

How to Add Modern Chic to a Historic House

From dark floors to new art and accessories, here's how to make an older house feel contemporary

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Designed by Laurie Blumenfeld-Russo of Laurie Blumenfeld Design in New York, this historic Brooklyn apartment has a fresh feel thanks to a light color scheme...

REGAN WOOD

When you have a home with history, it can be hard to imagine anything but the period in which it was built. And while great bones never have to be replaced, putting a contemporary spin on the interiors can give the space new life.

Follow these leads from the design pros to update your abode in a modern way.

Look for Clean Lines

“It is important to know that not all historic homes lend themselves to modernization, so if you are purchasing a home with the intent to modernize it, you should look for one with clean lines. This will save you time and money trying to replicate those elements typically found in more modern homes. Another easy place to start is by painting your walls white and staining the floors a darker color. This instantly creates a contemporary, chic feel that is synonymous with modern design.

“Once you have your base, add in comfortable seating and ambient lighting to anchor the rooms. Modern design is all about simplicity. It is always best to bring in additional pieces and accessories a little at a time to avoid a cluttered feel.

“A historic home should never be all modern. I always recommend bringing in a few vintage pieces. I live by the notion that great design can be paired with other great pieces regardless of period and style. At the end of the day, if it feels right, it will always look good.”



Design by Lisa Bowles, the guest house at Valley Rock Inn in Hudson Valley, New York, originally built in the 1800s, looks fresh and modern with a coat of white paint and eclectic furnishings

Luxproductions

— **Michael Bruno, founder of 1stdibs, an e-commerce site with a focus on furniture, antiques and home accessories, and of Valley Rock Inn based in Hudson Valley, New York**

Use a Neutral Base

“The sweet spot is to maintain the perfect amount of period detailing during the construction phase, and then layer in modern decor with clean lines and a bit of eclecticism sprinkled in. Layering modern accents among period details allows both to be superstars. Modern lighting and furniture give a room character that transcends time. The beauty is in the contrast.

“I lean on my go-to neutrals when working with historic homes. It’s fresh, bright and gives the illusion of more space. We have transformed old dark wood trim, molding and fireplace mantels into modern and fresh looks with a coat of white paint. You can also bleach and refinish the floors in a light ethereal stain.”

— Laurie Blumenfeld-Russo of Laurie Blumenfeld Design in New York City

Create Balance

“Initially, we want to understand the existing plan, context and architecture. Then, we look for places to sensitively upgrade for modern living—like adding skylights and exterior windows to bring in light.

“If the interior architectural detailing is traditional, mix modern furnishings and antiques to make the house feel collected and soulful. Mixing antique pieces with a few contemporary furnishings makes the house feel modern. Contemporary furnishings also really stand out against a backdrop of monochromatic walls and trim.

“Consider selecting door hardware and plumbing fixtures that are new but designed with a reference to the period of the house. If the home does not have architectural lighting, consider installing a minimal number of trim-less fixtures that are flush with the ceiling or pictures lights on the wall to illuminate art. In terms of decorative light fixtures, I like to use a mix of vintage and contemporary.

“In a house with traditional interior architectural detailing, I paint all trim the same color as the walls but in a different sheen. I also like to match curtain fabric to the walls. Enveloping the room in the same color makes the room feel fresh and modern.”



Pops of color from modern art and furnishings make a period home designed by San Francisco-based Heather Hilliard shine with a contemporary and interesting vibe.
Jose Manuel Alorda

— Heather Hilliard of Heather Hilliard Design in San Francisco

Create Continuity

“By juxtaposing current light fixtures, a fresh pair of draperies and modern art, the effect can really be striking.

“Add texture and visual interest through other materials. I also like to add a pop of color in unexpected ways, such as on the ceiling in a powder room or in a dining room, for example. Adding the same color accents throughout the home can bring a sense of continuity. A painted green ceiling in one room, green in textiles, such as pillows, in another room, for example.

“Sometimes it makes sense to open up a kitchen to the breakfast room and a family room area instead of having multiple small separate spaces, which is a common feature in historical homes.”



Designed by Houston-based Brooke McGuyer Hutson, this historic home feels more now thanks to a modern juxtaposition of art and accessories against a stone backdrop.

Michael Hunter

— **Brooke McGuyer Hutson of Brooke McGuyer Interiors in Houston**

Update the Colors Throughout

“Color and lighting can add a sense of theater that’s more current, and furnishings, artwork and collections can be juxtaposed to bring a totally modern feel to any environment.

Paint is an incredibly easy way to update the feel of an interior. I would however caution, if there is great stained wood—paneling, stairs, ceilings et cetera, think about refinishing. Much better to preserve those types of things for future generations and just change the color/finish.”



Chicago-based designer Frank Ponterio updated a 1911 home by adding a mix of modern art, accessories and furnishings.

Courtesy of Frank Ponterio

— Frank Ponterio of Frank Ponterio design firm in Chicago