

# Home Inspector's Handbook

by Paul Hanke



**The Complete Book of Home Inspection** (2nd edition), by Norman Becker (TAB Books, 1993; 800/822-8138). Softcover, 8 1/2x9, 263 pages. \$12.95.

Most home inspection titles I've reviewed all say pretty much the same thing in slightly different ways. *The Complete Book of Home Inspection* is no exception, but it does have unique qualities.

Author Norman Becker recommends a systematic approach to exterior, interior, and electromechanical inspection, and leads the reader through each topic in detail, including paving and landscaping, insects and rot, and all types of heating. Each chapter includes a description of the inspection procedure under consideration, and a checklist. But what gives Becker's book "personality" is the broad background information with which he opens each chapter. Becker goes into much greater detail than other authors, often spelling out the consequences of conditions you may discover in the field, and suggesting remedies. Some readers will find this information helpful, for others it may be excess baggage — but it distinguishes Becker's book from the competition.

This edition has also been updated with a new chapter devoted to environmental concerns, and includes information on new materials, such as single-ply roofing. And the final chapter, which discusses radon, asbestos, water tests, lead, and high-efficiency heating systems, brings *Home Inspection* into the '90s.

I had some quarrels with parts of the book. For example, the specs given for egress windows are completely wrong, and I do not agree with Becker's assessment of peeling paint as merely a cosmetic concern — it may be symptomatic of rot concealed within the walls. I would also

have appreciated more cross-referencing than I found in the text. Generally speaking, though, *Home Inspection* is a good introductory guide with a broader perspective than you'll find in similar books.



**Renovating Brick Houses For Yourself or For Investment**, by Philip J. Decker and T. Newell Decker (Garden Way/Storey Communications, 1990; 800/441-5700). Softcover, 8 1/2x11, 242 pages. \$16.95.

Twenty years ago I learned to build by helping renovate a lovely, 1840s brick-veneered farmhouse. Later I had the opportunity to assist in preparing drawings for the rehabbing of a fine old Italianate brick house in town that was listed in the National Register of Historic Buildings. In the process I learned to appreciate such structures, and I came to understand something of how they were built, how they deteriorate, and how to care for them. So when *Renovating Brick Houses* arrived for review, I was quite interested in comparing notes with the authors and enhancing my own knowledge.

Before explaining why I was disappointed, let me address the book's strengths. For a first-time or would-be renovator (amateur or pro), the Decker brothers provide a passable overview of the undertaking. The reader will learn to identify a worthy specimen, to ballpark rehab costs, to avoid "over-improving" the property, and to navigate regulatory agencies like zoning and historic preservation boards. The authors also do a pretty good job of explaining structural rehab and solving common window and door problems, which I gather is what these guys really know and like. All of this is certainly relevant and valuable to anyone about to start a renovation.

Having said that, however, I must caution the reader on two accounts. First, despite the title and cover photo, this is not a book strictly about renovating brick houses. There is some information on topics such as tuck pointing and proper cleaning procedures, but the bulk of the book could apply to renovating any house. Still, it seems rather odd for the authors to say, in their section on "Repairing Masonry," that the subject "is covered in a number of other publications and will not be discussed in detail here." True enough, but isn't this book supposed to be specifically about rehabbing brick structures?

I also found that the references appended to each chapter too often omitted useful works that I knew about, such as standard titles on architectural styles, or included books published in the late 1800s, which I find are inaccessible to most readers. Finally, there are too few illustrations, and too many instances of missing, misleading, and just plain wrong information. Consider, for example, the authors' statement that "since heat rises, most heat during the winter is lost through the ceiling." This reflects a certain ignorance of the subject: *warm air rises; heat moves by convection, conduction, and radiation in all directions*. And it seems to me that, especially in old brick houses, cold air infiltration accounts for most of the heat loss and should be a high priority during a gut rehab.

Overall, I think the authors of *Renovating Brick Houses* should have spent less effort on the general subject of renovation (which truly is covered well elsewhere), and put a lot more emphasis on the ostensible subject of their book. Where they were unable to thoroughly research topics they didn't know well, they could have better served their readers by reprinting some of the excellent government agency literature to which they refer. ■

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