

What to know if you like the vintage look

By Pamela Dittmer McKuen
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A vintage condo can offer architectural charm and elegant design with rock-solid construction, but older buildings also require more maintenance and can be quirky. (Jamie Padgett)

Vintage condominiums are loaded with architectural charm. They were typically designed with features such as parquet floors, superhigh ceilings, elaborate wood molding, formal dining rooms and even claw-footed bathtubs. Lobbies tend to be grand and welcoming.

One of the biggest draws for buyers is the aesthetics, said Jenn Kim, a Redfin real estate agent in Chicago.

But these buildings, loosely defined as those built in the late 1800s to early 1900s, also can be quirky.

Rooms are large but closets are small. Some buildings do not have central air conditioning. They probably don't have swimming pools or high-tech fitness

equipment. And because aging plumbing and electrical systems cannot meet the demands of modern-day living, residents often are prohibited from installing their own clothes washers, dryers and dishwashers.

"People do their laundry in a community laundry room in the basement," Kim said. "Or they send it out."

If you're thinking about buying a vintage condo, here are some more things you should know:

- Construction is rock solid. "If it has been well-maintained, you can make a case for it being a better-built building," said Lou Lutz, executive vice president at First Community Management in Chicago and a longtime community association manager. "They are usually brick and mortar, and the perimeter walls usually will be solid plaster, which tends to not allow as much noise transference as some of the newer buildings."

Vintage buildings often have large, operable windows, which provide natural ventilation. But they won't have sprinkler systems, he added.

- Assessments are high. Despite their quality construction, vintage buildings are old, and that makes them expensive to maintain, said association attorney James Erwin at Erwin Law in Chicago.

"The most difficult thing we've faced of late has been the costs to try to retrofit them for present-day ordinances or amenities," he said.

Vintage buildings are more expensive to insure because their hardier construction costs more to replace or repair, said Jennifer Eilert, commercial lines manager at Condominium Insurance Specialists of America in Elgin.

If the building or the neighborhood has landmark status, facade repairs and replacements must match the originals. Those projects can be pricey and often require the services of specialty contractors, Lutz said.

- Renovating your unit can be a challenge. The association probably has detailed rules about the changes and upgrades you can make to your unit. You'll have to submit your plans and get prior approval. Certain types of projects, like knocking down walls or moving the electrical wiring, may be prohibited.

"You might have to hire a structural engineer and an architect and have more staff involved in your project," Kim said. "The process is quite a bit harder than in a modern condo rehab."

"Even if you just want to modify or repair the plaster molding, it can be hard to find a craftsman who can do it," Lutz said.

- Use professionals to guide your purchase. Every vintage building has been built and maintained differently. You want to learn as much as you can about the structure, its history and future needs.

Work with a real estate broker and a home inspector who understand vintage buildings and know the right questions to ask, Lutz said.

Be sure to ask sellers for the disclosure information allowed under Section 22.1 of the Illinois Condominium Property Act. You're entitled to documents such as the status of reserve funds and a statement of anticipated capital expenditures in the coming two years.

"If the association has a history of special assessments, try to learn what they were for," Lutz said.

"If you have already established you like the vintage look, ask yourself if there is anything you must have that is not possible," Kim said. "For a lot of people, no washer or dryer is a deal breaker. If everything is OK with you, there are so many exciting vintage options in Chicago."

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