

How NOT to Buy a House

In this article I'll share my own 30-year history of buying and cleaning up existing houses (16 at last count). By sharing my housing history I hope I can help you avoid some of my problems and errors, and help you make better informed housing decisions.

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Buying an existing “used” house is high-risk behavior, because

1. It is very difficult to learn the environmental history of a house. The realtor doesn't know and the seller may not say.
2. It is very difficult to determine how “safe” a house is or will become while someone else is living in it.
3. It is very difficult to determine in advance your sensitivities to a house or a location before you buy the house, air it out, clean it up, and then actually try to live in it. Reactions to a house are often delayed or developed only after several days (or weeks) in a house.

Of course it is preferable to buy or build a non-toxic home, if you can afford non-toxic housing. In my case, I had to focus on low-end used houses because I had limited savings (\$15,000 in 1979) and a small disability income. Also, financing is usually easier for existing homes, especially if you encounter a seller who is willing to finance the sale (no bank, no qualifying). But, if you can afford to buy land and build a custom non-toxic home, congratulations, there's no reason for you to read this.

If “location, location, location” is Rule #1 of home buying, then Rule #2 has to be “inspection, inspection, inspection.” Those of us with EI/MCS and/or ES/EHS must be much more careful, thorough and diligent than the normal home buyer, because there are so many more potential pitfalls and booby-traps we must watch out for (e.g. pesticide, pressboard, fragrance, faulty wiring). Therefore it's absolutely necessary for us to do a complete inspection from basement or crawl-space to attic and roofing, and everything in between. In most cases this will require assistance from other experienced EIs, and perhaps also from a professional house inspector.

No need to go into detail about my first five pre-MCS houses in northern New York state. Like most houses in the area, they all had wet moldy basements and I quickly became mold-sensitive. Mold mitigation was not successful. The fungicides recommended by my allergist made me somewhat chemically sensitive, and the formaldehyde recommended by my clinical ecologist made me extremely chemically sensitive. I then moved to the Southwest in 1979 to get away from the mold problem.

My first house in the Southwest (house #6) in Boulder City, Nevada, turned out to be – surprise – moldy! Yes, there are molds in the Southwest. The winter rains and summer monsoons (thunderstorms) provide enough moisture to create mold damage where there are structural problems, such as a leaky roof, an unventilated bathroom, or a poorly drained building site. Be sure to inspect for mold damage, especially in the bathroom, kitchen and utility room (washing machines sometimes do back up and overflow).

My next home (house #7) was on the far west side of Las Vegas, Nevada. I determined that the prevailing southwest winds would keep the downtown Las Vegas air pollution away. Wrong. Winds are variable, rain winds tend to be easterly, winter winds come from the north after a storm, and thunderstorm winds come from every direction. Plus, at night the winds die down and air pollution drifts in every direction. So, before you buy, be sure to check wind directions in all four seasons, and be sure to know what is upwind of your location. Paper mills, power plants, copper smelters, etc. are not good neighbors. Wind rose maps are available at libraries and at airports.

My next home (#8) was in the Manzano Mountains in New Mexico, at about 7,500 ft (2,500 m) elevation. The air quality was excellent, because, in general, the higher you go, the better the air (avoid valleys!). However, I quickly became sensitized to the ponderosa pine and juniper terps, especially when they heated up in the early summer. I recall Dr. Rea recommending that we try the mountains, the desert and ocean or lakeside locations. I had already eliminated being near the ocean, due to humidity and mold, so I returned to the desert.

My next home (#9) in Rio Rancho, New Mexico, was in high desert vegetation at 5100 ft (1700 m). It cleaned up well, but was in a housing development on small lots (about 1/3 or 1/2 acre) and I learned quickly that neighbors are a problem — burning wood, burning trash, using pesticides and herbicides, etc. My house was downwind of a wood burner, and my closest neighbor suddenly employed a monthly pesticide service when his wife found a spider. Due to the pesticide drift, I had to put the house up for sale and was gone in a month.

Obviously, acreage is preferable. The more the better, when one can afford it.

I then moved to a house (#10) on 80 acres (32 hectares) inside the Gila National Forest in southwestern New Mexico, below the pines and junipers. My nearest neighbor was more than a mile away, I was the last house on the power grid on an unpaved four-wheel-drive jeep trail that ended at the Gila Wilderness. A perfect location? Maybe. But the house did not clean up, and I never actually moved into it. It was a wood frame owner-built home sitting on grade (no slab), and the owner had quite likely pesticided the site for termites, ants, etc. Some EI visitors could smell or feel pesticide residue inside the house. Since pesticide and herbicide residues persist for many years, this is a prohibitive and difficult problem for people with MCS. The only sure solution is to buy virgin land that has not been treated.

I then moved to a historic adobe home (#11) in Cliff, New Mexico, near the Gila National Forest. I had friends who had built a successful non-toxic adobe home, so this home with its two-foot (60 cm) thick adobe walls and old hardwood floors seemed to be an attractive possibility. However, when I began working on the house, I discovered lots of dry rot and termite damage under the floors, because the sills and joists were sitting on a damp and unventilated space, a serious structural problem. Without a moisture barrier to cover the soil and without aggressive ventilation of the space under the floor, the soil will remain damp and will provide an attractive environment for mold, rot, insects and critters. A properly designed and installed concrete slab will usually prevent these problems.

From Cliff, I moved to an unusually “safe” home (#12) in Silver City, New Mexico. It was the last house on a dead-end road. Built in 1946, it had plaster walls and hardwood floors, and a properly ventilated dry crawlspace. Undeveloped land on three sides provided good protection from neighbors. I had a large organic garden and mature fruit trees: apricots, plums, apples and pears. In the spring, when I bought the house, the prevailing winds were strong southwesterlies. Later in the summer, however, when the monsoon season began, the winds came up from the southeast, bringing smelter smoke in from Hurley, 20 miles east (the plant has since been closed). I quickly became sensitized to this smoke, and had to sell what had been my least-toxic house. As I wrote above, be sure you know the local wind direction for all four seasons before you buy. Check the local wind rose map if you can.

I then returned to Rio Rancho, New Mexico, because I had found an unusually attractive Santa Fe style home (#13) located far from the traffic pollution of downtown Rio Rancho. The house had passive solar with a tromb wall, brick floors to retain heat and a glass wall with southeastern exposure. It was high on a hill, well drained, with excellent views of the valley. One terrible problem: the sellers were smokers. An MCS friend who was helping me said, “one thing we

know: ozone removes smoke. It's such a beautiful house, it's worth trying to save it." Perhaps, but ozone removes only 80 or 90 percent of smoke residue on the exposed surfaces. It cannot remove the smoke that has penetrated the walls and permeated the insulation. This residue will continue to outgas even after determined ozoning with commercial ozone machines. And beware, ozone itself is an irritant and is sensitizing. It can permanently contaminate a home. I agree with those who say one should never use ozone in an MCS house.

Eventually I moved to Dolan Springs, Arizona, because it had mild winters and it had an MCS community. I was unable to find a "safe" house in Dolan, but I did find an inexpensive cabin (#14) in nearby Meadview. It was on 2-1/2 acres (1 hectare) in a relatively undeveloped area. While working on this cabin and sleeping outdoors, I realized I was reacting to the site itself. At first I thought it was the vegetation, but eventually I was able to determine that the land had been herbicided to keep down weeds, and I was reacting to the 2,4-D residue in the soil. This was verified by blood work. I quickly sold the house to non-EIs.

Note that herbicide residues have longer half-life than most pesticides and their presence is difficult to perceive by either sight or smell. In this instance, desert marigolds covered the lot, so I did not suspect herbicide use.

My next house (#15) was again in Meadview, this time a slump block home with tile floors on 2¹/₂ acres. I had done well in other slump block buildings, so I was pleased to find this one at an affordable price in a lightly developed rural area. But, be careful what you wish for. Not long after I moved in, did I realize that I had become sensitized to masonry products — perhaps the block, perhaps the cement (an irritant). I can't say. Be sure you can tolerate masonry products — test them before you buy or build a masonry structure. Since then, I've been sensitive to other masonry MCS homes.

Finally, the house (#16) I've been in for the past ten years. It is a fairly conventional wood frame house with a dry crawl space, electric heat, never pesticided or herbicided, no pets, no smokers, no fragrances, no mold, no prohibitive MCS problems. The lot is small (1/4 acre, 1/10 hectare), but I have purchased several adjacent lots and the area is relatively undeveloped, with many empty vacation homes. There are no immediate neighbor problems.

Some of the things I had to do before moving in was:

1. Seal all unsealed wood (cabinets)
2. Remove the cedar closet panels
3. Seal the wood floors
4. Remove particle board shelving

5. Replace swamp cooler with A/C
6. Air it out for a year, while sleeping on the patio

While the house is relatively successful, I have meanwhile become sensitized to some of the local vegetation, but not yet enough to give up a “safe” home. Apparently, becoming sensitized to the local vegetation is always a risk for those with MCS.

As you can see from my housing experiences, a thorough, relentless, detail-oriented inspection of an existing home, and the site, and the surrounding area, is absolutely necessary in order to avoid errors and disappointments. It is very difficult to do such a thorough inspection with real estate salespeople and/or the sellers supervising your time in the home. Professional inspectors can be hired to examine the basics, like plumbing, heating, appliances, the roof, the sills, etc. But these people are not trained to do an MCS/ES appraisal of a house. It is best to request assistance from mature MCS/ES people, who have experience with construction and materials. I suggest you use at least two or three such people, since each will have different areas of sensitivity or experience. Naturally, since every house and building site is different, and every house has a unique personal history, be prepared for the unexpected. Good luck!

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