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Out of the past

* A new generation of buyers seeks post-World War II homes frozen in time. Larger lots and a shot at their own remodeling fuel the trend.
By Marnell Jameson, Special to The Times

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Except for a room addition in 1962, Shelton and Helen Eaton left their Long Beach home largely the way it was when they became the home's first owners in 1952: same linoleum, same Formica, same pine cabinets.

Jim and Julie Bakken are glad they did. The Bakkens, who bought the 50-plus-year-old home in 2002, are bringing it into the 21st century while preserving the home's character.

"It was exactly what we were looking for," said Julie Bakken, 36. "We wanted this neighborhood, and we wanted a home where the owners had done very little remodeling. We wanted a good base that we could fix our way. You could tell this home had been cherished."

The Eatons, like many who remember the Great Depression, weren't big on extravagance, but kept their home in excellent repair. Over the years they'd replaced the roof, the windows and the plumbing. As for the rest, if it was serviceable, it stayed.

As people of that generation move on -- often to retirement or lower-maintenance housing -- a younger generation is moving in and refashioning homes that have been frozen in time to better suit their tastes and needs.

Unlike 30 to 40 years ago, homes today have to accommodate computers, telecommuters, home-based businesses, kids who need technical work alcoves, and blended or extended immigrant families, said Barry Berkus, architect and owner of B3 Architects in Santa Barbara, a firm that specializes in housing and urban planning.

"So much has changed since the 1950s in the way we ask our homes to serve our needs," said Berkus, who has been designing homes for 45

years and has studied this trend. "We have many different ages and more diversity living together, so homes need to accommodate that."

Younger buyers acquiring older homes, Berkus observed, tend to make the same kinds of changes: They update kitchens and baths, expand master bedrooms into master suites, add storage space, remodel garages, create rooms with flexibility -- such as great rooms to serve as living, dining and entertainment rooms -- and make the outdoors more inviting.

That covers what the Bakkens have in mind. The first-time buyers have added 600 square feet to the original 1,200-square-foot, three-bedroom, two-bath home. They expanded the master bedroom, added a closet for him and expanded one for her.

They enlarged the master bathroom, remodeling it with travertine, a spacious shower, maple cabinets and a vanity. In the second bathroom they added slate floor tile, a large bathtub with jets and antiqued white wainscoting. They added crown molding in every room, including the bathrooms, and created a laundry room by enclosing a small covered patio adjacent to the kitchen. The original owners had a washer and dryer in the one-car garage.

Much of the added square footage was used to create a great room. The former living room, which was more like a small parlor, is now a dining area off the kitchen with a fireplace where people can gather while dinner's cooking.

Underway is the conversion of the one-car garage into a 2 1/2-car garage -- space for two cars plus a workshop for Jim.

The kitchen will be next. For that remodel, the Bakkens plan to take out a wall to integrate the kitchen with the rest of the house. They will replace old counters with granite, and put in maple cabinets, an island, a bar seating area, slate floors and new appliances.

"I could see why people used to keep their kitchens hidden," Julie said. "They weren't too pretty to look at. But this one will be one you want to see."

To create indoor-outdoor flow, they replaced two picture windows in the former living room with a sliding door for access to the yard. In the side yard, they plan to cover the existing concrete patio with Mexican paver tiles and plants, and add an eating area. "The new space will feel a lot more lush," Julie said.

To keep costs down, Jim, 38, who did construction work in high school, is doing much of the remodeling himself. When completed, Julie estimates they will have put about \$100,000 to \$120,000 into the home, which they purchased for \$286,000. A comparable home on a busier street in the established community, she said, just sold for \$660,000.

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Don't change a thing

"A lot of buyers prefer to buy in an older neighborhood -- even if that means updating the property -- because they get more house on more land," said Doug Hamilton, a broker associate with First Team Real Estate, who in February represented Maxine Staump in the sale of her 43-year-old home in Orange.

Staump, 75, wanted to downsize. Her two children are long grown, and her husband died in 1991. While she had kept her home in good working condition, the decor was much the way it had been for the 33 years she lived there.

When she asked Hamilton what she should do to fix up her house to sell, he said to do nothing. "That can turn into an overwhelming and never-ending process, particularly for older sellers," Hamilton said. "Also, most buyers have a specific idea of what they want to do. It's best for sellers to save their money and leave the remodeling to the buyers."

Doris Small, who represented the buyer and is a broker with Century 21 in Santa Ana, agrees. "Older sellers aren't likely to make the same choices as a younger buyer. It's best if they just keep the house in good repair. Buyers like to know they're getting a good basic house, a good roof and good plumbing, and make cosmetic changes themselves."

Buyer Earl Hamer, 46, liked the fact that not much had been done to the 1,689-square-foot, three-bedroom, three-bath single-story ranch on an 8,400-square-foot lot. He had his own plans.

Hamer, who works out of his home as a tax planner, saw the house would need some work to accommodate his home-based business and young family. The first thing he did was enclose the breezeway that was between the house and garage to create a private office with a separate entrance from the outside.

"This gives me the isolation I need to work," he said. "Makes it so I don't have to bring clients through the house, and doesn't let my work space inconvenience my family."

He also repainted, restored some doors and gave the garage a face-lift, rewiring one wall to add electrical outlets. His updated garage now has a sound system and television. "I can watch the ballgame while I work."

Hamer paid \$445,000 for the house, and has put about \$25,000 into it for the office addition, the refurbished interior and some new landscaping. The alternative was a newer home with less space on a smaller lot for the same price.

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An affinity for the past

Apart from buying into an established neighborhood and getting a larger lot and home, said Brent Herrington of DMB Associates, a developer of large-scale planned communities based in Scottsdale, nostalgia is another reason buyers gravitate to post-World War II homes.

"In the past three to five years, Generation Xers have shown they have a fondness for homes that boomers grew up in and away from. To Generation Xers, those homes built between the late '40s and early '60s, look Rat Pack cool, with their low-slung roofs. They see Dean Martin with a martini," he said. "Baby boomers just don't look on those neighborhoods with the same affection. The Gen-Xers bring to the homes built in the '50s and '60s the reverence that boomers have for homes built in the '30s and '40s."

Such fondness played a role in Walter Hess' decision to purchase his home from a couple who had lived there for 30 years and are retiring to Arizona. When the single, 37-year-old custom cabinetmaker was house hunting, he found an 836-square-foot home on a 15,000-square-foot lot in Van Nuys.

The 1948 house not only met his need for privacy, but also reminded him of his childhood home in Burbank. "I liked the ranch-style architecture and old fruit trees."

Although he's still in escrow, Hess already has designs on the house. Upgrading the kitchen will come first, he said, and then he

plans to expand the master bedroom and make the other bedroom an entertainment center. He also wants to transform the garage into a space where he can work on his hobbies: motorcycles and model airplanes.

And with the large lot, the two-bedroom, one-bath home has room to grow.

"The house can change as my life does," he said. "If I ever do meet Mrs. Right, and she likes the house, too, who knows? It could be a great family house."

Which is what the Bakkens are thinking.

"When we bought the home, we thought we'd fix it up and sell," Julie said. "Now we think we'll stay. We like our neighbors so much and we want to start a family as soon as the construction is done."

So maybe they, too, will call this home for the next generation, or two.

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First things first

Common changes made by new owners of older homes:

- * Remove cottage cheese ceilings.
- * Replace carpet with hardwood floors. Or pull up the carpet and refinish existing hardwood floors.
- * Upgrade kitchens and baths, replacing fixtures, finishes and appliances.
- * Replace metal slider windows with vinyl clad or wood sash windows, sometimes enlarging the window space in the process.
- * Replace sliding glass doors with French doors.
- * Enlarge closets or make them more efficient with closet organization systems.
- * Create more storage space, either by adding pull-down ladders to access attics or building storage in the rafter space in the garage.

- * Tear down walls between the kitchen and living areas.
- * Expand master bedrooms to create master suites.
- * Create outdoor living space for dining and lounging.

Sources: Doris Small, Century 21, Santa Ana; Joe DiTore, Re/Max, Long Beach; Barry Berkus, B3 Architects, Santa Barbara; Brent Herrington, DMB Associates, Scottsdale.

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PHOTO: THE BUILDING BLOCKS: Jim Bakken is doing much of the remodeling on his 1950s Long Beach home. Like a growing number of young couples, he and his wife say they were looking for an older home "with a good base we could fix our way."

ID NUMBER:20040613hynp5hkf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: HE APPROVES: Jack the cat surveys the remodeled guest bathroom, which includes a large bathtub with jets, in Jim and Julie Bakken's Long Beach home.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: REWORKED: Earl and Ouida Hamer, with daughter Amari, enclosed a breezeway in their early-'60s home to use as an office.

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