HOMEOWNER REPAIR GUIDE

TEN OLD HOUSE TABOOS

Things to avoid when updating your home

For owners of older homes, it can be a challenge to keep your house safe, sound and secure. Here are some things to avoid when you are updating your home:

1 DON'T COVER EXTERIOR STEPS WITH INDOOR-OUTDOOR CARPETING

Carpeting holds moisture, which causes the mortar between the bricks to deteriorate more rapidly. Once the mortar deteriorates, the bricks will loosen and fall out. Before you know it, your stone treads will crack and break, and they'll need much more substantial work to get them back into good shape.

2 DON'T BUY THE WRONG TOILET

Many homeowners are replacing old-style toilets with new water-saving models. Since styles of toilets vary in how far they sit away from the wall, you need to be aware of the "rough-in" measurement (the distance between the center of the flange around the drain opening and the wall behind it). You can select a toilet designed for a shorter rough-in measurement (you'll just need to add some supportive blocking between the back of the tank and the wall), but you can't install a fixture designed for a longer rough-in measurement without some complicated alterations to the drain line. Be aware that, for some rough-in measurements, you will have to special order your toilet.

3 DON'T REPLACE A TWO-PRONG OUTLET WITH A REGULAR THREE-PRONG OUTLET

In older homes with knob and tube wiring (a two-wire system), the outlets have only two openings. Many homeowners are tempted to replace those old outlets with ones that will accept a three-prong plug. The problem is that a three-prong plug indicates that the outlet is grounded, but knob-and-tube wiring does not have a ground wire. If you don't want to run a ground wire from the service panel to the outlet, you can replace the two-prong outlet with a Ground-Fault Circuit Interrupter (the *only* three-prong outlet that should be installed in a two-wire system).

4 DON'T FORGET THE FASCIA BOARD

When you replace your gutter, be sure to check the fascia board behind it. If it is sound, put two coats of paint on it and let them dry before installing the gutter. If the fascia is loose, and longer replacement nails don't seem to secure it adequately, the ends of the roof rafters have probably rotted. If this is the case, remove the fascia board completely to expose the rafters, and nail a new piece of wood alongside each deteriorated rafter end to reinforce it. If the fascia board itself is rotted and deteriorated, replace it with outdoor treated wood or untreated wood that has been primed and painted or wrapped with aluminum or vinyl fascia wrap.

5 DON'T EXPOSE STRUCTURAL CLAY BLOCK ALONG YOUR FOUNDATION

The large red tile blocks used for the foundations of many older homes were not meant to be exposed to the elements. You shouldn't see them on the outside wall of your basement, so make sure your landscaping plans include keeping these blocks covered with soil.

6 DON'T LET TREE BRANCHES GET TOO LONG

Each season, check whether any limbs have grown long enough to reach your roof or siding. Wind-blown branches that repeatedly rub against a surface can cut through shingles and other roofing materials; damage paint; destroy wood, vinyl or aluminum siding; and even scar masonry, stucco and concrete. Identify any branches that should be trimmed back from the house or garage. Then, look for dead and dying trees and limbs, particularly those overhanging the house or garage, which could cause damage if felled by high winds. If you don't feel capable of removing them yourself, hire a professional tree trimmer for the job.

7 DON'T MOUNT A CEILING FAN IN THE WRONG KIND OF BOX

If you are replacing an existing light fixture with a ceiling fan, check how the light was originally installed in the ceiling. Most ceiling-mount boxes for lights were not secured to the wood framing; in fact, the box for a lightweight light fixture may only have been attached to the ¼" lath behind the plaster. It's important that you replace the old box that held the light with a new metal junction box able to support the weight of the fan motor and the vibration of the moving blades. There are various ways to install the new box, depending on the weight of the fan and how much access you have to the ceiling joists to which the box will be attached.

8 DON'T IGNORE A DRUM TRAP

Some older bathroom drain lines contain a drum trap (a coffee-can-shaped reservoir commonly located in the floor alongside the tub or mounted in a closet or behind an access panel) that was designed to collect hair and other debris in the drain line. Not only do drum traps make snaking an obstructed line more difficult, but they can also rust through and cause leaks. Replacing these devices with a regular trap can prevent water damage to the ceiling below.

9 DON'T COVER THE OUTSIDE WALLS OF A BASEMENT WITH DRYWALL

Drywall on the exterior walls of a basement will prevent you from seeing signs of water intrusion (usually caused by clogged sewer lines, sagging gutters, or other problems that are easily remedied) that can cause expensive damage if the problem goes undetected. Use exterior latex paint on basement walls, with the expectation that you'll have to repaint periodically. A stain-killing, mildew-resistant primer and paint can reduce the likelihood of mold growth and mildew odor.

10 DON'T FORGET TO LOCATE YOUR SHUT-OFFS

If you suddenly had to turn off the gas, water, or electrical power to your house, would you know how to do it? It's important that every adult and teenager in your home know where the emergency shut-offs are and how to operate them.

Home Repair Resource center

Home Repair Resource Center empowers homeowners to maintain their homes for sustainable and diverse communities.

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