

ASK THE INSPECTOR COLUMN FOR OCTOBER 5, 2016
HEADLINE: A HERITAGE HOME; DREAM OR NIGHTMARE?

The real estate market has been far different lately, than what we have seen in years. While the major cities are out of reach price wise, from our perspective, locally, we are seeing slower new home sales and a hot and cold resale market. The percentage of older home sales and ensuing inspections has risen dramatically of late, with the driving point being “the desire to live downtown.” When asked why they are buying an older home, most clients say something similar. While I used to see homebuyers whose dream home was a century farm house at the end of the country lane with 20 acres for the future horses or dogs, today it is urban renewal of heritage homes and most clients we see really don’t have a grasp of what they may be getting into, unfortunately.

Almost every client asks about the history of the home and are genuinely interested in heritage buildings overall. When you buy a heritage home, you are buying a hobby and, unless the home has seen a major or complete renovation by skilled professional heritage contractors, you can expect it to become your main hobby. Older homes take a lot of patience and time, but, when given both, I have seen examples of renovations that are well done, with sweat labour often being the only financially viable route.

Start by asking yourself some straight questions. Do you have the time to renovate the home and how long will you live here? Are you prepared to get your hands dirty? Are you prepared to live in a long-term renovation until it is done? I have a favourite line I use when asked about an older home. It’s called the 2-4-6 theory of older homes. Whatever you estimate it will cost to renovate, multiply by two; whatever time you estimate for renovations it will take that times 4 and the number of “discussions” you will have with your spouse or partner, times 6! The major plus side is the satisfaction of taking a piece of heritage and making it sound and comfortable. Lastly, do not confuse restoration and renovation. Restoring an older home is an expensive and time consuming process, if done to the period. Most older homes I see are a blend of highlights of the old and convenience of the new.

Now, a little history. The vast majority of older homes in Upper Canada or Ontario, as we now know it, were of wooden frame. Some towns, where stone and brick were available, along with skilled masons that were mostly from “the old country,” have a downtown area where these brick and stone homes are located. Settlers arriving with a good sized bank account bought large farms and had a stone or brick home built.

The original settlers’ homes were log, then a couple of different styles of timber frame became common. If you have ever been in an old barn, most of these are a timber frame assembly, often the bent style. The other style is called braced frame and there were different adaptations. These buildings usually sat on a stone foundation; rubble stone was used first and then tooled stone, called ashlar, was introduced. As the settlements in Eastern Ontario began to develop in the late 1700’s the rise of stone homes began. I see numerous examples built in this era that are still standing proud today. Most of the basements were rubble stone or fieldstone, no matter if the home was wood or stone assembly. As the fields were cleared for cultivation, this produced an ample supply of fieldstones for a home. Stone homes were very labour intensive and saw their peak in construction by the mid 1800’s. Very few were built after the turn of the century.

The first brick home in Eastern Ontario was built in Belleville, around 1794. Brick homes came into their own by the middle of the 1800's. There was an abundance of Scottish bricklayers by this time and development of brick manufacturing was progressing by the mid 1800's. Before this time bricks were literally hand made, one by one. Brick homes became stylish in the mid to late 1880's; a method called double brick was used. Most of these were built into the late 1800's and a few before WW1. Some of the finer brick homes actually had a third layer, usually on the street side so you could not see if the home was a double brick, today we call this a double-triple assembly. With the advent of balloon frame, a method of wood frame assembly, brick became a veneer as we use it today.

I think the largest single change that created a boom in home building was the development of a style of wood assembly called balloon frame. A builder who got tired of the slow process of a timber frame structure invented this in Chicago in 1835. This type of framing first arrived in Ontario in the mid 1800's. The circular saw, as we know it today, was introduced between 1830 and 1850 and sawmills now had a much greater capacity. Before these advancements, a method of ripping lumber called pit sawing was common. A hole was dug in the ground and one man climbed in the hole and another man stood on top of the log and they use a saw with handles on both ends. At that time, a thousand board feet of lumber was selling in the neighbourhood of six to eight dollars.

Advancements in machinery, semi-mass production nails and hardware came along about this time and these components, together, supplied the materials for a boom in home building. This type of wood frame home was used right up until the depression when platform frame homes, which were invented in California, came into use. We still use an updated rendition of this method today.

Once you begin your home hunt, the question "is it worth saving" should enter into the buyer's mind, especially if the home is dated or run down. I have yet to see a home that could not be saved; it comes down to dollars and labour, mainly yours. What you must decide is the distinction between structural repairs that must be done to preserve the integrity of the home and cosmetics that are not critical. Even some structural work can wait, where as a defunct furnace, for example, cannot. When you are considering the purchase of a heritage home, plan to spend more time and patience is key.

Cam Allen L.I.W NHI ACI can be reached at alltechconsultinggroup@gmail.com for questions or comments.