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Realtors Guide to Construction Era's

There are good decades and there are bad decades. The common thread is the economic period when the home was built. Example: Construction in the “Roaring” 1920’s often was rushed using smaller wood sizes and techniques leading to more settling through the structure, drafts and overall poorer quality. Previous years, after the “1st World War” construction was slower with greater care and larger, better quality materials often rendering the home more solid.

Another great difference was the “solid” 1950’s & 1960’s to the poorer quality of the 1970’s & 1980’s.

Following are overall general traits of the decades. Overlaps from some years happen as do Better quality Executive homes in areas deemed higher quality for the time period.

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Pre1900

Georgian, Romanesque, Gothic & Victorian can be found in the oldest parts of the GTA, Cabbagetown, Dundas station, Weston and along any other old rail lines.

- LARGER detached homes were constructed very well. Simple techniques using quality materials. Unfortunately every material has a limit and after 120 years many of these homes require improvements.
- GAS LIGHT piping is often found imbedded in the walls. Not an issue.
- WOOD was superior in quality.
- WOOD windows made of superior quality.
- WORKMANSHIP was superior in quality.
- WALLS were plaster over wood lathe.
- ATTIC construction had healthy slopes and unrestricted spaces and often strengthened to handle weight of Slate roofing.

Negatives

- REGULATION was not always the norm. Lower class areas at the turn of the century would find individuals building their own homes often with poor results.
- ROW housing was particularly poor.
- FOUNDATIONS were primarily Stone. Very porous often with mortar washing out from between the stones. Repair of these areas often required.
- BASEMENT floors were often dirt floors, covered in later decades.
- INSURANCE ITEM - ELECTRICAL - KNOB & TUBE was everywhere and Service size was often only 60 amps. Re-Wiring & Update to 100 amps required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes throughout the decade were “Galvanized Steel” which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed
- ASBESTOS insulation not originally used but often added around Boiler distribution piping and near furnace ductwork as a heat shield.

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1900 -1919

Care was taken. Newer technologies and methods were born out of the industrial age. Thought from old methods transitioned into a good constructive product (Mostly).

- WOOD was superior in quality.
- WOOD windows made of superior quality.
- WORKMANSHIP was superior in quality.
- WALLS were plaster over wood lathe.
- ATTIC construction had healthy slopes and unrestricted spaces.
- DESIGN of wood structure led to a more level / solid structure throughout.
- BRICK Mortar was a better mixture than previous decades, However Brick Arches above windows and doors often were not arched enough. A (Pyramid) crack under load would often occur (in a minimal way).
-

Negatives

- REGULATION was not always the norm. Lower class areas at the turn of the century would find individuals building their own homes often with poor results.
- FOUNDATIONS were primarily Stone, with brick coming into being around 1910. Very porous often with mortar washing out from between the stones. Repair of these areas often required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - ELECTRICAL - KNOB & TUBE was everywhere and Service size was often only 60 amps. Re-Wiring & Update to 100 amps required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes throughout the decade were “Galvanized Steel” which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed
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1920's

The “Roaring 20’s” was not a good era for construction. Homes erected quickly often used poor materials and sloppy workmanship. Semi-Detached structures were a big trend.

- FOUNDATIONS of Rare poured concrete was superior in every way - Rarely cracked, Rarely leaked ! Good stuff - But rare for the 1920's. Era of mostly brick.
- WOOD under-sizing was common in many areas of the home. The decade of making a fast buck bled down to every aspect of construction. The quality was good - simply overloaded.
- WATER supply from the city is now better pressurized removing the need for the “Reservoir” tanks in 2nd floor bedroom closets.
- WALLS were plaster over wood lathe.

Negatives

- FOUNDATIONS were mostly Brick masonry. This often leached and allowed water to penetrate through wall. Lower “Blue collar” areas often had Bricks disintegrating due to a higher clay base, which couldn't handle absorption.
- TERMITES - MORTAR in brickwork around “THE BEACH” in Toronto was made with too much sand. This made for an erosive mixture. Termites had no trouble burrowing through a brick foundation wall made in the 1920's
- ARCHES of Brick above windows and doors often were not arched enough. A (Pyramid) crack under load would often occur (in a more substantial way) than previous decade.
- SETTLING around the staircases always seem to occur. The wood beam header and surrounding wood structure simply was undersized and could not handle the load, causing the stairs to implode “inwards”. Extremely common.
- WATER supply piping from the street was often “Lead”.
- INSURANCE ITEM - ELECTRICAL - KNOB & TUBE was everywhere and Service size was often only 60 amps. Re-Wiring & Update to 100 amps required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes throughout the decade were “Galvanized Steel” which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed
- ASBESTOS insulation was used around Boiler distribution piping and near furnace ductwork as a heat shield.

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1930's

A good decade for construction. The great depression allowed slower methodical work (workers didn't want to lose jobs). So they took longer creating a better product.

- WOOD was superior in quality.
- WORKMANSHIP was superior in quality.
- WALLS were plaster over wood lath.
- ATTIC construction had healthy slopes and unrestricted spaces.
- DESIGN of wood structure led to fewer "Settlement" traits unlike the 1920's. A more level / solid structure throughout.
- BRICK Mortar was a better mixture than previous decades. Brick Arches above windows and doors didn't (Pyramid) crack under load as much as previous decades.
- WATER supply piping from street began using copper replacing Lead as the primary material.

Negatives

- FOUNDATIONS out of "Hollow" Masonry Block in the majority of the decade were hollow. Water could seep into a crack - fill the hollow "Flute" then bleed over into its sister blocks giving the appearance of a perimeter problem. "Leaky-er" than the 1940's & 1950's.
- WOOD often undersized BUT so thick of 1st generation wood - it still performed well whatever function it was under.
- RADIATORS rarely have their thermostatic knobs turned - resulting in eventual leakage at the valves. Replacements are best option.
- INSURANCE ITEM - ELECTRICAL - KNOB & TUBE was everywhere and Service size was often only 60 amps. Re-Wiring & Update to 100 amps required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes throughout the decade were "Galvanized Steel" which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed.
- ASBESTOS insulation was used around Boiler distribution piping and near furnace ductwork as a heat shield. Asbestos also in sporadic materials throughout.

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1940's

Slow construction during war years, picking up at a furious pace (mid1945). Overall - reasonably well built for their time.

- WOOD was superior in quality.
- WALLS saw the beginning of plaster board being used.
- METAL SIDING was used extensively after WWII. Speed was one factor along with military metal factories producing for the war effort turning quickly into commercial materials.
- ONE 1/2 STOREYS was the big trend. Knee wall attics often had poor ventilation but were drafty enough not to matter.
- ELECTRIC looked like "Knob & Tube" but mostly was NOT. Outside sheathing was identical, BUT both Hot & Neutral wires came from the same cable.

Negatives

- FOUNDATIONS out of "Hollow" Masonry Block in the majority of the decade were hollow. Water could seep into a crack - fill the hollow "Flute" then bleed over into its sister blocks giving the appearance of a perimeter problem.
- ELECTRICAL outlets were ungrounded (2-prong).
- INSURANCE ITEM - ELECTRICAL service often was only 60 amps. Update to 100 amps required.
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes throughout the decade were "Galvanized Steel" which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed
- ASBESTOS insulation was used around perimeter Heat Registers and near furnace ductwork as a heat shield. Asbestos also in sporadic materials throughout.

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1950's

A good decade for construction. Three recessions, one being severe produced slower more methodical construction.

- NO Winter construction activity (halted). This was good for curing times of materials in warmer weather and less warping throughout.
- ELECTRICAL was all Copper. - Good.
- FOUNDATIONS out of Masonry Block in the last few years (57', 58' & 59') - were filled with concrete producing a strong, water resistant foundation.
- WOOD was superior in quality
- BRICK /BLOCK or commonly known as "Solid Masonry" construction was in its final decade. Considered a more sturdy structure.
- ROOF SHEATHING below the shingles in attic were real wood boards - Best.
- BRICK construction was the preferred method again. (from the fast, late 1940's siding).
- WATER - Mostly copper supply and Cast Iron waste.

Negatives

- ELECTRICAL outlets were ungrounded (2-prong).
- INSURANCE ITEM - WATER supply pipes in the early decade were "Galvanized Steel" which by today - Fail. Insurance companies will not insure. Immediate replacement needed.
- FOUNDATIONS out of "Hollow" Masonry Block in the majority of the decade were hollow. Water could seep into a crack - fill the hollow "Flute" then bleed over into its sister blocks giving the appearance of a perimeter problem. From 1950's working backwards in time - Foundations steadily became "Leaky-er".
- ASBESTOS insulation was used around perimeter Heat Registers and near furnace ductwork as a heat shield. Asbestos also used in sporadic materials throughout.

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1960's

Considered one of the best decades of construction. Quality European workmanship met quality materials & technology. Economically a very steady period.

- NO Winter construction activity (halted). This was good for curing times of materials in warmer weather and less warping throughout.
- WALLS were mostly plaster over metal "chicken wire" lath.
- WATER supply pipes all Copper including Main. The only decade with all Copper wastes. A tell tale sign of 1960's.
- BASEMENTS (Mostly Dry). Concrete filled cement blocks in the 1st half of decade and few cracks in poured concrete in last half were
- WOOD structure - Superior sizes for spans & thickness, meant little structural failure of materials.
- ELECTRICAL wiring - Copper. Grounding (for outlets) came to be in 1965 - everything before was ungrounded outlets.
- FIREPLACE chimney assemblies mostly brick masonry with clay flues.
- WEEP holes (space between 1st row of brick) - introduced. Good.

Negatives

- WINDOWS were poor thermally - single glazed sliders.
- ELECTRICAL plugs - Ungrounded for the 1st half of the decade.
- ELECTRIC distribution panels were often "Fuses". Breakers began to creep
- ELECTRIC Radiant on ceilings made a brief visit and found not be a good alternative.
- ASBESTOS insulation was used around perimeter Heat Registers as a heat shield. Asbestos NOT sporadically used in other materials.

1970's

An overall poor decade for construction. 1970's oil embargo increases world wide core resource costs and prompts Canadian government to implement subsidy for adding attic insulation. Winter construction (all-season) begins.

- WATER supply pipes all Copper including Main. Wastes change to ABS "Plastic" throughout decade.
- WALLS saw the beginning of drywall boards being used.

Negatives

- ROOF wood sub-sheathing (Roof boards) reduced to a subpar 3/8" thickness. Roof SLOPE was at a low angle which is poor for attic ventilation. Warping and sagging naturally occurred however, was amplified by mould and mildew from Soffit obstruction (explained below).
- INSULATION & VENTILATION added (Gov. subsidy) in attic often obstructed "Soffit" vents needed to draw cool air into the attic so hot summer air exhausts out the upper (top) roof vents. Low Roof slope did not help. This obstruction caused an "internal rain forest" of damp heat. Feeding Mould growth throughout.
- FOUNDATION - Low sill (top of wall) construction. It was considered un-sightly to have too much concrete foundation showing. Brick walls often touched grade. This creates problems for water potentially entering Sill joint and Weep holed at the bottom of a brick wall and spilling into the basement.
- ELECTRICAL wiring distribution was Aluminum for the 1st half of the decade. 1970 - 1975 (sometimes 1976). Aluminum is considered inferior to Copper distribution BUT, not outlawed, contrary to popular belief. Insurance companies often will not insure Aluminum.
- ELECTRIC distribution panels from this decade are considered obsolete. Replacement breakers were flimsy and cannot be found. Panel updates prudent.
- ELECTRIC Baseboard heaters were plentiful. After Oil became expensive a "battle between titans" ensued - Electric over Gas. Gas clearly won.
- UFFI was used extensively in this decade until it was outlawed in 1980.
- FIREPLACE chimney assemblies often brick masonry with metal flues. Metal fire boxes introduced with inferior metal warping to heat (with regular use).

1980's

An overall poor decade for construction. Some improvements over the 1970's. Some set-backs in other areas. A brisk economic environment from 1984 onwards ushered in rushed homebuilding and renovations.

- ELECTRICAL distribution panels are descent in quality. Almost always (consistent) 100 amps, Breakers with Copper distribution. Good
- FOUNDATION's elevated far above grade line improving moisture protection.

Negatives

- ELECTRICAL Breaker for "Dryer" was 90% to be an undersized 30amp breaker on a 40amp cable. Considered a fire hazard - replacement required.
- WINDOWS of Wood often rotted quickly. Wood used was far inferior to other decades (60,000. types after all). Frames often rotted through. Metal capping will become a problem in future years as metal was fastened to a deteriorating material.
- WINDOW seals were also a problem. Condensation or fogging windows from compromised seals often plagued multiple units.
- FOUNDATION cracking was at a peak in the 1980's, averaging between 3 to 5 large size cracks upwards of 15+ around an average sized 3 bedroom home. REBAR Plug Cement also often failed allowing water to penetrate until the industry plugged "Corks" into the holes (which worked) around 1991.
- FRAMING of floors often squeaked & flexed - Framers would miss wood joists with nails (throughout). Ceramic tile floors cracked from the poor rigidity.
- WOOD TRIM on exterior often rotted quickly from using poor wood materials
- ROOF SHEATHING (below shingles) began using "particleboard" - a inferior product when wet and not particularly wise beneath shingles.
- ATTIC MOULD found 40% -50% of the time. Inadequate number of roof vents and obstructed Soffit vents (added insulation), caused Mould growth.
- 2ND FLOOR ADDITIONS were (mostly) poorly constructed in the wild West, late 80's (1986 - 1990). Attics were the worst part of that construction. Inadequate ventilation with too many obstructions (skylight wells). Colossal failures and Big Mould in these Attics in coming years, as they're opened up (especially the "cathedral" ceilings). BEWARE.

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1990's & onwards

Change! After two difficult decades and many complaints, hundreds of city building inspectors were hired & demanded to see every stage of construction on every house. Ultimately - Greater scrutiny and a deep recession (prompting competition) -Builders built a better product.

- FOUNDATION's better with their installation techniques drastically reduced water penetration.
- FRAMING connections fastened tighter produced a more solid wood structure reducing squeaks.
- CONTRACTORS took a more active role in completing small details and created a more robust finishing process with buyers in mind.
- TECHNOLOGY advanced greatly creating more environmentally superior products.
- MATERIALS for exterior replaced susceptible wood with Plastics and composite materials better withstanding the elements.
- ROOF SHEATHING (below shingles) realizing their mistake using "ParticalBoard" - a inferior product when wet reverted back to "Plywood" - a better product.

Negatives

- SUBCONTRACTORS use an assembly line approach to subdivision homes and often miss the completion of items throughout. Primary contractors communications process is key.

Hoping this helps identify common traits for period construction in the Toronto GTA area.

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Sincerely Yours,

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