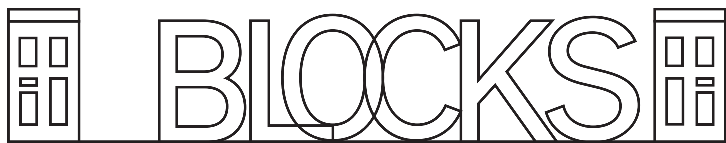


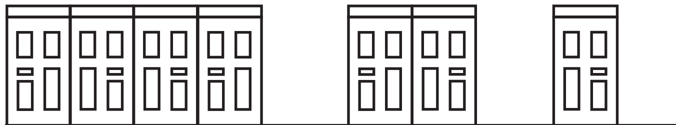
jenn kotler vol 2

caving in my basement

`After a year` of searching in pandemic-fueled fervor, we bought an 1880's brick rowhouse.

My partner grew up in a brick rowhome in West Baltimore. He left for New York where he met me. That was over a decade ago. We moved back to Baltimore. He has come full circle, moving into his own, old brick rowhouse.

Together, we have been on a journey buying, fixing, and living in a historic fixer-upper in Baltimore City. We've learned something about maintaining, remodeling, working with contractors, and when to get a permit. We've torn down walls, built them back, replastered, added circuits, and talked to experts. We've scoured over plat drawings and read about the zoning laws for historic lot encroachments. I've learned to look at materials and deduce the period they were used. I've read newspaper clippings from the 1900 Baltimore Sun to learn about who lived here before me. An old house is a series of puzzles to solve and facts to learn if you care to.



Our 1-bedroom apartment had been fine for years. The landlord was mostly absent except to occasionally remind us that the ugly beige wall-to-wall carpeting should be treated like a family heirloom. Then, the sink broke and she didn't fix it for months. The pandemic raged. Two of us were confined to two rooms, working, sleeping, eating, taking endless video calls. The universal story of 2020. Every time we walked the dog or simply wanted to step outside, we donned masks and took the elevator down through a lobby filled with elderly neighbors. The stress built. It was time to go.

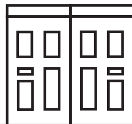
The housing market was bananas. Prices hit record highs. People bid far over asking-price and waived inspections. We were in our late twenties. Most people we knew did not have the means to even consider buying a house. But interest rates were low and we had saved up money from tech jobs and years of renting cheap places.

It took months of looking until we even found a house worth putting an offer on. Then more months of bidding on different houses, being outbid, and then going back to looking. One time our offer was accepted. During the inspection, we learned of an immediate roof replacement, foundation underpinning, dangerous aluminum wiring, and disintegrating asbestos tile. With that we ended the contract and were back to the bidding cycle.

Suddenly, we were homeowners. I could paint the walls any color. Hell, I could knock down walls if I felt like it.

welcome

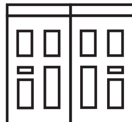
home



I'd like to introduce you to our house.

The place has so much historic charm. Her face is framed by a cute porch and detailed cornice. Her windows tall, elegant, and rotting, with shutters slightly broken. Her original hardwoods and nice-sized yard. Her two(!) bathrooms—we'd never had two bathrooms. And on a tree-lined street in Hampden, a walkable, urban neighborhood. The house had so much of what we were looking for. But it was an 1880s fixer-upper that hadn't been maintained for years—it also had… problems.
It rained indoors. The water came in through the ceiling of the sunroom, an extension bump-out on stilts at the back of the house. (Why does every house in Baltimore have a sketchy extension?) The home inspector warned that the sunroom was not structurally sound. It was no surprise since the floor slanted downwards and shook if you stepped on certain spots. We optimistically looked right past all the work, blinded by the light. In hindsight, it might have been the sunlight shining through a large crack in the ceiling.

stone
dust



`Because of the age` of this house—the first insurance was taken in 1888—getting an understanding of how it works is different than in a modern home. Learning what's broken and can be reasonably fixed as opposed to something that can be lived with as a "charming quirk" is important for maintaining sanity and budget. Historic houses are mysterious onions, their stories only discernible by peeling back the many layers.
It is tiny details—unused hinges, mismatched floorboards, and the placement of electrical sockets—that help us construct a history. Consider when different technology emerged, and when it might have entered the home. Back when Hampden was a mill town, the neighborhood did not have power lines or plumbing. The streets were cobblestone and dirt. Dust clouds followed horses as they passed by.

Modern houses have wood or steel structures covered by a layer of siding. The main structure of historic brick houses is also the siding, layers of brick sit on a stone foundation. All materials were hyper-local. The brick was made in South Baltimore. According to my elderly neighbor, quarry workers lived in my house. Its foundation stones came from that very quarry just a few blocks away; now a townhouse community.

The quarry owner lived across the street from us in a stately house with a wraparound porch, which has been broken into three apartments. The basement apartment exits across the street from my porch and is used as a brothel. It had a purple light outside to signify when it was open for business.

When we moved in, the mortar between the stones and brick was original to the house, made from sandy dirt, water and other random bits they smooshed in between. During our final walkthrough, I placed my hand on the foundation and smiled as I felt the history of the place seep into my bones. As I ran my hand along the stones, pebbly mortar swept away like sand falling through an hourglass. I pretended not to notice. Months later, while gardening, a bunch of dusty mortar blew into my eyes. With tears running down my face, I inspected the spaces between the stones. There were innumerable holes from burrowing mice. I had been seeing them run all over the house. After 140 years, it was time to repoint—chipping away the old cement and replace it with new. I met a mason working on a house up the street. A couple of days and a few thousand dollars later, we now have a foundation with modern cement between the stones. It has a smooth and uniform texture with no individual pebbles to be seen. I was sad to lose an original feature of the home, but it is in the same color and style as before. I'm not some monster who would have a historic stone foundation repointed in a modern style.

explore the depths

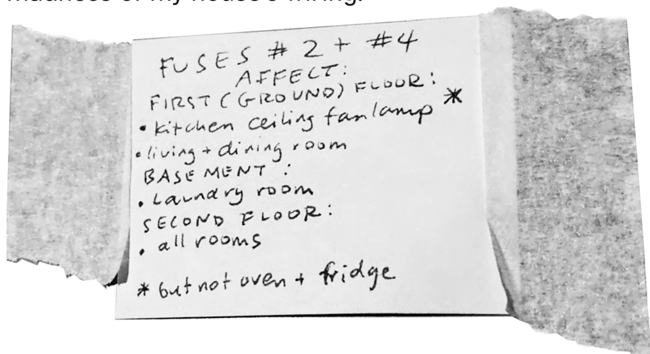
`When trying to learn the story` of a house, you review the outside. After, head directly to the basement—you'll learn the most about its organs. These physical clues can help us piece together its past.

When I look up at my basement's ceiling, I see the wooden joists—the bones of the house—thirteen feet wide and two inches thick. Resting directly across the joists is the wood floor of the first story. I wonder which nearby forest this wood came from, and where on the Jones Falls it was milled. I watch the boards flex as people in the living room walk around. When we jump, the floor moves up and down with us.

Looking around I see the house's heart and blood. Generations of abandoned heating systems. Multiple chimneys, a wrought iron wood-burning stove, an iron door for shoveling coal, an empty oil tank, and the modernish gas heater that we currently use. Upstairs at the far end of the dining room, the mismatched planks of wood reveal a footprint left behind from the oil heating system. A square on the floor does not match the others. I know there was once a monstrous grate that led to the fires in the basement. I saw one while looking at another house in the neighborhood. The heater had to be eighty years old but was still a workhorse. Together, those mismatched floorboards and an abandoned oil tank tell a story.

I also see the house's nervous system, electric technology from every decade since 1900. There are junction boxes, hiding knob-and-tube. BX/Flex, and modern wiring. If you're lucky, organized groups of wires run in parallel roads along the joists, and then up into the walls. In many old houses, wires with casings that don't match twist around themselves like the nerves of our brachial plexus, impossible to discern where they originate and where they lead.

Eventually, any active wire leads to the circuit breaker. In an old house, the breaker switches are an exciting gameshow of "What Will Turn Off!" a note taped to the panel, in handwriting I don't recognize, clues me into the madness of my house's wiring:



In modern houses, one breaker switch focuses on one room or appliance. Early electric was minimal so everything could fit on one modern breaker. That's why breakers #2 and #4 will turn off lights across the entire house.

Throughout the house, some outlets are in the walls and others are in the wood molding along the floor. This gives me a hint of the period in which they were added. An outlet in a wall means that the wall has been accessed during a remodel at some point because outlets can't easily be added to plaster walls. Early wiring was all added behind baseboards.

Leaving the basement, we can begin to consider the walls and floor. The outer walls of our house are, unfortunately, mostly uninsulated. I counted three layers of brick when we removed the plywood board hiding an abandoned doorway on the side of the house. A layer of lathing comes next, wooden stakes running parallel with horse hair shoved in between. Three layers of muddy plaster is skimmed across the boards and hardened to an incredibly dense wall. Today in America, most walls are constructed with premade drywall sheets rather than slathering on multiple layers of plaster. To figure out how a wall was built, make a fist and knocking on it. Plaster walls are hard and make a deep thud. Drywall's hollow interior reverberates in a higher pitch.

A staircase leads to the 3 bedrooms upstairs. The stairs are as cramped and steep as those on a Dutch boat. They are painted brown—the exact shade of my two tabby cats who like to run under my feet as I climb the stairs. I clutch the banister so not to fall to my death. When we had a baby, we added a strip LED lights under the banister to try to avoid any falling disasters.

The walls and ceiling in the middle bedroom had a spiky "popcorn" texture, popular in the 1960s and '70s. I've learned this questionable interior design look was often achieved using an even more questionable material: spray-on asbestos. We did not confirm the material on our walls. We skim-coated over it with drywall compound. Generally, these materials are safe if encapsulated.

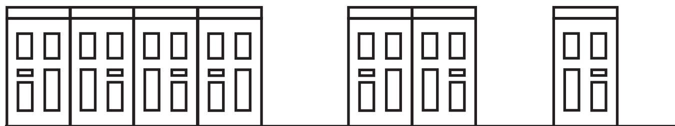
The wood floor throughout the house is original and shows its age. It's not the classy inlay I've seen in other Baltimore homes. The planks differ in width, and there is a noticeable gap between each of the boards which are not all parallel. When water spills, it drips right down to the basement. I've pulled out two-inch splinters from my toes after walking barefoot. They could benefit from being sanded and refinished, a huge job. For now, we have layered patterned carpets over the worst spots.

The floors throughout the house differ in thickness, depending on the number of layers. When entering the kitchen, you must step up a couple of inches. When I peer along the edge of the top basement step, I can count three layers over the original wood: 1950s vinyl, a plywood subfloor, and broken porcelain.
When the house was first built, it had no plumbing. There was a small wooden shed attached to the back of our basement. When we cleared out the garbage left by previous owners, we discovered a capped waste pipe plunging into the ground. Turns out the "shed" was an outhouse.

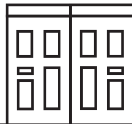
Every doorway has a transom, a window above the door. Opening a transom helps cycle air through the house, warm or cool, depending on the season.

One of my favorite original features of this house is our beautiful front window. It looks out onto the quaint treelined street. It’s almost the full height of the wall. Since it is protected by the porch roof, it’s in good condition for being over 130 years old. The glass is dappled with age and projects a beautiful pattern on the wall.

treasures, creatures, & the mind



`People view a property` on a spectrum from an asset to a home. Flippers buy run-down houses in hip neighborhoods, renovate them quickly and cheaply, and sell them for a profit. We bought a run-down house in a hip neighborhood and poured money and creativity and stress into it with dreams of turning it into the perfect nest. My only get-rich-quick scheme is rapping my knuckles against the walls, listening to the reverberation. I've been searching for a hollow spot filled with gold bars a previous owner stashed. It's the only way I will get a monetary return on my "investment" in this house anytime soon.



`Other than the generations` of humans who have lived here, we must also acknowledge the other creatures. Of course, there were dogs. Perhaps someone kept chickens in the backyard.

This is also the home of hundreds of generations of mice. When we moved in, I promptly removed traps filled with poison. Then, mice made their grand entry into my life. They were the most brazen mice. They would run across our feet as we sat on the couch watching movies, pausing to look up at us. Batting their eyelashes as if to say, I know you think I'm cute. I found it funny until their droppings started appearing all over the countertops, on the stove, inside of our pots and pans. Then I woke up in bed with a soft little mouse cuddled up against my back.

That's when we invited another two creatures to live in our house. Our cats Honey and Maple have been doing a great job of conveying the message that the mice are no longer welcome.

`Poisonous home design` blogs and toxic reality decorating shows have given me brain damage. I've looked at too many staged images of perfectly fake houses. My synapses have twisted a photoshopped image into what they think a house should be. Mine will never live up. I see clutter, and half-finished home improvement projects, and projects we haven't even started.

This is the most important thing I've learned since buying my old beautiful house. More important than the trivia about building materials and HVAC systems. It's dangerous business to spend too much time dreaming of how you will change your house. More dangerous than flaking lead paint. Since moving in, I have felt constant pressure to tackle the never-ending to-do list. I am learning to feel differently about it.

The list is always growing. Some tasks escalate into more work. Like the time we were fixing the sunroom—a multi-month, structural, and expensive project—and discovered the bathroom above was leaking through the ceiling. That became another multi-month, expensive project.

When I walk on the creaky splintery wooden floors, I see the beauty of their mismatched boards and the patina of 140 years of other human families walking from room to room. But I also see the potential for when we refinish them—and just like that the list weighs on my heart.

Only then I'll be able to relax and enjoy the house.

This gets to the core of a larger, spiritual principle. As Buddha said, desire leads to suffering. When you move into a house, you've just achieved A Very Big Thing. But it is a gateway into wanting even more things, stuff I never wanted as a renter. In reality, is a house ever complete? What does that even mean?

The problem with dreaming about my future house is that it stops me from enjoying the house I live in today. I must pause and celebrate what we've accomplished. It is too easy to move on to the next task on The List. Stop. Have a margarita. Host a dinner party. Wake up early and watch the dappled light come in through the front window. That's my advice to myself.

This place has been here for one hundred and forty years. I have joined a long lineage of caretakers contributing to its placefulness. I've added my own layer of paint to the walls. My steps wear into the floorboards. `That must be enough.`

Adventures buying, restoring & searching for gold in my 140-year old fixer-upper in Baltimore

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