Editorial

The Discreet Charm of Crawl Spaces and Attics

You would be professionally remiss if you did not read “Attics and Crawl Spaces” in this issue. The article, by Terry Nordbye is a valuable reminder that home performance problems too often begin in the places that we least want to work on or inspect. Mold, dry rot, and despicable smells emanating from these sites are responsible for both explicit and undiagnosed occupant afflictions. Terry illustrates through case studies and examples the symptoms, the diagnoses, and the solutions. In more than one case, Terry transformed an uninhabitable house into a comfortable home. The measures were not sexy, they did not rely on cutting-edge instrumentation or materials, but they were effective and long-lasting. At the same time, Terry’s article raises some broader issues that deserve attention.

Every one of Terry’s case studies begins with a struggle to gain access to the attic or crawl space. (Check out the memorable photos of dangling legs!) Why is it so difficult to enter attics and crawl spaces? The simple answer is that nobody expects people—at least normal-sized people with average dexterity—to enter these places. Perhaps this logic is faulty. Perhaps we should assume that such spaces should be regularly visited and inspected. If these are the “integral organs” of the home, then don’t they deserve regular health checks. Building codes could be revised to assure normal people reasonably simple entry and movement within these spaces. Changes in building codes or “best practices” might also stimulate production of more effective ladders, doors, and catwalks. It might also encourage use of new types of insulation and materials that result in a tidier, cleaner, space. The goal would be to facilitate periodic and convenient inspections of attics and crawl spaces. To be sure, these spaces shouldn’t be destinations for picnics, but neither should visits generate fear and loathing. These doors shouldn’t create new energy leakage sites either since weatherization experts have spent decades fixing this problem in old homes.

On the subject of periodic visits, Terry mentioned how he inspected his retrofitted attics and crawl spaces after one year. What a great idea! Expensive, too, but perhaps this is the only way to insure healthy “house organs.” In a perfect world, the original contractor would want to inspect his or her work. In a less-than-perfect world, perhaps a third-party might take responsibility for it. Certainly the inspection would be easier if access was more convenient.

Terry’s goal in many cases was fixing an indoor environment problem, not energy waste. But these are so often inseparable: an energy-related defect causes the mold that leads to the health problems or material damages. We at Home Energy have stressed these linkages for decades. Health and comfort will only rise in priorities as Americans grow older, live in more energy-efficient homes, and generally have lower energy bills.

Finally, how do we clone experts like Terry? We need thousands more like him—though perhaps younger and nimbler—to tackle the millions of needy homes. Our present training systems are incapable of producing the number and quality specialists that we require. Certainly this is linked to solving an equally critical question: how to we make certain that they will be paid a wage commensurate with their skills and the value they add to homes?

Now read “Attics and Crawl Spaces” and appreciate it for the practical solutions and as a springboard for larger technical issues.

By coincidence, I received a draft of Terry’s article after I spent most of a day in the least-accessible corner of my own attic wrestling out an old bathroom fan and replacing it with a new (nearly silent) one. The symptom was chronic mildew and I knew the solution involved a more powerful fan (with the duct actually attached to the fan) and insulation restored over the mildew sites. I wore a tyvek suit, mask, and gloves—which is why I had to wait until summer passed—and happily discarded everything when finished.
Getting in and out of the attic was half of the struggle; I would have appreciated being a foot shorter and 30 years younger. I’m still sore.