

When Houses Reach the Big Five-O

An older home is a wonderful thing. But alongside the charm and character that comes with age and maturity, you may also find a host of conditions not found in houses of modern construction, such as inadequate wiring, cracked foundations, clogged pipes, and deteriorating roofs.

Older homes should not be avoided, but they do require careful inspection because building codes were much different 50 years ago than they are today and some homes may have been built without careful review by municipal officials.

It takes a trained eye to spot the special problems of older homes, especially those that have undergone renovations and remodeling. Homes dating as far back as 1900 are still standing, but the construction materials are reaching their natural lifespan and you can be sure neither the materials used nor the methods employed are consistent with current standards.

A professional home inspection for older homes is a good idea. Some problems just waiting to happen are not obvious without expert probing. Where additions or major renovations have occurred, it's important to determine if the foundation is capable of carrying the additional load.

Over the decades various remodeling efforts or upgrades such as new bathrooms or kitchens will have masked underlying problems. For instance, a spiffy new sink connected to a pipe that is decades-old is susceptible to blockage just a few feet beyond its gleaming surface. Let's look at some common problem areas:

1. *One of the first places to look in an older home is the basement.* These were called cellars when the home was built and they were not meant to be lived in. The concept of a recreation room was unheard of and television hadn't even been invented!

The basement may have a solid feel thanks to a modern cosmetic finish but who knows what lurks behind the paneling? Faults and failures here can mean expensive repairs or higher insurance rates. Decades of exposure to poor drainage or lack of damp-proofing can cause serious deterioration. I turn my nose on when I walk downstairs. When a room has been damp for many years there is usually a musty odor that lets you know, even in mid-summer.

2. *The roof structure is also a potential problem after half a century of cold winters and hot summers, no matter how many times it has been re-*

shingled. Chimney deterioration is common, the flashing materials may have rusted, the wood fascia may have rotted beneath those repeated layers of paint, or the roofline itself may be sagging.

3. *Ceiling insulation is also a common problem in older homes.* Over the decades residents may have tried to cut heating costs by applying new insulation right on top of combustible materials such as sawdust, shredded paper or wood shavings. Lack of ventilation is also a problem because in decades past the importance of proper air flow was not appreciated.

4. *Hot air and hot water heating systems that rely on gravity and low pressure steam heating systems are still quite common.* Not only are they costly to operate, their components are often at or beyond their life expectancy.

5. *The electrical system offers a special challenge, since few older homes have sufficient electrical outlets for today's high-tech families.* Many still have 60 amp service and some still have ungrounded knob and tube wiring, which is a shock and fire hazard.

6. *Plumbing is a further concern because cast iron drainage pipes rust, galvanized steel water lines corrode, and vent pipes get plugged up over the years.* It's not uncommon in older homes to find copper pipes in exposed areas, connected to galvanized pipes behind the walls.

So there you have it. The need-to-know information that will give you the knowledge and confidence you need to expertly tackle the complex issues that come along with the character and charm of these rewarding homes. Now go get 'em!

