

“The Ten Most Common Problems in Middle-Aged Homes”

The following is a list of the ten most common deficiencies we find "middle-aged" homes.

Generally, I consider this category of homes to among the best we human beings may ever enjoy. While new technology is providing us with some interesting and high quality new homes, they are also expensive and the new homes that are affordable by most of us simply do not benefit from the best available technology and workmanship.

On the other hand, virtually all middle-aged homes reflect the same level of quality in materials and workmanship. During that period of time, there were fewer choices to be made about how a home was to be built and what materials were to be used. Materials and labor were cheap, so virtually all homes benefitted from nearly the best available of both.

Here are the ten most common deficiencies we find in middle-aged homes.

1. Asbestos insulation on old heating systems - This material looks somewhat like paper mache and was often used as an insulating jacket on heating pipes and boilers. This material is hazardous and should be removed or encapsulated for your protection.
2. Inadequate electrical systems - Most homes today that are not electrically heated require a 200 ampere electrical service. Many middle-aged homes were built with a 60 amperes electrical service, thus, upgrading of the electrical capacity may be necessary.
3. Old electrical wiring - While it is unlikely to find knob and tube wiring in middle-aged homes, BX (metal-sheathed) and fabric wiring are common. BX can and has been the source of many fires in homes and should be phased out soon.
4. Old fuse controlled electrical panels - While fuses inherently are just as safe as circuit breakers, it is easier to change the size of a fuse and, thus, allow overloading of electrical wiring than it is to change the size of the circuit breaker. Thus, overfusing can cause a fire hazard.

Generally, old wiring should be controlled by nothing greater than a 15 amp fuse. If larger fuses are found in the home you're considering, they should be replaced. If it's evident that frequent fuse replacement has been necessary, upgrading of the electrical system will likely be required.

5. Old septic systems - If the home in question has a septic system more than twenty years old and there's no evidence of recent maintenance, the probability of having to upgrade or entirely replace that system within the next few years is very high. Current plumbing codes set different standards than would have applied many years ago.

6. Old heating units - The typical life (according to the manufacturers) of most quality heating units is thirty to forty years. Many middle-aged homes have heating units much older than that. For these, the "thirty-thirty" guarantee often applies. They may last thirty seconds or thirty years! While it is true that many of these units can last as long as one hundred years, once they're beyond forty or fifty years old, their future life is quite unpredictable.

Particularly important are old hot air systems. A smoke test should be conducted to determine if there are any leaks in the want air plenum (the chamber at the top of the furnace) that would allow that air to be contaminated by the combustion air in the furnace itself. If such a leak exists, this heating unit is potentially a health hazard.

7. Old Plumbing - While copper and brass were in use during portions of the time when our middle-aged homes were being built, some galvanized iron piping was also used. This is identifiable by its attraction to a magnet and its threaded fittings. This pipe will corrode and mineral deposits will develop internally to restrict water flow. It will be necessary to phase out this piping. Also, many middle-aged homes were located in cities where their water supply was from a municipal system. If the water line connecting the house to the street is still original, it may be galvanized and will soon need replacement.
8. Roofs - The typical life of asphalt shingles (the most canon type of roofing used on middle-aged homes) is twenty to twenty-five years. Frequently, owners and contractors alike felt it appropriate to apply new shingles directly over the old, thus, saving time and money.

If your middle-aged home now has two layers of shingles and the second layer is reaching the end of its life, it will be necessary to remove all of the shingles before applying new. This will provide the opportunity to strip the underlayment (often tar paper) and examine the roofing boards to repair any that may be rotted, before applying the new roof.

9. Porches - Many of our middle-aged homes have large, often multi-level, porches. Structurally, these were typically somewhat independent. However, most relied on the main house for at least part of their support. These porches often had ornate railings, columns and trim. If these porches have not received regular, thorough maintenance, some rot is likely to be discovered as you in to paint and repair the porch on your middle-aged home.
10. Inadequate attic ventilation - Many of our middle-aged homes were built with minimal insulation and ventilation. However, the necessary ventilation often occurred naturally, the house simply "breathed."

As we have added insulation however, we have often begun to choke the house. Condensation in the attic and ice "dams" along the edge of the roof are both indications of inadequate ventilation. If this evidence is discovered, it's quite important that ventilation be improved.

As noted at the outset, I consider middle-aged homes to be among the best we will ever see and, thus, esthetics aside, you're likely to encounter the fewest numbers of problems in these homes. Working with your local Professional Engineer as a buyer or a seller of a middle-aged home, however, will answer questions and provide peace of mind.