

Does Your House Have a Surprise for You?

In my last article I discussed how our expectations about homes have changed from the "good old days." Today, many people have the notion that when you buy an older home, you are getting good quality automatically. Because these homes have many exterior hallmarks of "old world quality" such as leaded glass, hardwood doors, built-ins, and plaster arches, it may seem safe to assume that all was built right. After all, weren't labor and materials really inexpensive in the "good old days" and craftsmanship and quality also at its peak?

Experience with literally hundreds of home remodels, additions, and alterations has taught me that you shouldn't necessarily believe that just because it *looks* substantial that all is well with your house. Making this assumption could be a potentially expensive mistake! Below are some examples of assumptions you don't want to be caught making about your older home:

Don't assume that there are headers or beams above arches, doors, or windows. Often, when you break open the wall you will find just a couple of 2 x 4s laid flat to shape the opening. Where do the loads from above go? Sometimes it is the actual plaster or even the stucco exterior that ends up carrying the weight. When that is removed, there is virtually nothing left. In fact, don't even assume you will find 2 x 4s there. When we opened up a wall on a recent project in Land Park, in a top of the line house from the 1930's era loaded with sumptuous design detail, we found a bearing wall supporting the entire second floor and stairway without any means of support! For sixty years, the incredible weight of the tile roof had been resting literally on a few scraps of wood.

Don't assume your roof structure will support the three layers of roofing that are generally allowed by the Uniform Building Code. That

sag you're seeing in the roof could well be due to 2 x 4 rafters that are spanning over twice as far as they should. Don't assume you can put plywood down over the existing rafters for a composition roof even if they are strong enough. In the old days, they didn't worry that much about even spacing. So, your rafters might vary from 20" apart to 40" apart, making plywood joint layout difficult at best. The apparently easy solution of nailing the plywood into the skip sheathing will not produce a sound and stable structure, unless the nails go into the framing below.

Don't assume your ceramic tile shower is keeping the water out of the walls. Although the tile is waterproof, the *joints are not*. Over time, big problems can develop in the structure behind the wall and in the surrounding floor areas. These leaks don't always show up in the ceiling below either, if they just amount to a drop here and there. Even that amount of water, though, can foster an incredible ecology of organisms and creatures to feed on your house's bones!

Don't assume you can squeeze just one more fixture onto your ancient plumbing. There is a good chance your house has galvanized steel water pipes which may be so full of corrosion that there is barely room for any water to flow through. Your cast iron soil pipe (sewer) could last hundreds of years unless it was installed with a belly in the line which allowed water to sit in it. That could rust it through in 30 or 40 years.

Don't assume that cast iron sewers go all the way to the City's main, either. Many homes originally had "Orangeburg" pipe which was (incredibly) made from just tar paper wrapped into a cylinder. Many homes had their Orangeburg sewer lines fail within just a few years, but there are still a few "hanging in" out there. Our soil is so porous in parts of Sacramento that a broken sewer line might go

undetected indefinitely. One home we were working on had a history of intermittent sewer backups. We had several different expert roter technicians try to diagnose the problem in the line. We were able to feed indefinite amounts of roter line into the line but clearing it only lasted a short time. We finally decided to dig it up and replace it. In digging down, we discovered a clay sewer pipe. In theory it could last forever, but it had completely separated, creating a vast cesspool right under the backyard! The line had probably started with a minor crack or settlement opening. The seepage caused erosion, leading to a bigger opening and so on until the line was completely separated. The roter line had just been going out into the porous soil!

In the downtown area, we found a number of instances where the sewer line was connected to the City system only after running through an original brick septic tank. That is a *very* unpleasant surprise if it is in the wrong place in your backyard.

Don't assume you can squeeze just one more breaker into that packed electrical panel, or one more light fixture onto that old branch circuit wiring. In fact, if you are unlucky enough to have a Zinsco panel (made by a now defunct manufacturer), you'll find that locating used breakers is like a treasure hunt with the prey priced accordingly. In that case, you might be able to tear out your old panel and sell the breakers for enough money to install a brand new panel!

Don't get me wrong. I believe that old homes, most of them at least, were well built for their day. I also believe that most new homes are well built. I see examples of outstanding craftsmanship in all ages of homes. We also have the advantage of some great new materials like copper plumbing, Romex wiring, PVC sprinkler lines, ABS sewer lines, and engineered lumber products. When you tear into things during an addition or remodeling project, however, your house may have a few unpleasant surprises in store for you. Fortunately, even the worst of them can be fixed. As you probably suspected, all it takes is moola!

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