

## **First Time OLD Home Buyers**

*Know What to Look for in Your Dream Home so it Doesn't Become Your Worst Nightmare*

*By Anne DeWolf*

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*DISCLAIMER: This is not a definitive guide to purchasing an older home and is not intended to cover every aspect of the home buying process. We do however encourage you to use it as a supplemental reference in your search. Keep in mind that the most important thing to consider in any remodeling project are current city codes. Ultimately, as many homeowners who have embarked on this journey will tell you, buying an old home is an affair of the heart and where common sense departs, the passion to restore that which once was takes over.*

It may appear absolutely perfect from the street: It needs just a few cosmetic touch-ups and a little TLC and it will be your dream home. Or perhaps it's a badly "remuddled" gem in the rough that you feel passionate about restoring to its original grandeur.

No matter what your first impression is, it is a daunting task to purchase a pre-World War II home for the first time – especially if you do not have qualified contractors to help you make decisions.

Arciform LLC, a company that has specialized in the design, restoration and remodeling of vintage and historic homes in the Greater Portland area for the past nine years, gets a lot of inquiries from buyers about what they should be looking for when they are purchasing an older home. Although we do not provide pre-purchase home consultation services, we have created this article with the aid of our related-industry experts to cover some of the most commonly asked questions about what you should be looking for before you make an offer.

My husband, Richard DeWolf and I, understand the passion for older homes. Not only do we design and restore pre-World War II houses through our company, Arciform, but we have lived in several including an early 1900s house that we currently call home.

We were responsible for the entire home restoration of a severely remuddled 1909 Bungalow. "The 1909 House," as the project was titled, illustrated perfectly that sometimes what you **cannot** see is what you get. Even as seasoned professionals, we had surprises around every corner such as multiple layers of flooring in the

kitchen, rotted brackets under the eaves and missing support posts in the basement. The 1909 House was a perfect example of the lessons buyers of older homes learn along the way.

The most important part of any renovation project is planning. Hiring a professional to help you create an overall vision for the project will not only give you an idea of the costs and scope of the project, it will help to establish various phases for the renovation which can save you a lot of money in the long run.

Remember, remodeling is stressful and the design phase should be fun so try not to create any unnecessary deadlines. A good remodeling company should be able to plan in advance and then pull the remodel through in an efficient manner.

The other thing to keep in mind is that it is never "just" a bath remodel or kitchen remodel or attic remodel...you get the idea. Many other elements come into play or need to be considered or addressed during the project.

Along those lines, here are some areas that you need to look out for:

### **Structural:**

*How do you know if the structure is sound?* Check to be sure that the ridges of the roof aren't bowing or the eaves are sagging. A bow is a signal that there is a structural flaw and sagging of the overhangs can mean that they aren't supported or are carrying too much weight. These are significant issues that need to be taken care of.

Other signs that there are problems:

- The windows won't open because the jams are not square
- The doors swing open or close on their own
- The doors stick
- There is significant bowing in the floors. Almost all old homes have some degree of bowing due to settling but if all of the above applies it could be the sign of bigger problems
- There is bowing between the siding and the basement walls which could signal uneven settling
- The chimney is separating from the walls
- There are large cracks in foundation walls and plaster

These problems might sound scary but there are many ways to fix them. The most important thing is to be aware of the issues and expect to deal with them.

Another structural issue that buyers of older homes need to be aware of is the problems that might be lurking behind vinyl or aluminum siding. The vinyl that covered the 1909 House trapped moisture and caused rotting of the knee braces that were intended to support the eaves.

Sometimes things that may appear to be structural issues are not problems at all. The back porches in many older homes were often added on to the kitchens and designed with floors that sloped away from the house. Do not be alarmed by proper sloping floors; they are not a sign of structural problems with the house, but were designed to shed water.

## **Electrical:**

One of the biggest problems that all potential homeowners face with the electrical systems in any home, old or newer, is not knowing what they are looking at or for, notes Arciform's electrician Jerry Moyer, president of Master Tech Electric Inc.

In order for an electrician to offer information about the safety of the current electrical systems in a home and provide advice about future expansion, buyers should schedule an on site consultation with a reputable electrical contractor that has experience in residential construction.

If any new wiring was added during a remodel, it is very important to ensure that all of the correct permits were issued and the home had a final inspection. This information is made available in the homes records on [portlandmaps.com](http://portlandmaps.com).

If an electrical panel is newer it should have a sticker on the panel cover identifying when it was installed. You should also check to make sure the grounding system is intact. You can do this by looking for a large grounding wire, which is usually bare, attached to a metal pipe that goes into the ground. If the old water pipes have been changed from metal to plastic, ground rods should have been installed to replace the grounding electrode water pipe.

Here are a few other things to check to make sure the electrical systems are in good condition:

- Make sure all junction boxes have covers
- Make sure all existing light fixtures have the correct wattage of light bulb installed. A higher wattage than the fixture is rated for could be a fire hazard.
- Check the neatness of the existing wiring. Electrical wiring that appears messy or disorganized might not have been installed by a licensed electrician and it should be checked to ensure it is up to code.
- Have any concerns checked by a licensed electrician. Most home inspectors do a pretty good job on their inspections but keep in mind that they are not trained electricians and they only do a basic inspection of the electrical system. It is always a good idea to get a professional opinion.

## **Plumbing:**

Milo Linville with Power Plumbing Company, a longtime associate of Arciform, suggests that potential old home buyers check a few basic plumbing systems – especially if you plan to add bathrooms in the future.

Hire a professional to check the sewer line to the street. Taking the time to have a video camera run through the sewer line will alert you to any potential problems and avoid a costly – and messy – project in the future.

Once the sewer line is declared to be free of problems, check the plumbing inside the home. It will be much easier to get an idea of the overall plumbing if the home has an unfinished basement as opposed to a crawlspace or finished basement but regardless of how difficult it is to access the plumbing, taking a thorough look can save a lot of trouble in the long run.

Check the water supply where it comes into the house. If the piping is copper or plastic it has probably been replaced completely which is a good sign but if the pipe is galvanized steel it is probably rather old and will have to be replaced eventually.

It is also important to check the water lines inside the house where you can see them such as under the kitchen sink or basement ceiling. If the pipes are galvanized steel, look for small holes and other signs of rust that might be found in places where they have leaked.

There are a few other things to check to ensure the plumbing is in optimal shape:

- Are the pipes copper or plastic? This is important because some plastics are not approved for use inside the house and approved plastic and copper are more up to date and do not corrode like steel. For example PVC piping is not approved, and CPVC (although not really a high quality material choice) and PEX flexible plastic piping are.
- Check to be sure the pipes are the right size. The pipe size should be larger as it enters the home and at the water heater than where it meets the individual fixtures like the bathroom sink.
- Are the pipes a collection of different materials? A home with a mixture of galvanized, copper and plastic pipe is usually a sign that minimal repairs have been made and re-pipe could be required sooner than later.
- Inspect the inside drain lines. Although drain lines are not as prone to problems as water lines, they do commonly rot out and should be checked for rust holes and previous repairs
- Check the size of the main water supply pipe. Does it allow extra pressure required for added plumbing fixtures?
- Turn on the taps to see if rust runs out of the pipes. It is common (and not problematic) for a house that has been sitting for a period of time to show signs of rust but it could be a sign of corrosion if the home is occupied.
- Test the water pressure by turning on all the faucets at the same time

If adding another bathroom is on your list of remodeling projects, it is important to check the size of the floor joists in addition to the size of the water pipes. In some cases, the floor joists are not large enough to allow for drilling holes to run the drain pipes through from an upper floor. Be prepared to make compromises with the design in order to install a new bathroom and be warned that although it is almost always possible to add a bathroom on a second or third floor it might be costly and rooms below will be affected.

### **Heating & Cooling:**

Because most old homes are heated with oil heat, Molly Brady of First Call Heating and Cooling, emphasizes how important it is to research the facts before considering a change. There are a lot of misconceptions and inaccurate information regarding oil-heated homes so be sure to do your homework before letting someone talk you in to converting from oil to gas. The best sources for information about oil heat are full-service oil heating dealers ([www.oregonoilheat.com](http://www.oregonoilheat.com)) and the Oil Heat Help Line (503-546-5501).

Converting from oil to gas is very costly and installing a new high-tech oil furnace often makes more economic sense. The same is true with heating oil tanks. If a tank needs to be replaced, an above ground or basement tank is far less expensive than

changing heat sources.

Be sure to request receipts that show any abandoned heating oil tank has been properly emptied or decommissioned.

If you are not sure if there is an abandoned oil tank on the property, go to [www.portlandmaps.com](http://www.portlandmaps.com) and click on 'storage tanks' or contact the local fire marshal. It is also a good idea to check with local heating oil dealers for information from their historical delivery records.

To find out if there is a tank that has been previously decommissioned or certified and registered with DEQ, some records can be found by contacting the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality at <http://www.deq.state.or.us> or by calling the DEQ Hotline at 1-800-742-7878.

Once you take possession of the home, Molly recommends having the heating and cooling system professionally inspected by a qualified service and repair technician familiar with the type of heating system in the home to assess its current condition. It is also a good idea to have the air duct system cleaned to remove buildup of dirt, dust, pet dander, mold, bacteria and pollen that may have occurred over the years.

Ducting in old homes was commonly wrapped in asbestos installation. If you do not touch it there is no need to do anything about it. Once it has been disturbed it needs to be abated.

### **Paint:**

Lead paint was commonly used in old homes. In fact, most all of the paint used prior to 1978 will contain lead. The lead content in paint is more of an issue when the paint is peeling because this is when it poses the greatest risk of ingestion through its dust or if kids lick the filmy residue or lick their hands after touching it. In order to remove lead paint, be sure to do a good prep job to remove loose paint or strip it completely before repainting. For more information, please refer to the Oregon Department of Health and Human Service Lead Based Paint website [www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/leadpaint/index.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/leadpaint/index.shtml) or call them at 971-673-0457.

### **Design:**

Chances are you purchased the house because you loved it – even though you intended to make a few changes to fit your needs. Although you have big plans and are eager to get started, it is important to live in the home for awhile before undertaking a major remodeling project. The very things that you were planning to change might turn into features that you love and the things you thought you would love might be things you really want to change.

Remember that the house has been there for a long time and has weathered many styles. To maintain the latest in visual trends is costly and in our opinion, creates the need for a remodel every 10 years or so. If design and material selection is approached in this manner, the value of the home is decreased and increases the amount of materials that end up in landfills with every remodel.

Arciform believes that the house should dictate the architectural elements. The changes that you make need to relate to the space and it is important to maintain the original proportions of the home.

One of the best ways to approach a remodeling project is from the top down and from the outside in to ensure that you are not destroying something below to accommodate an upstairs remodel.

Prior to creating a design, visit the City of Portland website at [www.portlandonline.com/bds](http://www.portlandonline.com/bds) to find out about code requirements and other restrictions such as height, windows, stairs and insulation.

There may be parts of your home that are not up to current code but did meet the building codes at the time they were built. For example: If you decide to convert your attic to a living space, if the current stairs meet grandfathered-in requirements, you may leave them untouched or make minor adjustments by adding a railing or adding additional headroom. However, as soon as you touch it, structurally you must bring it up to current code.

It is also a good idea to check out city records on the home. If it is on the market as a two story home because it has a finished upstairs, but on city records it is shown as a 1 story with an unfinished attic, then the upstairs needs to be brought up to current code if remodeled. Insufficient structural elements may need to be addressed. There is a strong likelihood that current structural elements will be insufficient and could need to be addressed and can cause a significant chain reaction of other items that need to be taken care of.

### **How Much Will it Cost?**

It is THE question Arciform is asked the most and it is also one of THE most unanswerable. There are so many variables that need to be considered and prior to home ownership and a professional design, it cannot be determined. Keep in mind, that it is never "just" anything with an old home.

We do suggest that you take several things into consideration when you are investing in a home and considering future remodeling projects:

- Do you anticipate living in the home for longer than five years? This is important because it helps prioritizing.
- Is it being remodeled for you or resale or both? Put another way, are you designing a space just for you or what the general public might want based on the real estate market or both?
- What will the neighborhood bear? If you are considering resale it is important to remodel the main parts of the house rather than adding features that might be more personal.
- What will the house bear? There is such a thing as over-remodeling so you want to be sure the general style of the house can support a high-end kitchen for example. Or on the other end of the spectrum the home may have been designed by a noteworthy Portland architect so the house itself is worth maintaining. We defer to the Bosco-Milligan Foundation's Architectural Heritage Center as a valuable resource in determining this. Visit [www.architecturalheritagecenter.org](http://www.architecturalheritagecenter.org) or phone 503-231-7264. They also offer classes on topics such as "What Style is My Home.", or focused lectures on

particular periods, and have excellent rotating exhibits on specific architectural elements.

If you are looking at a house with ornate detailing a remodel is going to be exponentially more expensive because of the detailing. The same is true for "remuddled" homes where the original elements were removed and need to be restored.

Buying an older home requires a great deal of research and preparation – especially if you plan to tackle a major remodeling project – but the amount of effort required to restore an older home to its original beauty should not deter you. Older homes are a testament to the history of our city and hallmarks of a bygone era; living in one may be one of the best decisions you ever make. Your new neighbors are going to love you for adopting and caring for your new old home. Best wishes on your search!