

Like New, but Better: Common Concerns About Historic Homes

by Megan Joyce

NO ONE COULD DISPUTE THE CHARM

and unmatched character to be found in older homes—especially those in Lancaster City. The old-world architecture calls out to many potential buyers ... and yet, their interest is often tempered by wariness at the potential costs involved with operating and maintaining an old house.

Will their utility bills be through the roof? Will they purchase the house, only to be saddled with expensive repairs a few months down the line?

Both Chuck Groshong of [Historic Restorations](#) and Mike Zimmerman of [City Brick Restorations](#) will tell you that there are ways to alleviate the common problems of energy efficiency (or lack thereof) and structural repair that often plague some historic houses.

Groshong estimated that about 30 percent of a home's air leaves through the roof, with 12 to 13 percent also escaping through door and window cavities. Decades ago, the attic often didn't receive any insulation at all, and the naturally cold area was used to store feed, grain, and food supplies.

But old houses don't have to be virtual sieves of energy efficiency. Today, that problem can be easily solved with blown insulation—floorboards can be removed and those chassis filled up with cellulose, “which has a fairly high energy-efficiency rating,” Groshong said.

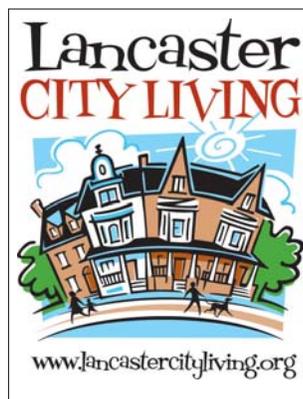
He added that mildew is often a problem when insulation is inserted too tightly between rafters and he urges homeowners to maintain some cross-roof ventilation. “I'm an old-school carpenter, so I always come from the point of view that wood needs to be able to dry out and breathe,” he said, but admitted that with technological advancements in foam insulation, the incredible density of the substance earns fantastic energy-saving ratings.

When approaching any insulation project, homeowners should approach the old, existing insulation with caution. A century ago, it was normal procedure to insulate heating pipes with asbestos, and basements that still have older furnaces often contain asbestos particles in those pipes.

“The EPA has definite standards for their removal and they require an abatement crew. If the material is actually wet down, the particulates are dangerous,” Groshong warned. “Almost all cleaning up or demolition in an old home has issues in terms of health hazards.”

As for those other energy-killing culprits, those old doors and windows, Groshong recommends keeping the house's original dual-pane windows, which boast greater longevity than today's replacement windows. Instead, interior storm windows can be installed that garner the same energy performance.

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From top: Chuck explaining how the deteriorated wood will be replaced; A closeup of the sash that will need to be replaced; Removing paint from window with heat gun and scraper; Deteriorated wood replaced with Dutchman sash; Painted window ready to be reinstalled.





From left: Grinding out of old mortar; brick ready for new mortar; repointing the brick (adding new mortar); the finished wall.

Older homes are also eligible for a \$1,500 tax credit for installing interior or exterior storm windows.

“I like interiors because I think you lose a lot of the architectural detail if the true divided-light panes are not visible from the outside,” said Groshong. “There’s nothing prettier than an old farmhouse that has a candle in the middle of the sill and you can see the true divided-light windows.”

Windows can also be made more energy efficient with traditional weather stripping, and underdoor sweeps can be used to prevent heat escaping under doors. Groshong also suggests controlling the heating in your house with zones and by planning the heat levels according to your day and nighttime use.

Groshong stressed that homeowners need not fear building codes when considering a renovation in their older homes. Pennsylvania adopted the International Building Code in 2006, which includes what is called an existing building code.

“That basically says that a person with an older home can have a variance or exclusion to some of the different code requirements for a newer house,” he said. “If people knew that, they’d have fewer problems with their building inspectors.”

Another frequent problem inside older houses is cracked plaster walls or ceilings. If the plaster is still sticking to the lathe, Groshong said that the crack can be repaired using drywall compound. But if the plaster comes loose, it needs to be taken down and is especially dangerous on ceilings. In those cases, plasterboard or wire lathe with a thick coat of gypsum plaster might do the trick.

Groshong urges homeowners not to immediately replace *all* the plaster in their older home with drywall. “Often the plaster is probably 80 percent good in the house, so why not maintain that plaster wall rather than convert to a modern building? Plaster has so much more character than drywall,” he said.

But what do you do when it’s the outside of your home that’s in need of a little TLC? Mike Zimmerman and City Brick Restorations conduct about 90 percent of their business in Lancaster City—rebuilding chimneys, removing PermaStone, removing paint on bricks, and repointing and replacing badly deteriorated bricks, as well as exterior painting and powerwashing.

Zimmerman often works on houses that need their mortar repaired—the claylike substance between bricks that gives a building its structural integrity. When the mortar deteriorates due to age and weather,

homeowners will often notice bubbling in the plaster inside the home, a sign that the mortar has loosened and is no longer keeping out moisture.

“In these older homes, the mortar’s been there for 100 years,” Zimmerman said. “By repointing it, it seals that joint up again and you’re good for another 30, 40, or 50 years if it’s done properly.” He added that softened mortar is most frequently found on aging chimneys.

The biggest mistake Zimmerman sees homeowners make is delaying repairs. “When your mortar starts to go, that’s as important as a leaky roof,” he said.

Another common pitfall is using a modern mortar, easily purchased at a hardware store, to replace the mortar in an old home, or hiring someone who doesn’t know the difference to do the work. “Homes that were built 100 years ago have a much softer brick than what they do today, and if you get somebody who will use a much harder mortar than what they should be using, they’ll wind up damaging the brick,” added Zimmerman.

For owners of older homes who are still seeking to fulfill their “obligation to the house,” as Groshong puts it, while dealing with today’s rough economy, there are cost-effective steps that can be taken to keep up with maintenance. Older buildings do require more maintenance, but by being attentive and proactive, homeowners can keep things running smoothly instead of putting off needed repairs until the price tag looms large.

“Do the unskilled things yourself if money is an issue; then pay a professional to come in and do the things that are a little more difficult,” Groshong recommended. “By doing a combination of those things, you can keep the price in a reasonable area, and also feel the pride of owning something that you worked for.”

As for exterior fixes, Zimmerman urges homeowners to hire someone who has experience with the tools, equipment, and technique required for repointing brickwork. If the cost of repointing an entire wall is out of the question for now, walls can be spot-pointed instead.

Both agree that the advantages of investing money and time into a historic home are well worth whatever upgrades or maintenance costs that may crop up en route to keeping your older home running efficiently.

“There’s something to be said for sweat equity,” Groshong said. “There’s also the reverence of the past. I think, flat-out, the money you spend for a house is much better spent in an older house because you’re getting so much more in terms of quality; they’re built better.” **CL**