

BROKEDOWN PALACE

For novelist CAROL EDGARIAN, restoring a shambling San Francisco house to its former glory has been an 18-year affair of the heart.

I ONCE KNEW A HOUSE. It was of a simple design: square rooms, smooth plastered walls, tall windows that opened with hardly a heave, wide-planked floors that never creaked. This house was warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and every room looked out onto the garden. This was the home of my imagination. The house in which I actually live is of a different order: a Lady Gaga of a house, a Victorian—God help me—yes, a San Francisco painted lady; tricked out, willful, drafty. Some would say she’s also grand, but they haven’t lived with the old broad as I have, these 18 years.

I call her “she” because what else would you call a high-heeled thing, all that color, curves, and fancywork? She is a lovely eccentric. Her two columns guarding the front door are mismatched—one square, one round. And that is just the beginning.

Edith Wharton, in her treatise on design, *The Decoration of Houses*, declared, “Proportion is the good breeding of architecture.” I couldn’t argue. Proportion is what distinguishes our old Vic: She’s wider than a typical Queen Anne, with enough hip to balance the chest.

But what is it anyway about people and their houses? Why do I get so excited when one more shelter magazine arrives in the mailbox each month? Why does the inside of other people’s homes give such a voyeuristic thrill?

I come from nomads. My mother moves so often, it is a running joke with friends: “How many times has your mother moved since the last time I saw you?” Perhaps for that very reason I want to grow old in my old house, where my children first arrived wrapped in my arms like burritos.

But to stay in an old house, to renovate around you, is to endure a strong test on the nerves. It is also another kind of marriage for sure. There’s the love affair, the breakups, the heartaches, the dastardly suitors (subcontractors) who woo but fail to deliver, the near misses, the money crises, the former owner who kept secrets from you, the nosy neighbors. There’s the person you were when you first moved in, and the person you become.

We fell in love from afar. Actually, from across the street. When I met the man I would eventually marry, I was living in an apartment directly opposite the house. My man and I shacked up in that small apartment for six months, tripping over each other. I spent long days at my desk, which was set in a bay window overlooking my future house. While writing my first novel, I stared at the place for hours. I decided she was a bit spooky. No one seemed to come or go. Her windows revealed nothing, not light. Eventually we moved to a larger flat in another part of town, but five years later, when we started looking to buy, we discovered that the old lady was for sale.

She was built in 1874, and survived the great 1906 earthquake. She’d had only a few owners, and the one before us had renovated her in 1968 and hadn’t touched her since. When we moved in, her roofs were leaking.

All four floors of the house, including the 12-foot-high ceilings, were painted in the heyday of putrid pea green. The appliances in the kitchen were—you guessed it—avocado. Downtrodden mustard yellow shag carpeting embarrassed the living room and carried the insult up four flights of stairs. Stained voile curtains hid her gorgeous curved bay windows. The house was, in a word, tired. Each time I toured her, I thought, Oh, but she has great bones.

The widow who owned her had spent the happiest years of her life in the house and, believing she owned the Taj Mahal, priced her accordingly. The house had been on the market for a year, with no serious offers. “Go for it,” our real-estate agent encouraged. “Offer what you can afford.” And so we did—in fact, beyond what we could afford. Disgusted, the widow threw the papers in our agent’s face. That was pretty much the end of things. We went away heartsick. We pined. We looked at 60 other houses, but nothing else spoke to our souls. Sometimes in the evening

we’d buy ice cream cones and park stealthily across the street from her wishing she was ours.

Some months later, a week before our wedding, as all our crazy relatives were about to converge, the call came. If we signed that day, the widow would accept our price. We signed. And that was the last time we had a good night’s sleep for months. We enjoyed our wedding, of course, and the honeymoon, but my most poignant memory of the trip is sitting in our lovely hotel room in Venice, overlooking the Grand Canal, two writers trying to make sense of bond fluctuations in *The Wall Street Journal*, deciding if we should lock in the mortgage rate this day or that. We were so innocent back then. We thought she needed just a little work. And so began years of living and writing alongside roofers, carpenters, plumbers, the tile guy, each with their crises and dramas worthy of a novel. The painter we hired for a week stayed for two months. Cesar

became part of the family. But first he had to rid the house of what we affectionately called “the pea of green.” This proved more difficult than any of us imagined. Try as he might to paint the living room ceiling white, the color underneath kept seeping through. “*Jesus Christo*,” Cesar would mutter, dipping his roller and attacking the miasma yet again, while religious programming blasted in Spanish on his paint-specked radio.

Back then, in 1993, we thought it would take a year or so to return her to glory. That was before we put in a garage—months of drilling construction leading to the day the cement finally hardened and we drove the car in, only to have the floor bottom out. The whole thing had to be ripped out. Eighteen years of living with our Vic, her problems have become our problems, her eccentricities our own. So we now call her our 30-year project. Thirty years is a long marriage. Next up: the kitchen. Renovating it is surely going to kill me. In my mind’s eye, I can see how great it’s going to look. ♦

