

## **14 Most Important Items to Consider When Buying an Older House (1900 to 1970)**

**1. Neighbourhood:** Can push the price up or down. Proximity to highways, community centres, shopping malls, schools, churches and community services can have positive or negative values. Most old houses are in established neighbourhoods with trees and charm.

**2. Historical Significance:** The house could be protected or is in the process of being assessed as a landmark. Prospective homeowners may need to follow strict city or municipal preservation guidelines.

**3. Structure:** All structural components should be examined. For example, load bearing columns, walls, posts and beams should be checked for wood rot, sagging and anchors. Often concrete pours and structural assemblies are weak and undersized, porches are falling apart due to rot.

**4. Renovation Potential:** If the structure is acceptable, one can either renovate, remodel or restore the house, often at great costs. Be careful when purchasing houses that have been extensively renovated or added on to without permits or inspection certificates.

**5. Interior and Exterior Wear:** Old houses with many previous owners and large families can be worn out. Worn out flooring, stairs, door and window hardware, plumbing fixtures and heating systems are often causes for concern in the interior. On the exterior, old trees and lawns may be ready for replacement.

**6. Craftsmanship:** It is not always true that old is better, depending of course upon the builder at

that time. Often the building is held together with gravity and rusted nails. Building codes were not very comprehensive in the past. Old materials are covered with newer materials; e.g., vinyl siding over stucco over wood shingle exteriors. Stairs are narrow or steep. Interior rooms are oversized or undersized.

**7. Fire:** Wood used in construction is very dry and brittle. No fire stops were used within walls and around chimneys. Walls have little or no insulation. Flame, fire and smoke travels easily within the house. May have balloon framing.

**8. Hazardous Materials and Vermin:** On the property, one can find old, unused buried fuel tanks and septic systems. Inside the house, one can find asbestos used to insulate heating systems and pipes. Lead-based paints covered with wallpaper or layers of paint. Urea from formaldehyde used as insulation. Radon in earth crawl spaces. Dust mites, mice, rats, dead raccoons, carpenter ants feeding from rotted wood and a variety of spiders, pigeons, and squirrels.

**9. Ventilation:** Both mechanical and natural ventilation in bathrooms and kitchen are non-existent. Windows have been painted shut. There is no cross-ventilation.

**10. Heating:** Old systems are either oversized, undersized, or in need of replacement. Many old houses have insufficient heat at various room areas. Furnaces have no combustion air. Old masonry chimneys have spalling brick with no chimney liners. Wood-burning fireplaces are falling apart.

**11. Electrical:** Undersized and overloaded fuse systems along with a variety of mixed wiring consisting of knob and tub, aluminum and lamp

cords. Few worm and not grounded electrical outlets and switches. Bathrooms and kitchens with inadequate wiring. No electrical ground fault interrupters.

**12. Plumbing and Drainage:** Old plumbing fixtures. There is a mixture of plumbing piping from galvanized iron, cast iron, plastic to lead. Faucets and taps spew rust-coloured water. Underground main water lines and sewage waste lines are ready for replacement. Hot water tanks only last 8 to 12 years. Perimeter drainage around the house is backing up into basements and crawl spaces. Gutters and downspouts are Inadequate. Drains are plugged up.

**13. Attic and Roof:** Many older homes have no soffits or roof overhangs, causing the interior room areas to overheat in the summer and overcool in the winter. Attics have little if any structural integrity or ventilation. Roofs leak around most flashings, around chimney, plumbing, vent, skylight penetrations, and under valleys. Roofs have as many as five layers of old roofing under them.

**14. Energy Efficiency:** Doors and windows are thin and inadequately weather-stripped. Little or no insulation is found in walls and attics. In the winter months, some roofs ice dam, causing interior condensation problems.

*Keep in mind that although older houses may appear to offer better value per square foot of space than a newer home, they are four to five times more expensive to maintain and operate than a newer home. An old house is a good buy only if its price plus the cost of necessary improvements does not exceed the price of a new house of comparable size. What one finds in houses also often applies to*

*commercial buildings as well. Every building is a good building at a right price.*