



ABOVE:

The bathroom's bay window is a grace note in the room. Michaelides chose to flank the windows with cabinets for more storage. The bathtub and medicine cabinet are original to the house. Period hexagonal tiles were added to the floor, as were a new pedestal sink and toilet.

BELOW:

The shower ceiling was raised to 11 feet and tiled all the way to the top to give the small space a feeling of grandness.





BELOW: Built-in seating was added to the breakfast room. Some of the pine flooring in the kitchen and breakfast room had rotted. Replacement boards were found at Historic Houston.

ABOVE AND BELOW: "I saw the [built-in] cabinet in the dining room and those cross beams. I said, 'Whoa! This house is very special,'" says Lowe. During the '20s and '30s, people showed up uninvited for Sunday dinner at the Wilkes' house, where they were always welcomed at the table. Flowers by Neil Eguis for Aubrey Sellers Florist



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in the dirt under the house.

For the grime-caked windows, Lowe applied Easy-Off oven cleaner on the windows and the grunge came off easily. Some windows were broken; Heights Glass installed new ones.

The house needed new wiring and plumbing and the flared-skirt framing on the lower part of its exterior was rotted and needed replacing. Lowe also had carpenter/general contractor Ken Bakos design and build a new wooden fence to replace the rusted chain-link fence that was there.

FOUR SQUARE DESIGN

For the kitchen and bath, Lowe enlisted the help of Laura Michaelides of Four Square Design Studio who lives in Woodland Heights and is committed to the idea of saving as many of the old houses as possible.

Michaelides could see the kitchen needed much more space for countertops and cabinetry. "The kitchen was comprised of one main area and then there was a little room — no door — just a space that had overhanging shelves," she says. The wall adjacent to that room had a built-in ironing board and hutch that were in bad condition. "All those little choppy spaces made it impossible to have enough room for cabinetry."

Michaelides widened the opening to the breakfast room. "We did that to make it feel lighter and more connected with the kitchen."

To create more cabinet space around the kitchen sink, Michaelides covered up one of the three windows. From the exterior of the house, three windows can be seen, but in the interior, there are only two. By doing this, "we were able to have more contiguous counter space," she says.

Inexpensive laminate covers the countertops — Wilsonart 4623-60 Graphite Nebula — which resembles honed granite. "I think laminate is one of those materials which is incredibly dissed," says Michaelides. "It actually can be a great material when it's used in the right way."

In the bathroom, she flanked the window with more cabinets, raised the ceiling of the shower to 11 feet and had subway tile placed all the way up to the ceiling. "When I have a small space, I tend to take the tile all the way up," she says. "It gives it a feeling of grandness even in a small space."

FINDING TENANTS

Once the house was finished, three prospective tenants immediately told Lowe they wanted to rent it and began bidding up the amount they would pay for rent. "I've never had trouble renting," Lowe says. One party wanted to buy the house outright, but Lowe was too attached to sell it.

Tenants have since moved in, and Lowe is thrilled with the results. "This project just came together like magic," she says. "I'm able to combine investing for personal gain while investing in the beauty of our neighborhood. I'm also getting so much gratification for what I do. I'm hoping more people will do this." Lowe's hobby—restoring houses and renting them to responsible tenants—has since become her profession. She has seven properties she leases to tenants now and has her eye on a couple more.

Says Michaelides: "It's so wonderful to have someone who's committed to taking a house like this and even though it's going to be rented, fixing it up and preserving it so it stays part of the fabric of the community. I think it's wonderful she's doing this and not selling them." 



ABOVE:

Mozelle Wilkes, left, and Pam Lowe on the bungalow's newly restored front porch. Mozelle's husband was born in the house and grew up in it. "I want you to know that good people lived here," Mozelle told Lowe when she sold the house to her.

resources

Design

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Carpentry/General Contractor

KEN BAKOS

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Painting

RANDY MATTOX

Mattox Painting
713.868.4792

Tile Work and Carpeting

JUAN LANDAVERDE

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832.715.7593

Flooring

FELIPE GALLARDO

713.678.8275 or
832.577.0485

Plumbing

WADE EDWARDS

PLUMBING SOLUTIONS
281.974.9449, Crosby



The back door now opens to the breakfast room; before, the back door opened to the kitchen. Flowers in yellow pail from Aubrey Sellers Florist