



Looking through a window installation

How one Chicago homeowner learned to see windows in a new light

By Louis R. Carlozo

It's a saying so old that some trace it to the Gospel of Matthew: "The eyes are the windows to the soul." If that's true, I'd like to think windows themselves serve as portals into a home's soul. A great window means lots of things, both scientific and poetic. It's not just the energy it saves in winter, but the warm feeling it projects into a living space: not just how it filters ultraviolet light, but the way it catches and frames a rising or setting sun. A solid window works hard — and plays with our senses of comfort and aesthetics in the most sublime ways.

Which is to say that by any measure, all six windows in the upstairs rooms of my 1920s Victorian-bungalow hybrid on Chicago's North Side were shot, stuck, decayed — windows in name only, useless in form and function. What to do?

Owning and renovating an old home presents all sorts of challenges. So when my wife, Amy, and I pondered the window replacement project, we agreed on one thing: There would be no quality skimping.



We'd compromised when replacing our patio doors — and paid for it dearly. To save a few dollars, we wound up with this: a three-panel door, delivered after a month-long wait, that was the wrong size. We suffered through another month with a large hole socked in our kitchen wall, patched like a crude repair on a fire-damaged home.

When the right door finally arrived, it had a flimsy, busted latch. I pointed this out to the second crew foreman, only to get a lecture: "That's how the latch is supposed to work," he said. "It floats on ball bearings."

I may not install doors for a living, but I know enough carpentry from working on my guitar collection. "Look," I said, "this latch doesn't feel right." I was told I'd get used to it. I never did. And when I complained to the company — a well-known brand, by the way — I was offered a token 5 percent discount for all the trouble, inconvenience and backtalk. Never again, my wife and I swore.

And so began the road from window replacement to seeing things in a fresh light.

First, I consulted an unusual source — Chicago rock photographer Paul Natkin, who has a sharp eye for detail. He fashions all of his own home renovation by hand. He does beautiful work, from impressive cathedral ceilings down to the smoothest seam in his hardwood floors. So when I went over to Paul's house to help him tear out some old windows, I asked about his plan for replacements.

"Pella," he replied. "There's no need to mess around with any other brand."

To be sure, I did not want to mess around this time. The rot in my three-year-old daughter Genevieve's bedroom window had created a hole so large in the sill that I could've punched a hole in it with the same force you might use to push a car door shut. What's more, the left window's ancient pulley system had long since ruptured, leaving a floppy fragment of rope. We had to prop the pane open on hot days with a book of prayers. How appropriate. The window represented an eyesore at best, a serious safety hazard at worst.

In my five-year-old son Christopher's room, the situation was hardly better: the old panes required a weightlifter's strength to open and shut, what with all the wear, tear and layers of sticky paint and dirt. Down the hall, Amy and I had to endure dry-rotted sills in the master bedroom.

It didn't take much research to confirm what Paul Natkin already knew from rehabbing his last two homes. Pella's slogan — "Viewed To Be The Best.®" — was hardly an idle boast. "The Highest in Customer Satisfaction among Window and Door Manufacturers*" distinction from J.D. Power and Associates. High marks from *Consumer Reports* for their professionalism and knowledge of their installation crews. Family-owned. A ranking in the "100 Best Companies to Work For 2007" by *FORTUNE* magazine.

Most important: by our own informal poll, glowing praises from everyone Amy and I knew who had Pella® windows and doors gracing their homes.

After a brief discussion, Amy picked up a Pella catalog. We called over Pella salesman Rey Hammad and selected six replacement windows from Pella's Architect Series®, encased in lovely white pine and trimmed on the outside in a dark vermilion color known as Pella Red. We held our breath, plunked down \$5,226 and waited for the windows to arrive. Knowing they'd be made to our specs in Pella, Iowa, made us feel the wait would be well worth it.

Still, Amy and I held our breath again ... hoping there would be no accidents in the upstairs rooms until Installation Day.

Out the window with those old windows

When it was time to install, the reporter in me thought it would be fun to keep a diary. I'm ever-curious about home repair, and the Pella crew had picked a most unusual time to start the job: day two of Chicago's Air and Water Show. Since stunt jets would likely scream overhead — we live in O'Hare Airport's northwestern flight path — I wondered how an installer perched on high scaffolds would keep his concentration ... or deal with the rain forecast.

As the day went down, it brought more than its share of surprises — all good — and quite a few challenges — all conquered. The first mini-drama started, in fact, before anyone got out of the truck

Pella's four-man crew shows at 8:30 a.m., right on schedule. But due to an unforeseen parking shortage, there is nowhere to plant the large Chevy™ Suburban with its yellow-and-white Pella trailer holding the windows. We settle on parking in the alley, and everyone (including yours truly) takes turns checking to make sure it's not blocking in any neighbors.

No sooner is the first tarp placed on the ground floor at 8:35 than we hit another snag: The clearance is too narrow to fit the windows through the stairwell. Rey Hammad is there, and he's not surprised: "On older homes, we run into this a lot," he says. "This is a tight path."

The crew members — Doug Palmer, David Arreguin, Mike Nelson and leader Nate Peterson — hit on a solution immediately. Once the old windows are out in Christopher's room, they'll bring the new ones in through the square hole, over the front-porch roof. It's not an easy move; the roof has a steep 40-degree pitch. But they're sure they can handle it.

Man, these guys are resourceful. Not only that, they turn out to be sharp, conscious of cleanliness and fun. I decide I'll treat them to pizza.

As the hammering, prying and sawing begins, I expect the project might take most of the day. Here's the blow-by-blow account.

9:01 a.m.: Rotted cedar rains from my son's room as the crew sets to work on ripping out his old windows. Later on, he inspects their work. I think if he had his way, he'd keep the big hole. What else do you expect from a kid wearing a T-shirt that says "WEE HAIRY BEASTIE!" on it? He watches Doug — a jovial, bearded ex-cop the other crew guys call "Dougacious" — hammer and clear debris just outside his bedroom wall.

"Cool!" Christopher shouts. "I didn't know you could stand on the roof."

9:15 a.m.: Outside my house, three huge cardboard-wrapped packages lean against an oak tree, the windows inside. Up two stories, Doug yanks out the last vestiges of Christopher's old windows, walking to and fro on the slanted roof as if it were a flat bedroom floor. Inside the frames, we discover a chain-and-pulley system with iron weights so old and heavy, I could well have mistaken them for Civil War battleship parts.

Doug picks up a weight and stares at it: It is roughly the shape of a condensed rolling pin. "That's older than I am," he says. "From back when dinosaurs walked the Earth."

Christopher runs off downstairs. "When you come back," Doug shouts after him, "you'll have a new window!"

9:20 a.m.: With Mike on the inside and David erecting a ladder-mounted scaffold outside, work on Genevieve's room begins. The bottom of the center moulding pulls apart like pie crust, revealing a hole big enough to host a brood of baby squirrels. "It's definitely old rot," Mike says. "I'd say it's original to the house."

Outside it begins to rain. "What do you guys do when it rains?" I ask. Dave answers from his scaffold some 35 feet up: "Stay and work!"



9:26 a.m.: Nate removes remnants of Christopher's sill with a hand-held Sawzall™. A cedar sawdust smell permeates the room, and now we get to see how the walls were built: tongue-in-groove cedar lap siding, topped over the years from the outside by wood, asphalt and then white vinyl.

I ask Doug if he's nervous stomping around on a semi-slick roof. "The biggest building I've ever worked on was the Standard Oil Building and that was what — 83 stories?"

No wonder he looks so carefree as he helps hoist the first of the three double windows into the house via the hole in Christopher's wall.

9:40 a.m.: Time for me to remove the air conditioner from my bedroom in preparation for that installation. Stuffed underneath it is ... a dried-out pigeon nest. This, I should note, is not an option in Pella® Architect Series® windows.

Outside of Genevieve's room, David needs a little leverage to work at the window from his side. For a short spell, he balances one foot on the wall of our neighbor's house across the gangway. I'll bet I could do that.

9:45 a.m.: Everyone's working hard. Pop music on the radio seems to fuel the good mood. I'm alone in my bedroom, staring at the still-packaged new window, admiring its red frame. I poke a hole in the plastic to stroke the pine grooves. Smooth. Perfect. Is it possible to fall in love with a window? Sigh.

9:50 a.m.: There's enough rotten wood popping out of Genevieve's old window to create a creepy prop for a *Lord of the Rings* sequel. Nate barely has to push with his chisel. "It's just old, old, old," he says. "They just make a horrible mess. That's the way they pop out, just like that." Layers of rot come up as the old window lifts out. "Wheewwww!"

And to think: This is what stood between my toddler and the outside of my home.



10:00 a.m.: Back in Christopher's room, Mike takes over for Nate with the Sawzall, chopping up tiny fragments while Doug follows him with a Shop-Vac™. These guys are good at cleaning up. I wonder if they do windows.

Seriously: The way this four-man crew moves, it's almost like watching a drill team — a very friendly one — in a military formation. The last time I remember seeing this kind of unity and purposeful concentration, a friend had taken me into the kitchen of Alinea, Chicago's premier four-star restaurant. Everyone has a job to do, attends to it and does so in an unconscious synchrony that reflects pure concentration. As I watch the

hoisting, hammering, sawing, vacuuming, I look for wasted movements. They're hard to find.

The guys find a yellowed fragment of newspaper embedded in Christopher's wall. We study it closely and find a date: November 1912. Could it be our house is older than what our deed says?

They also find an old black sock. No date. And no smell test, thanks.

10:45 a.m.: These double-hung replacement windows weigh about 180 pounds each. That's some serious hauling and lifting for these guys, who still manage to attend to the small details with care. Tape measures come out again and again; shims are popped in slow and sure to wedge frames in place. Once one window comes out of its box, I pick up a spare part: a plastic carry handle that might work on my broken banjo case. Ten minutes later, it's screwed in and ready for my next gig.

11:00 a.m.: As the windows in my kids' rooms take shape, I begin to wonder about insulation. No sooner does this thought occur than I spy each team filling in the cracks with pressurized spray guns. Every nook and cranny gets a helping of banana-yellow low-expansion insulation foam that dries almost as fast as it takes me to write this sentence. Exterior flashing tape resistant to extreme weather conditions will also help sustain the life of these Pella windows.



Noon: Lunch. Five pizzas, gone in almost 35 minutes. (Hey, my kids and I helped.) Then it's back to work. Do these guys deliver or what?

Afternoon

1 p.m.: The pine sills and inside window trim are built on the premises, from a portable table saw mounted on our front sidewalk. Because the hole in Christopher's room is an unusual size, another layer of framing needs to be cut. The guys seem almost apologetic, but Amy and I are most pleasantly surprised: It takes on a look similar to a double-matted picture frame. Wow.

1:45 p.m.: Removing old windows, I am learning, can take on the drama of a "CSI" episode. Case in point: The new hole in my bedroom reveals black smoke scars. An older set of windows had apparently been yanked after a house fire. Mike: "This was probably one window at some time, and they got two in a replacement deal."

I stand next to the old, white window frame, lying on the bedroom tarp. It's dry as dust, as inviting as a coffin lid. This nail-jagged box of glass has done its time. Be gone.

1:50 p.m.: "What was that?" says Dave, now perched above my bedroom on a scaffold. Sounds like thunder coming from, oh, maybe 30 feet away. Peeking from an overcast sky, we see a trio of Blue Angels jets. Dave turns around and gets right back to work. Pure concentration.

2 p.m.: Note to self: The sound of an old window getting sawed out is like that of a dentist's drill getting rid of a decaying tooth.

2:32 p.m.: The fine mist that has been on and off all day begins to pick up to a drizzle. I fear it might stop the job, but Nate reassures me: "If it's pounding rain, we don't start — you don't want power tools in the rain. But if it's something we've started, well ... we'll finish it."

2:51 p.m.: When the new window pops into place in my bedroom, I notice that the noise level outside drops dramatically, by perhaps as much as 35 decibels. Will we actually sleep better with these new windows drowning out the street noise from nearby Western Avenue? Here's hoping.

3 p.m. to 3:45 p.m.: The finishing touches are applied on the kids' rooms, while David works in the rain to trim the outdoor Pella Red exterior framing to size. And then ...

4 to 4:30 p.m.: It's cleanup time, if you could call it that. The whole process has produced such a minimal disruption that once the tarps are lifted and hauled back to the truck, it takes just minutes with the Shop-Vac to leave the house — yes — cleaner than the Pella guys found it. Not to mention more beautiful. And safer.

Nate walks us through some explanations of the product, how to clean and lock it, and asks me to fill out survey forms. How fast can you check off "extremely satisfied"?

Postscript: A window to the future

A month after the install, the glow has hardly faded from our new windows. Amy and I feel like we've made the right move to protect, beautify and conserve energy.

"The crew was very efficient, and very respectful of our house — it was delightful to see," Amy says, looking back at the experience. "They interacted with the kids, too. They didn't just sweep them away."

She adds: "I love, love, love, love, love Pella Red. It's my new favorite color. And the windows look incredibly beautiful. Our old house now looks like it has a new life."

I sought out Cordell Burton, an engineering testing team leader at Pella's headquarters in Iowa, to learn more about the science behind the art. "It's more than just the product, right? It's not just how we staff and develop it — it's the treatment of the customer, the way we interview the customer, and making sure that the installation goes right," says Burton. "When you get a Pella window, you're not just wanting to buy a frame and a piece of glass. The customer wants to buy something that's installed right, built to last and looks good — that's a part of their home."

Though Burton is trained as a scientist, it sounds like he understands the underlying issue for homeowners like me. It's not just a window, is it? In our country, the one thing so hard to find today — that something all of us ache for — are products made by people passionate about their craft. Products that represent the best not just in construction, but that intangible musicians call "heart and soul."

To be sure, Pella® windows sing. "But it's got to be the whole picture for the customer," Burton says. "It could be the best window in the world, but if the installation goes wrong, we've failed. It could be the best installation in the world, but if the product is inferior, we've failed again. It's got to be excellent at every point of contact," Burton says.

He adds: "We've got a strong ethic. It's the drive of the people at Pella; we've all got that drive to want to be the best — and to have the best product that's out there on the market. I'm passionate about Pella."

And now, so am I.

Louis R. Carlozo is a Chicago Tribune features writer and DVD columnist, a music critic at Christian Century magazine, and a studio musician and songwriter. He lives with his wife, Amy, two children and six new Pella Architect Series® windows just a long home run from Wrigley Field on Chicago's North Side.



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