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# How to Breathe New Life into Older Homes

Presented by Morse Constructions Inc.

# Staying Put in an Older Home



Boston area communities are filled with lovely older homes from Back Bay brownstones and Cambridge row houses, to large colonials in Newton and Wellesley. These homes often have wonderful character and great locations, but floor plans and features that may be out of sync with modern lifestyles.

Almost every owner of an older home reaches a point where the house is no longer meeting all of his or her needs. They might be frustrated with a small kitchen with inadequate storage, high heating bills from drafty rooms, or steep stairs and high thresholds that make it difficult to navigate. The question becomes whether to move or stay put.

There are plenty of reasons to move, but what if there is much that you love about your community, your garden, your location? In this case, staying put and renovating is the answer.

If you love where you are, but don't love certain features of your house, this publication is for you. The following pages provide tips to solve common problems in older homes and creative inspiration for some of the most popular updates.

**5 Reasons to Live in an Older Home**

- Character of home
- Sense of community and proximity to amenities
- Established landscaping
- Environmentally responsible to reuse rather than build new
- Preserving our heritage

# Table of Contents





# Solutions to 5 Common Problems

# Problem: Floor Plan Doesn’t Work

1

Floor plans in older homes reflect the lifestyles of an earlier era. Rooms were typically walled off from one another and defined by their function – kitchens were for food preparation, the living room was for entertaining, dining room for eating and so forth. In today’s homes, we expect more flexibility. We want the kitchen to function well for food preparation, but we may also want it to be a comfortable gathering place and provide space for children to do homework or adults to take care of paperwork. We want more flexible floor plans so we can customize spaces to our individual preferences.



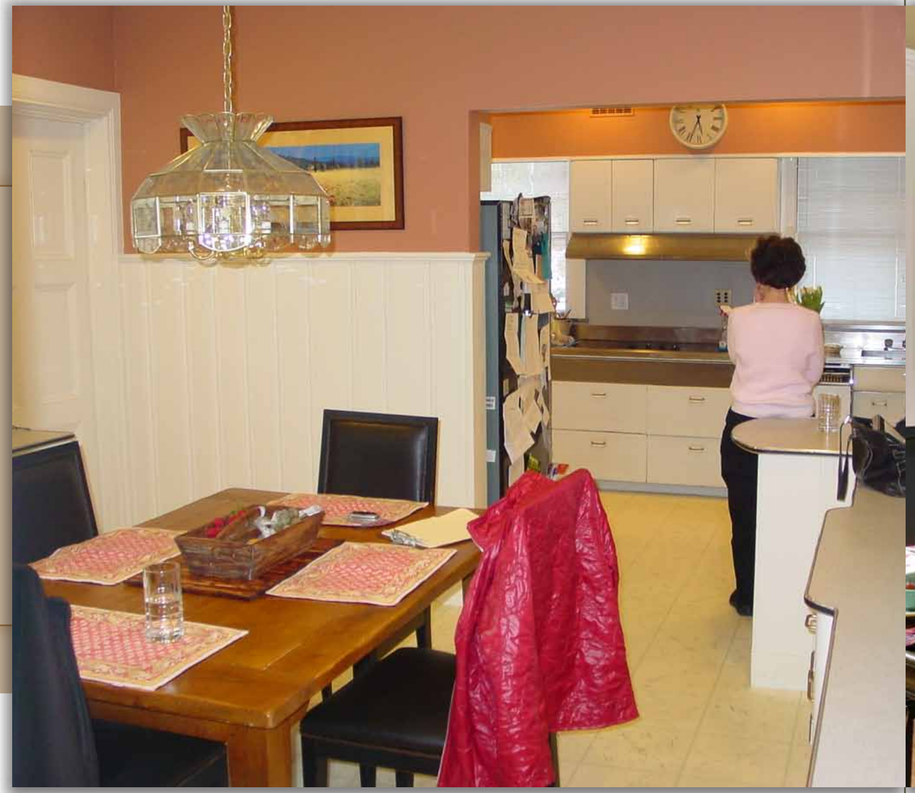
# Solution: Remove or Move Walls

Moving or removing a wall can solve a host of problems. Without adding any square footage, a small house feels much more spacious, rooms function more efficiently, and light can be brought in to formerly dark areas.

Some walls are non-load bearing and are easy to remove. Non-load bearing walls often run parallel to joists and simply divide space. On the other hand, load bearing walls play an important role in the structure of the house. If they are removed, a beam in the ceiling will need to be installed to carry the weight that was formerly carried by the wall. You will often see columns or partial walls perform the function of load-bearing walls in the open floor plans of new homes.

## *Before*

*A dark, inefficient kitchen became bright and airy once a wall was removed and an entry wall added.*



## *After*

# Problem: Inadequate Storage

2

If you own an older home, chances are good that inefficient or inadequate storage is high on your list of grievances. We have more – and different – possessions than previous generations. The storage provided in a home built 25, 50 or 100 years ago simply doesn't work for today's homeowners.

Most older homes have small (or non-existent) closets and garages. Homes from the 18th and early 19th centuries may have fieldstone foundations and dirt cellars, which limit the storage value of a basement.



# Solution: Use Hidden Spaces for Smart Storage

With careful planning, it is possible to discover all kinds of untapped storage spaces without expanding a home's footprint. Tuck storage in to niches or unused corners, around doors, under stairs and eaves, and even beneath stair treads. Dry out and finish basements to create functional space.

Have an unused chimney? Take it out and use the space for closets. If you have air ducts left from an abandoned heating system, put that wasted space to work for small shelves or cupboards. If your closets are too narrow, considering enlarging them to get the space you need.

The key is to look at space creatively to make every inch count.

*These built-in bookshelves provided additional storage in a previously unused corner, while adding architectural interest to the hallway.*

*A couple in Cambridge added a tremendous amount of storage in the master bedroom by lining the walls with built-in cabinetry.*

# Problem: Energy Inefficiencies

3

Today's building materials and construction techniques combine to maximize energy efficiency in new homes. Back in the days when energy was cheap (or people were more accustomed to being cold), energy efficiency was not a priority. Only about 20% of the homes built before 1980 are adequately insulated and many are riddled with gaps that send warm air out and cold air in.

Are higher energy costs and chilly rooms the price you pay for living in an older home? Absolutely not, if you are willing to get serious about weatherization.



# Solution: Strategic Weatherization

If you live in a historic home, you may fear that energy efficiency starts with scrapping treasured old doors and windows. Rest assured that you can improve your home's energy efficiency while maintaining its historic integrity.

Start with an energy audit to identify the major sources of heat loss in the home. Then focus first on changes that will have the most dramatic impact. Begin by caulking and sealing cracks and gaps. Cracks between floorboards and baseboards, gaps in the foundation, areas around ducts and exhaust units, and cellar and attic doors are prime candidates for heat loss. The Department of Energy estimates that you can save more than 10 percent on energy bills simply by sealing gaps.

Most homeowners recognize the importance of good attic insulation, but insulation in the basement is almost as important. Be sure that rim joists in the basement are properly insulated and take advantage of remodeling projects to add insulation when you have walls open for plumbing or electrical work.

Older windows and doors are often identified as major culprits for heat loss. Certainly seize the opportunity to upgrade to energy efficient models if you are remodeling, but don't worry if you want to keep the current windows and doors. Weather stripping and quality storms can help properly installed older windows and doors approach the energy efficiency of newer models.

*Common locations for air movement and leakage*


Source: U.S. Department of Energy

*Closed cell foam provides superior insulation value*

# Problem: Accommodating Technology

4

In the early 1950s, the entire family clustered around a single black and white television set. Today, we consume media constantly through big screen TVs in the family room and/or bedrooms, smaller TVs in the kitchen or bathroom, laptop computers, tablet computers, ereaders, iPods, cell phones, and the list goes on and on. Our home must now provide spaces for both comfortable use and convenient charging of all our technology.

Do you have a room that is large enough to accommodate a big screen TV and comfortable seating? Can you keep an eye on children using a laptop while you prepare a meal? Do you have easy access to outlets to charge an ereader while you are curled up in a chair reading on it? If you live in an older home, the answer is probably “no”.

# Solution: Plan for Technology When You Renovate

The goal of renovation is to tailor a home so that it supports your lifestyle. Technology is an essential part of that lifestyle and needs to be considered whenever renovations are made.

Whenever a wall is opened up, think about how you can take advantage of the opportunity to enhance the use of technology. Should you add blocking for a future flat screen TV? Add wiring for a whole house speaker system? Add outlets for a charging station in a kitchen corner?

Consider taking down walls to create multi-functional spaces that can accommodate socializing, computer use, TV watching and even cooking.

# Problem: Challenges to Aging in Place

5

Older homes pose unique challenges to homeowners who want to age in the community where they have set down roots. Uneven floors, steep stairs, narrow hallways, and high thresholds give older homes character, but they can hinder mobility whether you are carrying an infant around or aging in place.



# Solution: Incorporate Universal Design Features

Universal design is the art of creating environments that are usable by most people without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design concepts are used to create living spaces that work well whether you are short or tall, young or old, healthy or sick.

Universal design principles should be incorporated into all renovations to ensure maximum usability for a space. Changes that are particularly important to include in renovations in older homes include:

- **Wide Doorways and Hallways** - Doorways should be at least 32” wide and hallways should be 42” wide for easy mobility
- **No-Step Entry** - The home should include at least one step-free entrance. If the front entrance has steps, consider adding a side or back entrance that is level with the ground or has a ramp up to a porch
- **Zero Thresholds** - Level your flooring surfaces so you do not need thresholds at room transitions. Young children who are just learning to walk, people carrying packages and older adults will all find it much easier to move around.
- **Multi-Purpose First Floor Room with Bath** - Think long term if you are adding or renovating first-floor space. A room that starts out as a home office or den may be able to seamlessly transition to a first floor bedroom if you add an adjacent bathroom.
- **Reachable Switches, Controls and Outlets** - Electrical outlets should be set 18” off the floor and the tops of light switches and thermostats should be set at 48” for maximum accessibility.

For more information, download our universal design white paper.

*Plan for at least one no-step entrance. The landing area for the ramp became this homeowner's favorite spot to enjoy a morning coffee in warm weather.*

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# 4 Popular Updates for Older Homes

# Opening Up a Kitchen

1

Tired of a dark, cramped kitchen? Bring in light and open it up to the rest of the home by removing walls. If a wall is load-bearing and can't be replaced by using a header beam, you may be able to get the open feel that you desire by using columns or a half wall.

If removing a wall is not an option, installing an interior window on the wall between the kitchen and an adjoining room makes the kitchen feel larger and gives it better sightlines. Doubling the width of the entryway or using archways instead of solid doors both achieve a similar effect.

*Before*

*An underused attic was transformed into a light-filled playroom for a family in Lexington.*

# Repurposing a Basement or Attic

2

Finishing a basement or attic is a cost-effective way to gain additional living space without adding to your home's footprint. Basements with a fieldstone foundation, significant moisture issues,  or low ceiling height are clearly not good candidates for finished rooms. Otherwise, basements are fairly easy to remodel from a structural standpoint.  Most are sturdily built, offer easy access to utilities, and walls can always be added to simplify electrical wiring. Radiant heating can be installed below the floor to counteract cold, while well-designed lighting systems can replace natural light if windows are limited.

Renovating an attic can be a bit trickier.  Angled dormers can often be accommodated in the design of the space, but low ceilings pose a far more significant challenge. Most attics also do not have an adequate point of exit and entry, so a new or remodeled staircase may have to be added as part of the remodeling process. Most attics are also not built with floors that can withstand day-to-day living, so you may need to strengthen the joists and lay down sub-floor if you are converting it to a useable room.

# Bringing the Outside In

3

If you can't be outside, the next best thing is seeing it. Windows, skylights and glass doors instantly make a room feel more spacious by drawing the eye to the outdoors and letting in light and air. Transoms above doorways may not frame a view, but they are a wonderful way to share a room's natural light with an adjacent space.

*A skylight and porthole window flood this bathroom with natural light while establishing a connection with the outdoors.*

*The zero entry threshold to and from this sunny hallway makes the space easy to navigate for people of all ages and mobility.*



# Expanding to Accommodate Multiple Generations

4

Is an adult child coming back home or an elderly parent coming to live? You'll probably need to renovate or add on to create additional living space. The space should feature:

**Privacy with Proximity** – Successful multi-generational living requires a fine balance between private and communal spaces. Separate entrances, morning bars or kitchenettes in bedroom suites, and sitting rooms provide much-needed privacy. A large, open kitchen/eating/living area is ideal when the family comes together.

**Flexibility** – Flexible spaces can be easily transformed to function for different purposes and ages. For example, an underused living room and sunroom may transition into a home office, then an in-law suite, then a space for an adult child who moves home, then an entertainment area.

**Universal Design** – Universal design works hand-in-hand with flexible spaces to create environments that are usable by all people. Hallways that are wide enough to accommodate a wheel chair and zero entry thresholds are classic examples of universal design features.

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# Is Your House Worth Renovating?

If you like your community and the location and style of your home, renovation is the best way to get the features you want without the hassles of moving. Before deciding to renovate, however, it is worth checking to make sure that your home is sound and that your money is well spent. If your house has good bones, renovation is a great idea. If not, it may not be worthwhile to put money into a home with some fundamental problems.

Houses with good bones have these key features:

**Quality construction** - A house with good bones is well-built. Does it bounce or list, or does it "feel" solid? Are there cracks above doorways or in stairways? Are things tight? Are floor joists in a flat plane or do they sag in the middle of their span? Are the joists notched into the sill or resting on their full depth? Can you see cracks between the ends and the sill or are they still tight? When looking down along the foundation wall, does it look plumb or is it listing outward? When outside the building and stepping back looking at it, do the walls have bows or are they straight? Does the house lean to one side or the other? Does the roof of the front porch sag? Are there sways to the roof or is it in one plane?

**Solid infrastructure** - It's relatively simple to replace aging roofing shingles or update plumbing fixtures, but it is far more complicated if the basic infrastructure of the home is lacking. If the foundation, roof, heating, plumbing and electrical systems are in good shape, renovations become much easier.

**Structural flexibility** – An awkward floor plan or small rooms is standard in older homes. Renovation can compensate for these issues. There are times, however, when a room or entire home's underlying structure is so limiting that it would be prohibitively expensive to make it work better for the homeowner. For example, a home with low ceilings is never going to feel comfortable for somebody who is 6' 5" unless you gut the entire home and raise ceiling heights in every room.

A trusted renovation professional can help you determine if your home is a good candidate for an update and identify any problems that should be addressed during design or construction.

# About Morse Constructions

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Morse Constructions Inc. is a design/build firm providing complete renovation services to homeowners through the greater Boston area. Since the company was founded more than 35 years ago, it has remained dedicated to creating a collaborative, enjoyable, clear renovation process that features attentive listening, frequent communication, and great care and respect for clients, team members and the environment.

Morse Constructions' work has been featured in numerous publications such as Architectural Digest, Better Homes and Gardens and The Boston Globe. In 2003, Remodeling Magazine named Morse to its list of the top 50 remodeling companies in the country.

Paul is a past VP of National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI)I Northeast, facilitator of the NARI Green Remodeling Certification Course, and current member of the Builders Association of Greater Boston Green Council.

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