Vintage House Becomes a TV Star

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

FOR the pioneer modernist Le Corbusier, a house was a machine to live in; for others it is a place to hang one's hat; for most, a house is a home, the stage where the drama of life is played. But some houses are central to the drama, or at least have a strong supporting

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role. The drawing room of the house at Eaton Place in "Upstairs, Downstairs" was more than a background against which the characters came and went — it was the familiar constant in war and peace and joy and grief; its changes signaled deeper changes in time and the family. When the house was sold, the series ended.

Lately, more houses have been getting into the act, and the news. Old houses are increasingly used as settings or themes for movies and television productions, for reasons that range from cost to character. An interesting old house is a cheap set for independents filming anything from art to porn. While producers of the latter are more concerned with just keeping the budget low, finding the setting to fit the cinematic theme can be as painstaking a talent search as casting a film.

One old house was purchased recently by a Boston television station to star in its own series. WGBH (Channel 2) has acquired a handsome 19th-century hybrid well past its prime, in outlying Dorchester, which is currently the subject of a series called "This Old House." Over a 13-week period, it is being repaired and restored for the television audience in a domestic do-it-yourself drama.

This is the kind of house that has meant home to many generations of Americans — a square white clapboard structure with a Greek Revival doorway, probably built in the mid-19th century, a dormer story over a bracketed

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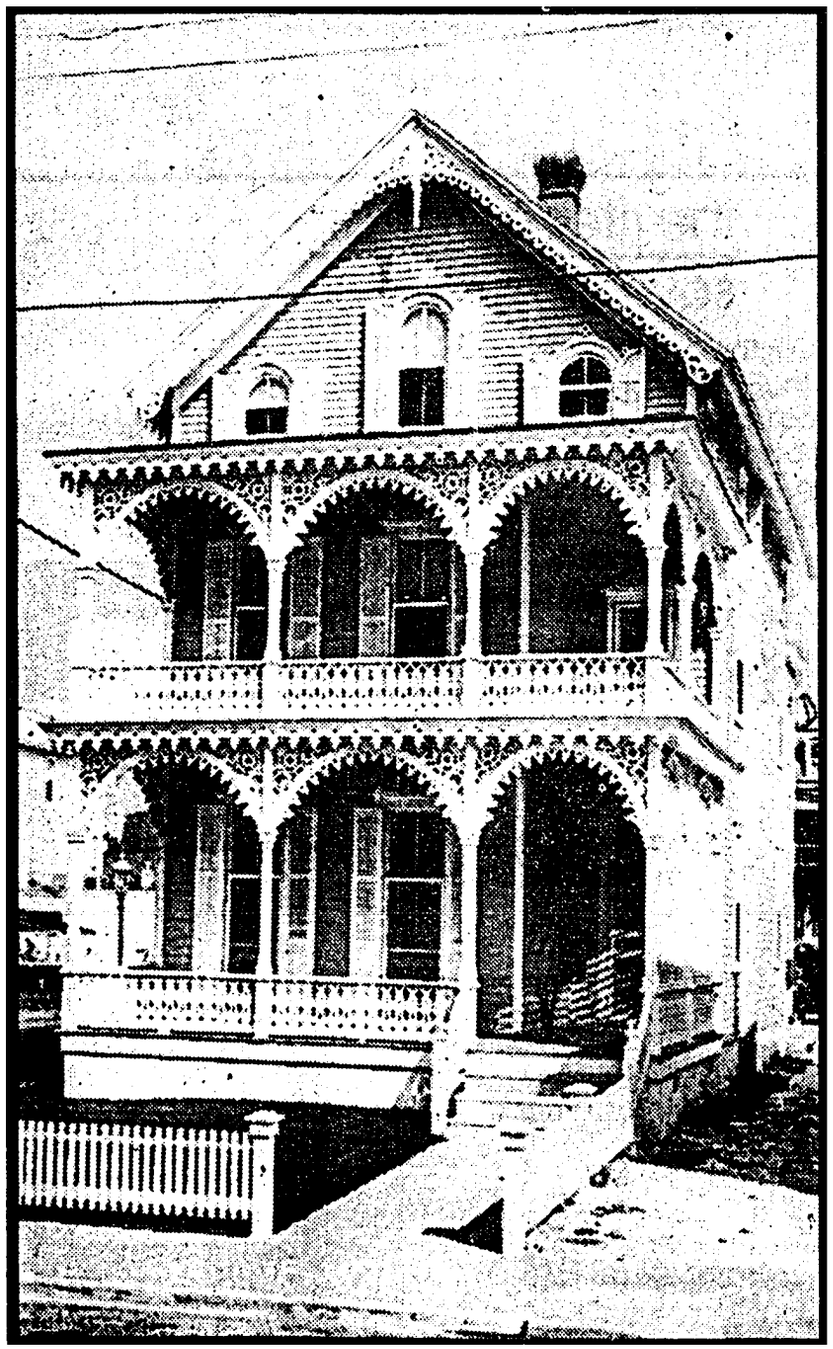

Gingerbread is now prized for its charm, craftsmanship

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container — mix together 25 pounds of loamy topsoil, rich in rotted organic material, four quarts of peat moss, four quarts of vermiculite (or perlite) if the white pellets don't offend your esthetic sense, half a cup of fine lime, half a cup cornice added later like a proper Victorian hat. It is almost the archetypical New England house, unlike the gussied-up "Colonial" of the shelter magazines or the proper Williamsburg models, unembellished by such masters of elegant architectural detail as Bullfinch or McIntyre — a solidly and plainly carpenter-built dwelling in a comfortable mix of vernacular styles. That it had seen better days was clear, but so was its symbolic value as a house everyone could identify with and care about, and learn from.

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The scenario for the series deals with restoration and repairs, from new heating and plumbing installations to the rebuilding of porches and roof and the refinishing of floors, walls and ceilings. The climax will be the construction of a "dream kitchen." Local tradespeople, demonstrating techniques and processes, are the "characters" of the story. With the boom in recycling, this series could become as popular as an earlier small-budget WGBH sleeper — the French cooking of Julia Child.

WGBH paid $17,000 for the house and expects to put about $25,000 to $30,000 into its reconstruction. Today, the inner-city suburb is virtually the last place where one can find this kind of house bargain. That discovery has led to the phenomenon called "gentrification," a form of spontaneous renewal by which older neighborhoods are being reclaimed by the middle class — a process of urban rehabilitation that has the unfortunate side effect of often dispossessing the urban poor. Although this trend is being overoptimistically heralded as the cities' rebirth, it is reversing decay in some areas.

A much smaller movement, "urban homesteading," is a token attempt to give the less privileged a chance to reclaim houses in deteriorating city neighborhoods through "sweat equity," applying their own labor and low-cost loans to houses that are sold to them for token sums. In Savannah, Ga., and Charleston, S.C., an exemplary package of Federal grants and aids has been put together to restore modest 19th-century neighborhoods that would once have been bulldozed, keeping their present residents.

The appeal of older houses of almost unlimited stylistic variety is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is related to the high price and scarcity of new houses, with their shrinking space and minimal construction, and the success of the historic preservation movement.

This burgeoning growth of neighborhood and architectural consciousness has come from a forceful combination of grass-roots action and elite leadership. Results range from the rescue of pedigreed 18th-century houses from the wreckers to the clasping of the universally denigrated Victorian house to the movement's collective bosom.

What was once considered ugly and expendable is now prized for its wayward charm and extinct craftsmanship. The American dream is no longer restricted to a rose-covered suburban cottage, the developer's latest status symbol or a choice of department-store model rooms.

Decaying Victorian rows have been turned into handsome inner-city enclaves. Brownstoning has progressed from an oddball pastime to a shrewd real estate investment. San Francisco's small gingerbread houses are lovingly painted in brilliant hues. Restored house and neighborhood tours are annual events. Greek Revival plaster work or a General Grant pier glass is something to boast about, and an Eastlake mantel is the owner's glory.

The old house revival has reached the point where, if you are not lucky enough to have the right period artifacts, there are dealers to supply them. The irony, of course, is that most were rescued from demolition sites as junk when similar, or even better, houses were destroyed.

Starting with Jefferson and Monticello, Americans have always been quite passionate about their homes. What is new is the preoccupation with the vintage house, or the house as an object for its own sake. It has become an item of scholarship or nostalgia for the connoisseur. In the back-to-the-city movement, it is the houses that bring the people.

Throughout those neglected neighborhoods that are the new urban frontiers, domestic pioneers battle with heat and plumbing and leaking roofs in high-ceilinged rooms that promise the kind of gracious living and elegant detail that no split-level can provide.

The unending process of restoration and maintenance in a time of scarce and unskilled work and stratospheric costs is formidable; it takes the young and strong or the old and optimistic to live with plaster endlessly about their ears; more than romance is needed to dine by candlelight with no ceiling above one's head.

The difference is that these houses have much more than problems, they have personalities; their presence is as real as that of any member of the family. And their owners become hopelessly addicted to such things as space and style.

Today the house has become more than shelter or status; it is being recognized as an important part of the national cultural heritage. We are beginning to understand and value the art and aspirations of our forebears in the details of their dwellings. In a sense we have all come home.

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The New York Times/Ira Wyman

The house that Boston's WGBH bought: its restoration is subject of 13-week series