

NASTY, DARK PLACES

Yecchhh!!!! There's no better way to describe an under floor crawl space—usually a nasty, dark place filled with cobwebs, black widow spiders, and even creepier things. I have a vivid memory from years ago, being flat on my belly in a space just barely big enough to squeeze forward like a snake, when I came upon the mummified remains of a long, lost cat! While crawl spaces are not happy places to visit except in circumstances of most pressing need, they still have a number of advantages that make them the premium floor and foundation system for homes in my opinion.

Back in 1936, the year my home was built, the cost of labor was relatively low in comparison to concrete. That's why virtually all of the homes in that era were built with raised wood floors. Today, however, the reverse is true. Most new homes are built with slab on grade, which can save \$5.00 to \$10.00 per square foot on construction costs.

If a pipe ever breaks under a slab house, however, one of the key advantages of a raised wood floor quickly comes to light--its flexibility in accommodating diagnosis and repair. It is also a floor system that is much more accommodating for change. A minor addition of a wet bar sink in a slab house can involve some heavy concrete demolition; bigger remodels like second story additions require extensive cutting of the existing slab to get new foundation supports in. You can imagine the mess and effect this can have on interior finishes – and the cost.

Another advantage of a raised wood floor is its resiliency underfoot. The slight give of a wood sub-floor is more comfortable for most people after they've been on their feet awhile as compared to the rock hard floors of slab

concrete. A raised floor also allows for periodic inspections under the house for insect infestations. Although a slab may seem inaccessible for crawling creatures such as termites, they can and do appear in the middle of a house, entering interior walls through the most tiny cracks in a slab floor and such cracks are almost always present.

Of course, there are disadvantages to raised wood floors, too. I've noticed, in older homes in particular, the sub-floor area can have a dusty, musty smell that can over time permeate a home. Usually this can be controlled by sealing the crawl space dirt completely with a plastic sheeting. Plastic with a suitable weight and flame spread rating is simple and inexpensive in most cases to install, and it will control moisture and dust, and eliminate that musty odor. It also has the added benefit of making a visit to the crawl space much more pleasant.

If you do have a raised wood floor, be watchful that water does not collect under it. Sometimes this happens due to ground water percolating up, but often it is due to grade problems or even an improperly protected sub-floor access from the exterior which, in the worst case, will channel surface drainage directly under your house.

The consequences of standing water under a house can be devastating, leading to structural damage, as well possible health problems as molds, fungus, and insects start to colonize. If the subfloor area is lower than the outside grade, correcting these problems can require installation of a subfloor drainage and pumping system; and a power ventilation system controlled with a humidistat; these can cost thousands of dollars.

Whether your home has a slab on grade or a raised wood floor, one of the biggest threats to it's integrity is water – so keep an eye on the exterior conditions that might allow water to accumulate directly against your house – that is ALWAYS a bad idea.

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