

SHELTER



I AM LAKE MORTON

How homeowners with big vision
and a big-box budget brought
an historic Lake Morton
home back to life

written by **Christian Lee**
photography by **Tina Sargeant**



I am a house.

To be precise, I am an historic Lake Morton house. Built in the 1920s, I used to be very nice. Well, I guess I still am, in many ways. However, I suffered a bit of a reversal of fortune a few years ago. I mean, not to be boastful or put too much swagger in my step, but back in the 1920s I was the cat’s pajamas in my area of town. I like to think I was swanky, like Betty Blythe in the silent-film classic *Queen of Sheba*. Well, maybe that’s a reach. I may not have been quite as attractive as Ms. Blythe. I wasn’t built by one of those folks constructing the enormous, fancy houses on some of the other lakes in the area, but I could still hold my own as a keen Arts and Crafts bungalow with more than a minor touch of class.

So, here I am, still alive, fortuitously saved by the great taste and unlimited budget of some wonderful local folks with vision. At least that’s my considered opinion. The unlimited-budget part is a stretch, however. That’s actually what I want to tell you about. My owners didn’t have unlimited resources, yet they found a way to bring me back to my glory. They took my weathered, worn bones and managed to breathe new life into me on a big-box budget. They didn’t break the bank.

I was built not far from Lake Morton in what is now known as the South Lake Morton Historic District. Lake Morton, as you may have heard, is known for the

glorious swans that inhabit its shores and lake. There are also ducks, but somehow the poor ducks get lost in all the “swan love” that everyone feels. The swans simply appeared sometime in 1923 and lasted until about 1954 when the alligators and local pets finished eating them. An industrious (and obviously well-connected) local resident wrote to Queen Elizabeth II about the swan-as-gator-food issue, and HRH arranged to send us a couple of royal swans to replace them. So the swans you see around the lake have a royal lineage of sorts, which in turn makes my neighborhood a kind of Buckingham Palace suburb. Buckingham West, so to speak. By extrapolation, I consider myself a royal descendant. Even though I’m a house and not a swan, it’s close enough for Lakeland.

Since I was built, my neighborhood has seen some significant ups and downs. I was originally part of the boom period of the 1920s that quickly went bust with the changes brought on by the market crash and depression that followed. Buckingham West wasn’t immune from some of the transformations that resulted during those tough times. But the bones of the neighborhood were solid, and by 1985 my ’hood was declared a United States Historic District and placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This was in no small part because of the ahead-of-its-time urban planning done by the city forefathers in



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the 1920s and the substantial numbers of architecturally significant structures spanning the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Most of my neighbors are Arts and Crafts, but many are also Victorian, Spanish Revival, and Queen Anne (sorry, Queen Elizabeth).

As mentioned previously, I eventually fell on hard times. Maintenance just wasn't what it needed to be, and I couldn't keep up without a family that actually had the desire to hold a paint brush and lovingly apply a shingle and nail here and there. So, there I sat with the kind of people living in me that didn't really care what I looked like or how I felt about things. In fact, I was ignored for years. That is, until my new owners arrived on the scene with a vision of what I once was and could be again. I'll call them "the Saints," since they would prefer I not mention them by name.

The Saints recognized my potential and, perhaps more importantly, the potential of the neighborhood in general. In other words, they had imagination. They found me to be charming, in a rough sort of way (I did say I had run into hard times).

I have some old-house renovation advice for you. The first thing you do after you buy an old house that needs love is resist waking up the next day in a clammy, cold sweat induced by panic. Do not open your eyes, rub the perspiration off your brow, look over at your spouse, and scream, "What have you gotten me into?" or something similar (or, perhaps, worse). To avoid that communication "problem," create a plan that includes a wish list and that all-important "B" word, a budget, ahead of time. You definitely want to avoid being stranded with, in, or around a house that has no plan and, worse, no budget.





My Saints had a wish list, a budget, and a plan — all of the ingredients typically necessary to dodge hopeless despair. Maybe it's not everything you need, but having a grip on these things does help. Renovating an old house requires one key component: focus on fixing one thing at a time. Because there will be A LOT of things to fix, and you will become absolutely, positively, saturated with “fixtocity” (the need to get it done now). Do not get overwhelmed with what color to paint the hall closet when today's issue may well be a case of no air conditioning when it's 120 degrees outside. When heat stroke is imminent, paint colors need to take a back seat for a while. Sigh.

You will run into problems. And you will likely occasionally come up with some really bad ideas for solutions. First, blame your spouse for the bad ideas. Just kidding. Try to recognize the bad ideas for what they are. Stinkers. And go at it again from another direction. You will come up with what works, and that's part of the fun and satisfaction of surviving a renovation.

So here's how to do it. Fix stuff. Stand back and admire your work. Repeat by fixing something else. More admiring. Repeat. Sometimes blame your spouse for what isn't going as well as you had planned. Then make up with your spouse.



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I'M NOW A HAPPY,
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THE SOOTHING
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RENOVATION.

I'm a three-bedroom, two-bath house with about 2,300 square feet of living space. I'm situated on a quiet side street with a new brick paver driveway that feels and looks perfect for the era. I have to confess to a visceral reaction when tires run over me (It. The driveway. Whatever). And, yay, I received a new roof, paint, and columns out front with some wonderful Greek Revival planters lining the sidewalk that leads up from the street. I was painted gray with white trim and received lovely new landscaping for good measure. My front porch has a refurbished amber tongue-and-groove pine ceiling, with suspended glass jars over colorful, intimate, comfortable furniture so the Saints can sit and visit with their neighbors, just like folks did in the 1920s. Perfect. Now *that's* what I'm used to.

The Saints had some pretty clear ideas of what they wanted to do and how to accomplish it. They didn't do all the work themselves. They hired experts to come in and help. But I would hear them talking (I actually am the four walls, after all). There are some great sources you can use for inspiration. Go to Instagram. Look to Pinterest for design inspiration. Put key words like "vintage design," "remodeling," "interior decorating," and the names of designers you like in your search engine. Find a cool, old book or two, cut out pictures you like and buy classic (and inexpensive) black frames with white matting at Michael's. Frame the pictures and create an entire wall this way. Go to flea markets, but don't spend more than \$100 for a work of art. Browse vintage stores, Ikea, Target, Lowe's, Home Depot, and Floor D  cor for sales and interesting ideas.

The Saints decided to use premade kitchen cabinets from Ikea, and they look and fit great. They built a center island that included the stove and cooktop with a central stainless steel hood. A double-door stainless steel refrigerator was located on a back wall leaving plenty of work space, cabinets, and drawers. A simple pipe was hung over the kitchen sink to suspend drop pendant lights with vintage bulbs for lighting. It's affordable, yet sophisticated.

On the family-room wall, they disassembled pallets and then reassembled them as a kind of wood paneling. How cool is that? The wall is absolutely covered with texture and variety, adding interest as if it's a work of art, which I guess it is in a way. A robust and glorious old-school motif.

My Saints found furniture on overstock.com and Target. They bought a ready-to-install

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bathroom sink and chest/vanity combination at Lowe’s that has the look and feel of vintage charm. They took out a tub and created a shower using affordable white subway tile with stylish gray grouting. My bathrooms went from imminent doom, the result of years of steadfast bad taste, to stylized displays of dedicated design love. Wow. I felt so much better. I’d been delivered into a postwar, non-Levittown, contemporary world.

Stacked boxes from Ikea with colorful, large vintage letters on the top shelf were placed in one of the kids’ rooms to help with organization and storage. World globes of different sizes were hung (that’s right) in a corner of the family room, adding an amazing sense of design imagination and immaculate imbalance to the space. Three graciously nomadic old doors were used as headboards in the master bedroom.

Instead of using wallpaper, the Saints painted a pattern on the wall. Not as expensive as wallpaper but just as interesting, pretty, and effective. Prefinished hardwood flooring from Lowe’s was used throughout, while the hall bathroom’s tile floors came from Lowe’s but look like wood — amazing what they’ve been able to do with various materials since 1920. They utilized galvanized plumbing pipe, painted black, with added stained-wood shelves to create a unique entertainment center perfect for the wall space. And speaking of space, the Saints created symmetry and equilibrium by hanging a sliding barn door to separate the family room from the dining room.

I’m now a happy, absolutely content, old house, consecrated in the soothing oil of tasteful renovation. And I’m loving my new family and the new life they breathed into my, shall we say, senior lungs. In a matter of months, I went from, “I’m in big trouble and I’m going to die,” to, “Calm down, the Saints have arrived to save me.” They transformed me from a neglected lump of forgotten history to a relaxed, splendid, and glorious future part of the new Lakeland. From low self-esteem to deliverance. Like Hans Christian Andersen’s famous fairy tale, from ugly duckling to beautiful swan. Hopefully, I will be able to dodge the alligators in the years to come. 🐢

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