

## They Don't Build Them the Way They Used To

I can just picture the good old days. In that wonderful era, you could buy a bag of groceries for under a buck and an entire house for \$2,500. Of course, the house would be of "old world quality," packed with exquisite details and the lovingly crafted touches of a master builder. Back then, they took the time to *do things right!* Since labor and materials were so inexpensive, they didn't have to start every construction task with compromise foremost in mind. Today, in contrast, we all know that things are done fast and cheap! Quality is the exception, not the rule. Quality is an advertising slogan, not something to live by.

### *Baloney!*

Call me a skeptic, but I don't believe those rosy days ever existed. "But wait a minute," you say, "you just finished praising the 'good old days.'" No, I actually said I can "picture" the good old days. I've certainly heard them described often enough. Instead of impassioned testimonials, though, I'd be more impressed by evidence. Sure houses were a lot less expensive back then, but how about pay rates? If things weren't expensive in relative terms, then why did they build so many small two bedroom houses on small lots? I know it wasn't for lack of want and need. A two bedroom one bath house that feels cramped today for a family of three couldn't have seemed particularly spacious for an even bigger family fifty years ago.

One thing that definitely has changed is our expectations. Fortunately, we also have at our disposal additional resources to devote toward these expectations. That's why it is becoming relatively rare to find two bedroom, one bath houses in the older neighborhoods today, just as it is rare to find them in entry-level NEW homes. We expect more space, and of course we pay for it. Older small homes are 'obsolete' in meeting our

expectations – which is why most of them will ultimately get expanding in a remodel sooner or later.

And what about the notion regarding the lost quality that was seen in those "good old days?" Please don't take it for granted that an older home is a quality home, or you could be making a potentially expensive mistake. About ten years ago, I was hired to determine the cause of uneven floors in a fifty year old home in East Sacramento. This house had all the exterior hallmarks of "old world quality" - a brick exterior, leaded glass, built-ins, hardwood doors, and plaster arches. Investigating why the floors were sagging, however, led to a visit of the crawl space where I was found -- just pieces of wood on the dirt, with makeshift struts to the floor joists above. This builder's long ago, secret, cost saving method came to light fifty years later due to the problems it has caused!

On another home nearby where a contractor tried to carry out my details for tying new foundations into the old ones, he called me up with some bad news: "Mike," he said, "there *are* no old foundations." I dashed to the job site and sure enough, the brick walls were supported on what was a troweled on slurry of sand and cement – some long forgotten mason's quick and cheap foundation system.

The present day owners now had an explanation for why their brick walls needed to be continually patched. This same house had a brick basement wall that had a center bulge in it of nearly 6 inches. By the time we corrected the problems, well over \$20,000.00 had been spent – without any cosmetic upgrades or added space. And since there wasn't a "sudden and unexpected catastrophe" involved, there was no insurance coverage available. There seemed to be no one to blame except that unknown and long gone mason.

Having worked on additions and remodels to many hundreds of homes in our region, I have seen all kinds of surprising things. A house that has been seems to have been standing soundly for many years may have hidden defects just waiting to be discovered – which may give little indication other than some cracks and creaks until all hell breaks loose. Here are some situational examples that led one remodeling specialist we work with to exclaim to his carpenters: "*Please* don't build it the way they used to!"

*Don't assume* that there are headers or beams above arches, doors, or windows on a house built prior to the 1940's. 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 the plaster or stucco exterior end up carrying the weight of the structure – meaning that a simple crack can cause major movement! In fact, don't even assume you will find 2 x 4s there. When we opened up a wall on a Land Park house loaded with sumptuous design detail, we found a load bearing wall supporting the entire second floor and stairway with literally nothing under it to hold it up!

*Don't assume* your home built in the last 20 years has an earthquake system that will hold it up in the event we have a 'big shaker'. Until quite recently, simple diagonal bracing was all that was required, and homes from the 30's and 40's may not even be anchored to their foundations.

*Don't assume* a roof structure in an older home will support the three layers of roofing that are generally allowed by the Uniform Building Code. If you see a sag in your roof, you've likely already got a problem that needs fixing. Modern permanent roofing materials like concrete tile cannot generally go on even a two year old home unless it was designed for the weight, or reinforced to carry it.

*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. If the tile was set

on water resistant gypsum board – which is still done in some quick and inexpensive construction today – you are pretty likely to eventually have a water problem due to moisture coming through the grout joints, which will quickly put that 'water resistant' gypsum board into a state of mush.

*Don't assume* you can squeeze just one more fixture onto your plumbing or electrical system, or one more room on your heating cooling system. Older homes have building systems designed for much lighter loads that we use today; and modern homes often have been provided with the BARE minimum to meet the need at the time of construction, with no extra capacity for adding on 'more'.

If your house is from the 40's or earlier, you may have galvanized steel water pipes which may be so full of corrosion that there is barely room for any water to flow through. A plastic or 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 a couple of dozen years. In the 40's some houses were built with "Orangeburg" pipe which was (incredibly) made from just tar paper wrapped into a cylinder. While most of these have already failed and had to be replaced, there are still a few "hanging in" out there waiting to surprise someone.

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 roofer technicians try to diagnose the problem in the line. We were able to feed indefinite amounts of roofer 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 roofer line had just been going out into the porous soil!

I could go on. 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 – it's just a question of how big the surprise is, and how much money it will consume.

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