

COLUMN FOR MAY 1 2004.
HEADLINE; BUYING A HERITAGE HOME

Q; We have read your column for a number of years now and have finally decided to tackle an older home. Any suggestions what to look for in the brief time you get during a house hunting tour?

A; I think the first thing everyone should do when they are house hunting for a heritage or century home is to decide if they are ready to buy a lifetime hobby, because this is in most cases what you are doing. A home built in the 1800's is more expensive to maintain, heat and when repairs are called for, everything is custom. Very few "off the shelf" products and materials are quick fit without some adaptation. This also brings me to a definition, are you buying this home to restore it or renovate it. The two words are often mixed, but have huge differences. If you are buying to restore, then you are looking to accurately recover the building to its original grandeur and this can be a very expensive process. It is in my mind a very rewarding experience if you have the time, the desire and a healthy bank account. There is nothing wrong with renovating an older home either, here modern convenience are blended with the charm of the old for practicality and convenience.

I suggest our readers make themselves a single page list. Start with three headings; 1) Estimate the time of construction. 2) Estimate the present condition of the building 3) Try to establish the amount of renovations that have been completed.

First, estimating the time of construction will give you some idea of the method used, is the home a timber frame or balloon frame for example. Both styles have pros and cons for upgrades and improvements and you should understand the assembly method. Next the condition of the building to date and here the list that follows will help here. Lastly the renovations done can be hard to establish. Additions to older homes are often not the quality of the original home. Are some floors uneven and others level, this can mean some cosmetic work done or a quick fix to hide decay. If it is done indiscriminately, this often means problems. Ignore the pretty wallpaper and fresh paint and head to the cellar and take your time looking at the foundation and the wood structure. On your list start a heading reading "Deterioration" and list insect, rot and decay, human abuse, moisture, wood structural defects, foundation defects, replacement materials, doors and windows. Go to your local hardware and invest in a good ice pick or scratch awl.

I reside in Eastern Ontario and termites are not here yet but if you live in parts of Toronto or some outlying areas like Guelph, they are an issue. Carpenter Ants and Beetles nest in wood and do not consume it for food. While they are not as serious, get enough of them and they can be. What do you look for, small piles of dust and random tiny holes in the wood. Rot is sometimes hard to pick out unless it is very evident. Many times when I am doing a Heritage Building Assessment I see my clients quiver when I probe the floor beams in the cellar. Often my probe will sink in 1-2 inches. What you have to remember is that many of these beams are 8-12 inches or more in girth and showing this amount of decay in 150 years is very common. However if the probe sinks 4-5 inches, we have to look further here. Human Abuse is usually very evident; I see portions cut out of beams for new plumbing and wiring. Here direct support like floor jacks generally do the trick. If the holes and cut-outs have fractured the beam though, this can be an expensive repair. Moisture in old buildings is very common, 99% of the old cellars I see have some form of water invasion. If you are buying an older home and want the cellar dry, this is a very expensive luxury and many times not attainable. Either learn to control it and live with it or reconsider buying an older home. The vast majority of older homes have a stone foundation of some form and the older formula of mortar was not as strong as we know today and it is known to fail if constant water is present. Use that trusty pick again and probe any areas that appear wet. If the mortar falls away easily, this can be an issue. Here I would find a reputable engineer or inspector with strong heritage experience for a second opinion. Wood structural defects are a tough call for many homebuyers, especially if they lack some experience. We have an old saying in the trades with respect to an older home; if it is settled in the centre, get the tools. We can fix this one. If the home is settled to the walls, put the tools away, this one may not be worth saving. Many

times the wood defects are hidden behind the old foundation. Make note of any visible defects in the wood structure and then call a reputable heritage contractor or licensed inspector and ask them for an opinion. If there is evidence of some recent repairs, ask the homeowner why this was done. If the work is foundation work, ask for the name of the trade that did the work and call them. Ask them one question, "In your opinion, did you go far enough in the foundation repairs you made?" If the answer is no or has some qualifications, give this home a second thought. Lastly doors and windows can tell a lot. Again take that pick and go to the corners of the frames at the thresholds and sills. Without doing any damage, gently probe this area. If the pick has some resistance, stop. If the pick begins to sink, stop here too. It is likely that some amount of decay is present here and the corners are the first sign. Door and Window repairs, while many times can be painted and sealed to stretch some more life out of them, if you are looking at this as a long term home these can be expensive replacements.

Remember what you are looking at an older home for, its character and charm and cut the building some slack. Heating systems can generally be replaced for under 10,000.00. If it is the furnace alone, then under 4000.00 can be expected. Older homes could be completely rewired for around the same amount. If you have to start doing major structural repairs and foundation work, I have seen all of the above figures combined not cover the repair costs in some heritage homes. My last recommendation here, ask for an inspection and shop around for an trade licensed inspector, civil technologist or engineer.

Ask if they have a strong heritage building inspection background. Phone some local heritage contractors and get their references, it is time well spent.

And now the answer to last weeks "Trivia about Homes" question. The National Building Code was first introduced in 1941 and today is the standard for Canada. And now this weeks question. What is a Wooden Lintel? Is it A) a wood header B) a laminated beam C) a bearing joist D) part of conventional wood rafter assembly. The answer in next week's column!

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