YOU CAN KEEP THOSE OLD GARAGE DOORS AND HAVE AN AUTOMATIC OPENER AS WELL

A Sunset District homeowner wanted the convenience of an automatic garage door opener. The problem is, she had the original side-hinged doors, which, following the example of some of her neighbors, she was prepared to scrap for a new sectional overhead door. When she consulted with The Foundation for San Francisco's Architectural Heritage, she learned she had another option. She could retrofit that attractive set of existing doors and preserve the integrity of the design of her 18th Avenue home. What is more, she could achieve this at half the cost of a new sectional overhead door.

Garage doors are an integral part of the design

In Victorian and Edwardian-era neighborhoods, owners began to add basement-level garages in the teens. Typical San Francisco single family residences, flats and apartment houses built since then have incorporated garages with direct street access in the original design. In either case, garage doors are consistent with the style and detailing of the façade. There are numerous elegant examples of old side-hinge garage doors throughout the city, although, not surprisingly, they predominate in the neighborhoods developed since the start of the automobile age, such as the Sunset, Marina and Outer Richmond. Many owners who want an automatic garage door opener—like the neighbors of the 18th Avenue homeowner—end up replacing their old style doors with a modern sectional overhead door which is out of proportion with the other elements of the building and presents a bland face to the street, creating a jarring, incongruous appearance.

Photos: 18th Avenue row houses (left) illustrate the merits of retaining old doors versus replacing them with new overhead sectional doors. The original doors of the house on the right are consistent with the style of the house. Houses to the left, whose owners could have kept the original doors and adapted them to automatic operation, have replacement doors which are not compatible in design or materials with the structures. — The c. 1875 Italianate house on Oak St. (below, left), a Heritage façade easement property, has side-hinged doors typical of those added in the teens and '20s. In 1987, the owner engaged Roberts Construction, of Oakland, to join the doors into a single unit which, attached to an overhead track and electric opener, operates automatically. — Expressive design of doors (right) resemble sensuous floral forms of the Art Nouveau.
3 ways to convert old garage doors to automatic operation

There are three common ways to retrofit existing garage doors to open automatically by remote control.

- Doors which swing out to the street are the most common and the easiest to retrofit. You can install a common opener, such as a Genie, with two steel rods attached, one to each door. A trolley on a central channel mounted on the ceiling pushes and pulls the rods, opening and closing the doors. This will cost approximately $500, compared to about $1000 for a new sectional overhead door.

- With doors that swing into the garage, you can use any standard make opener, if you retrofit the doors to swing outward. This would still cost less than a new sectional overhead door. In some cases, though, it is impossible to reverse the doors’ swing because the driveway is too steep or because the garage sits right on the property line so that doors would swing into the sidewalk, resulting in a code violation. In that instance, you might seek a code variance, or you could install hydraulic gate operators. An hydraulic arm extends from a post against the wall on each side of the garage to each of the doors, which open and close inward like a gate. The cost is about $2500.

- Whether your doors swing outward or inward, contractors can make them into a non-sectional overhead door by bolting them together with angle irons to make a single unit and mount it onto a standard operating overhead door system fitted with any electronic opener. The door needs to be cut down about a half an inch on each side so that it can clear the beam. The approximate cost is $1000, about the same as a new sectional overhead door.

Garage evolves from barn and stable

The earliest garages resulted from the conversion of barns or livery stables, with minimal physical alteration, to provide storage for the horseless carriage. The sizeable lots of outlying one-time farm houses and of large older homes preserve some of these early examples of brick or woodframe garages in San Francisco. Elsewhere in the Victorian-era city, neighborhood livery stables boarded residents’ horses. These underwent conversion to auto storage, as well, after the turn of the century, and in the years following, developers constructed new large-capacity storage facilities of reinforced concrete, chosen for its fire-resistant properties.

The first automatic doors

Automatic garage door openers, which even now seem the last word in convenience, first appeared in the 1920s and were usually key-activated. Openers operated by remote control radio signal from the car, were also available during the 1920s. According to Maurice Searcy, who runs Franklin Electronic Service, those early automatic doors were electric with hydraulic lines. The first fully electric openers appeared after World War II. Mr. Searcy’s firm has been retrofitting garage doors all over the Bay Area for many years, and he says it is a comparatively easy sell. Once they know it can be done, people are enthusiastic about keeping their old doors.

Importance of conservation

When architects and builders began to incorporate garages into new and existing residential design, the automobile was still an exciting young invention. Designing appropriate housing for the vehicle which combined the practical with the aesthetic was not an onerous chore but a challenge to be met. Conservation of original garage doors is worthwhile, therefore, because they “look better” than the typical replacement doors but also because they are a part of the history of a house, particularly as it recalls the early days of the automobile age.

The free-standing private garage is more typical of small-town and suburban America or cities with wider residential lots, like Oakland, than it is of San Francisco. When it does occur, on the standard 25-foot lot in San Francisco, a detached garage typically occupies a portion of the front yard setback. With the occasional wider lot in the city, it may appear at the rear and to the side of the house. In the few instances that a kind of news or back alley exists in a block, detached garages were common. Some of these remain, including Thoren Lane in the Upper Market Street area; Nellie and Blanche Streets in Noe Valley; Balmy, Lilac, Cypress and Virgil in the Mission and two blocks in the Inner Richmond. In the late teens, assembly line production made the automobile available to a mass market, and middle class homeowners began to convert the basement level of their Victorian and Edwardian era residences into garages. This entailed some excavation and/or raising of the structure as much as six to eight feet. A typical door for garages added in the teens and 20s in San Francisco is a pair of gate-swing panelled doors with two rows of three window panes in the upper third. Many of these garages remain in use, although in some instances sloping driveways are too steep to accommodate today’s lower riding cars. A substantial increase in the number of automobiles in the city during the past decade has prompted a new wave of garage additions to older residences.

Whether builder-designed, as were most Sunset and Marina style row houses and flats, or architect-designed, like the residence shown in the photograph at the top of this page, the structures received equal attention in the matter of detail and the integration of all elements of the design, including the garage doors. — Fear of fire from the “new-fangled” machine led early garage builders to construct detached housing for the automobile. Several of this type (such as the one shown in the middle photograph taken on Potrero Hill) remain in San Francisco, sitting on a front corner or tucked on the back corner of some of the city’s wider lots or lining back alleys in some blocks of Noe Valley, the Mission and other older neighborhoods. — The Queen Anne at the bottom of the page is typical of many Victorian and Edwardian era houses in San Francisco retrofitted with garages beginning in the late teens. The side-hinged double-panelled doors with two rows of three lights were a typical model.
Where you can go to get assistance

Here are the names of some companies in the area that will retrofit existing side-hinged garage doors to open automatically:

A Door and Gate
801 22nd Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
(415) 641-9308

Automatic Garage Door Corporation
2501 Army Street
San Francisco, CA 94124
(415) 648-6413

Franklin Electronic Service
1223 Masonic Avenue
Berkeley, CA 94706
(510) 525-9536

Roberts Construction & Overhead Door Company
4425 Park Boulevard
Oakland, CA 94602
(510) 482-4253

If you own an older building with modern replacement doors and you would like to return to the originals, you might try your luck with the following:

Urban Ore Building Materials, located at 7th and Gilman Streets in Berkeley (510) 559-4460, says they do get old garage doors once in a while but they go fast; there is a waiting list.

Caldwell Building Wreckers at 195 Bayshore Boulevard in San Francisco (415) 550-6777, says they usually buy such doors if they are in good condition, although they sometimes go several months without obtaining any.

—By Elizabeth Kerman with Don Andreini. Photos by Elizabeth Kerman

The example of these two apartment houses illustrates the contribution of garage doors to the rhythm and visual interest of the streetscape. This importance appears particularly from the building on the right, in which a standard design overhead door that swings out and up has replaced one of the original — and distinctive — pairs of side-hinged doors. The newer door turns a bland face to the street. Replacement of the remaining three in the same fashion would create the uninviting effect of a blank wall.

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