

The Visionary of Howe Street

"There goes the neighborhood!" the residents of Pittsburgh's Howe Street might have said when artist Sandy Tarr moved in three years ago. There it goes from a dark cluster of crumbling Victorians to an enclave of bright renovated homes. One by one, Sandy has purchased nearly condemned houses along her street and brought them back to life, removing rags from windows, lead from bullet-riddled doors, and gloom from 19th-century architecture.

PHOTOGRAPHS JEFF McNAMARA
FLOWERS AND ACCESSORIES, TOADFLEX





Sandy begins each renovation by measuring doorways and windows that need antique replacements. The window of this 1896 painted lady's first-floor landing, top right, was covered with bubble plastic, and the home had no front door until Sandy found a carved 19th-century beauty in a Baltimore antiques shop.

ILLUSTRATION BEVERLEY BOZARTH COLGAN



Given the heavily carved and bracketed facade of 5601 Howe Street, you might expect your passage through its ornate double door to land you in a complex world of Victorian draperies and wallhangings. Sandy, however, has other plans for visitors. She plays up natural assets—tiles original to the foyer, below, and a third-floor bedroom fireplace, right—while making sure the contemporary interior is awash with air and light.



By purchasing and revamping homes in the same neighborhood, Sandy, a professional renovator, gives herself the rare chance not only to create a harmonious blend of colors on an individual house but to carry that visual consistency from one address to the next. For example, the rich hues of this home's vestibule, opposite left, flow outside and even down the street. And the color of the terra cotta tile is repeated in a band on the carved front doors as well as on the outside trim. "Now I'm working on the house next door, and I plan to pull out one of the accent colors from this house and use it as the base color on its tall, thin neighbor," says Sandy. "That way, the two houses will be friendly together."



Coaxing Sunlight Inside

For a renovation expert bent on banishing Victorian gloom and flooding spaces with light, working in a neighborhood called Shadyside is far from ideal. On Howe Street, houses are situated cheek by jowl, preventing sunlight from entering through side windows. "We're bunched so close here that I can look out my window and read my neighbor's water meter," says Sandy, who lives just down the block in another period home, an 1890's Eastlake she fixed up ostensibly for resale before deciding the house "was meant for me" (*Victoria*, July 1990).

Like her own home, the Victorian shown on these pages proved especially difficult to win over to the forces of light. After uprooting two obstreperous evergreens whose branches had assaulted the building's facade and whose hunched backs had blocked the sun, Sandy set about creating space and brightness in the home's interior. Faced with a choice between retaining the kitchen's only windows and using the window area for badly needed shelf space, she chose both. The clever mullioned display cabinet she fashioned, opposite, is a natural storage spot for glassware that actually makes the kitchen more private (the artist who bought the house from Sandy swears she has not had even a glimpse of the neighbor's water meter).

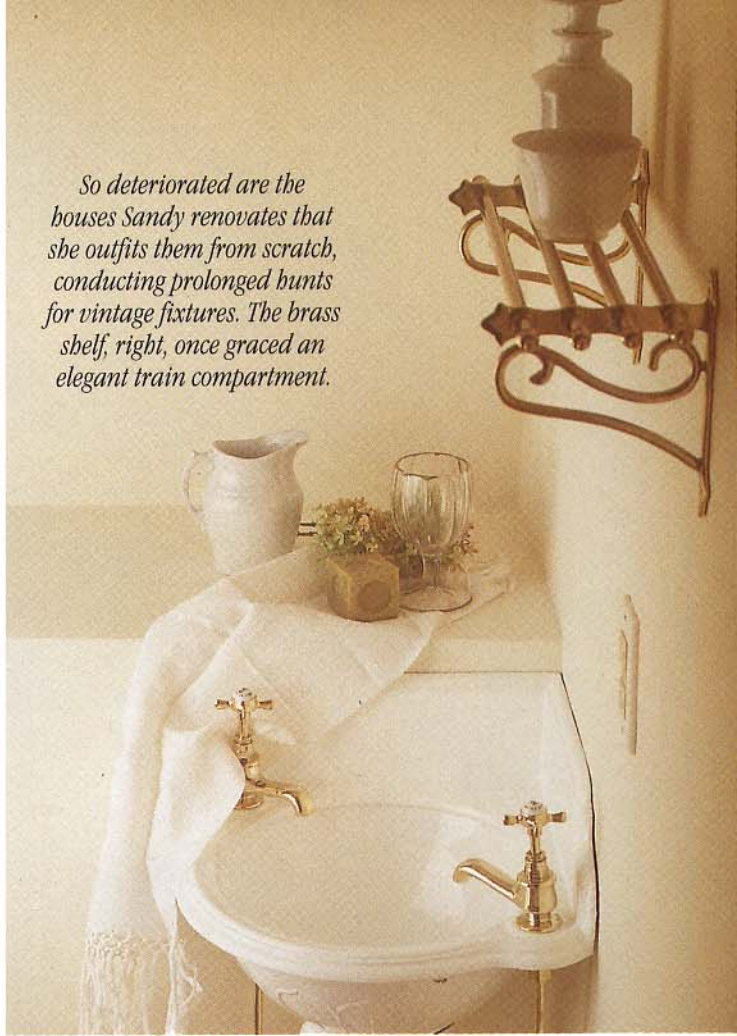
Even more challenging was the problem of adapting a 19th-century house to 20th-century living standards. "These homes were rarely equipped with anything more luxurious than wardrobes and outhouses, so renovations are all about grabbing space for closets and bathrooms," says Sandy. In this case, she found a truly elegant solution to the closet quandary. The dining room, she noticed, was nearly a perfect octagon, with the exception of one conventional 90-degree corner. By cutting off that last corner, she simultaneously perfected the room's geometry and created a spacious closet that could be entered from the hallway.

The design of the first-floor powder room, right, was equally ingenious. By moving the cellar stairs a few feet, Sandy made room for an attractive sunken bathroom with three steps leading into it. Because the entire area is tucked under the front stairway (page 71), it was not necessary to borrow space from the broad first-floor hallway.

Once the new bathroom had come into being, Sandy took special care to ensure that it would not be an oppressive little cave. Her search for a lightly tinted window yielded a section of vintage stained glass that now suffuses the room with pastel peach tones, providing privacy without resorting to the severe colors of church windows.

The secret to inspired renovation, notes Sandy, is being open to the possibility of moving walls and windows around. Homeowners planning the reconstruction of an old house should not be intimidated by its history, or they will wind up with a home that is more musty than venerable.

So deteriorated are the houses Sandy renovates that she outfits them from scratch, conducting prolonged hunts for vintage fixtures. The brass shelf, right, once graced an elegant train compartment.





“There’s always an attraction in taking something homely and making it beautiful—and there’s something addictive about it, too. By the time the house goes up for sale, I’m loath to part with it. I’ve become a sort of Pygmalion,” says Sandy, referring to the mythological Cypriot sculptor who fell in love with his own creation.

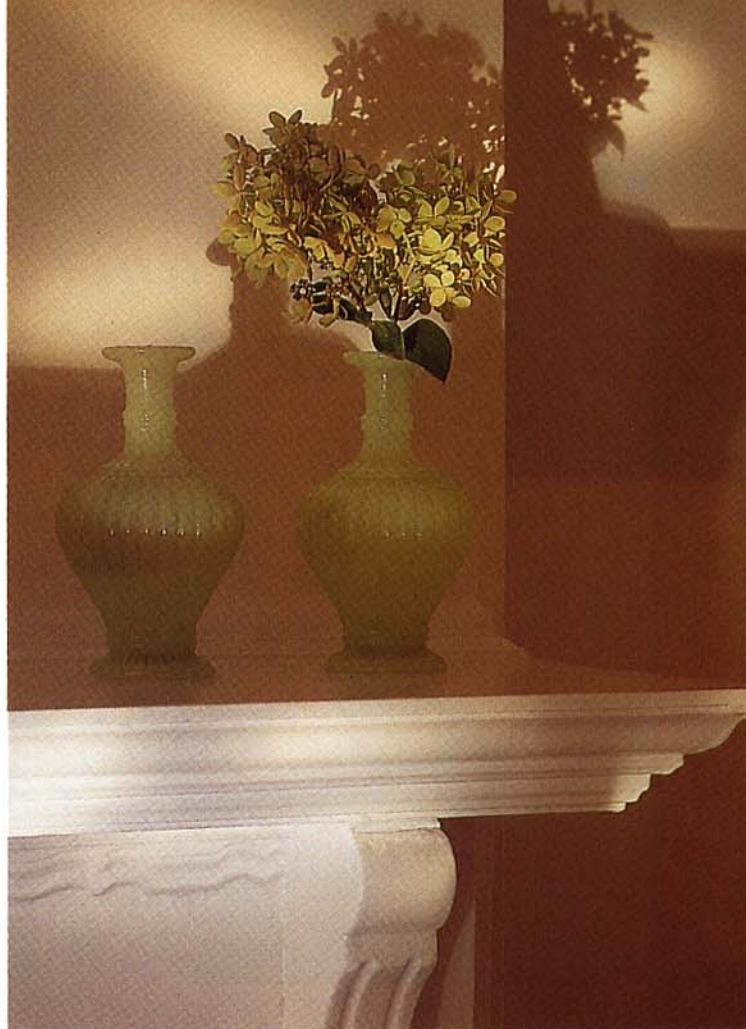


A Splash of Simplicity

An artist by training and inclination, Sandy resists cluttering a home with signature touches, preferring to leave each house a blank canvas to be decorated by its unknown future owner. "I don't get too carried away with making my own statement. I want the house to be a background, a place some couple can move into and then adapt it for themselves."

Regardless of a home's age and architectural style, Sandy gives it a cellar-to-roofbeam splash of simplicity through the understated juxtaposition of high-gloss white enamel trim and creamy walls. If a mantelpiece is painted pine, like that in the living room, below and opposite, she tries to strip it down to the bare wood. If the wood is darker—oak perhaps, such as the mantels in the bedroom, opposite top, or the second-floor sitting room, opposite bottom—then whitewash is the name of the game. Though she respects tradition, she feels no one should have to live in a somber interior that resembles a nine-room Ivy League library.

"I'm committed to having a Victorian look its age—I wouldn't put the Guggenheim Museum's mammoth spiral walkway inside it—but I'm not married to accents that are heavy, dark, or serious," she explains. If



she feels a home is too severe looking, or that a dentil molding contrasts with the gentle sweep of an arched doorway, she has no qualms about pulling the teeth.

Even so, balancing her main design principles—clear division of rooms and free flow of space—can be tricky. "Like many homes of the period, this house was built with three floors of identical railroad flats," Sandy points out. "The Victorians stacked them up as though they were little building blocks, and if you don't alter the entranceways, the middle room is a dismal den." Sandy opens the rooms by widening the doorways and adding glass transoms, retaining the dividing walls and the cozy chambers. "If I didn't care about the flow of space I could leave the rooms as they are, or If I didn't care about division, I could gut the whole place. But I'm not big on the Great Room philosophy—I like a comfortable setting that invites intimacy."

All the mantels in this Shadyside home were original to the house and still intact, with the exception of the late-Victorian pine piece, left and opposite right, which Sandy discovered piled up with other old furniture in a Central Pennsylvania barn. "Sometimes I think I'm buying back the very pieces that were stripped from the home I'm fixing up," she says.