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Living in the past

The romance of ghosts, peeling plaster, and old houses

by Cynthia G. La Ferle
Special Writer

I'm often asked if I have any practical advice for people who are about to buy an older home that needs work. But I know enough to keep my mouth shut. The word practical has nothing to do with an old house, and besides, you can't talk sense into anyone who's smitten with one.

You could point out the peeling plaster and creaky floorboards. Or preach a sermon about the terrors of high heating bills and budget deficits. You might even try praising the virtues of new construction techniques and the seamless flow of contemporary floor plans. But you might just as well talk to the walls.

It's perfectly useless to stand between a man and a woman and the crumbling palace they are about to mortgage. This kind of love is ignited by the wicked gleam of leaded glass windows, sealed at first sight by the flirtatious quirk of a nook or cranny.

I speak from years of experience. Throughout our 13 married years together, my husband and I have always purchased houses that are much older than we are. We've searched, begged, and borrowed to get them. We've tolerated musty basements, cracked ceilings, antique toilets, and funny old bathrooms that even Bob Vila wouldn't touch.

For the past three years we've lived in a 1920s Tudor, a brooding bastion with thick oak woodwork and a leaky dungeon of a basement. On winter nights we listen to a mournful symphony of steam pipes clanking and moaning like Marley's ghost. Our house commands the corner of a narrow street lined with ancient maple trees, and we wouldn't trade the place for a dozen new houses in an upscale subdivision.

I'm not quite sure how to explain my passion for houses with a past. But I can trace its beginnings to the vacations of my youth, when my parents drove me to Mt. Vernon, Colonial Williamsburg, and Salem Village. While other kids sereched on the thrill rides in Disneyland, I snooped around George Washington's bedroom. I learned at an early age that buildings, like people, acquire character as they mature. And curiously — despite the "space age" in which I grew up — I decided that anything that's been around for a while is infinitely more interesting than a future we can only imagine.

New houses are, without a doubt, much more convenient than old ones. If you get a new house that's really well constructed, you probably won't see much of your tool kit. But Jacuzzi or no Jacuzzi, there's always something missing in these contemporary castles.

For one thing, you can't build history into a gey house. Time works an inexplorable magic; you can sense it the

moment you step inside a home in which someone else has lived. In a collective voice the rooms seem to whisper, "This house has seen some things that you haven't." I'm always moved by the everyday romance of people and events that have become part of a building's mortar and plaster. And romance, after all, is what gets the old-house lover through the toughest renovation projects.

Even a place with the humblest history can wend its way into our hearts, especially if we've spent some time there.

I'll never forget our first old house, a tiny English cottage of a place that was built in the 1940s. Married just two years, my husband and I bought it on a land contract from Mrs. Morris, an endearing elderly woman whose late husband had left a legacy of sweet peas and wild groundcover in the backyard. Whenever I worked in that garden, I could almost picture old Mr. Morris turning the earth with his hand trowel, or perhaps leaning on his rake while surveying his botanical empire.

After selling her home to us, Mrs. Morris moved to a nursing home. But not long before she died, her daughter brought her back to visit the house. She was anxious to see how we had decorated it; I was nervous about showing her the changes we'd made. Making her way ever so slowly through the rooms, Mrs. Morris graciously admired our paint and wallpaper selections, then told me how she had decorated years before, when her family was young.

During that visit that I began to understand, on a much deeper level, the inevitable passage of time and how buildings connect us to the people who have lived in them before us. It's that knowledge that makes it so difficult to leave an old house when it's time to move on.

Saying good-bye to my parents' home when it was sold this year was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Mom just couldn't keep the house after my father had died of a heart attack in the driveway. It was too large, too much work; and there were too many memories hovering in the corners.

Just before we packed my mother's last box of china and loaded it into my car, I took one final tour of the last place my father had loved and called his home. Walking past his study upstairs, I paused for a moment, half expecting to see his familiar gray head leaning over his roll top desk. Completely empty, the room looked so much smaller than it had seemed when it was cluttered with his books and furniture.

But I sensed the years of Dad's benevolent presence in the very walls of the little study, and I knew that he would, in his usual quiet way, always haunt the house.

Cynthia G. La Ferle is a freelance writer who lives in Royal Oak.

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