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Renovations to old beach home into "Big Houses"

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This summer, there seemed to have been an awful lot of house-warming parties at newly refurbished or built summer places. Fortunately for me, I was invited to a few, and I marveled at the size, finish and overall grandeur of many of these homes.

I was invited because I knew the owners and what the houses had been like before the renovation or tear down. Typically they were unheated, uninsulated, unsheet-rocked, old arks with rattling windows, chipping paint, cracked shingles, and bead board and open studs that were so soaked with ocean dampness that they had a smell that bordered on mold. Sound bad? Actually, they were wonderful old places which, upon entering, you were transported back to carefree summers in old cottages where the main chore of the day was to broom sweep the sand out the front door.

Now renovated, the smell and the dampness are gone, condensed away through high tech HVAC systems. The paint is fresh and perfectly applied with no chance of peeling. The open studs are replaced by insulation and sheet rock walls, but often with some bead board to replace the feeling of the old house. The bathrooms are sparkling marble with antiqued nickel fixtures, also to try to remember a time gone by.

I know this all too well, because I have done one of these renovations to our old seashore house. We tried to keep the old flavor, and much of the house is only restored, but much is new. In any case, the old salt air smell is gone and it does not carry me back in the same way.

But what does all this have to do with real estate? In attending those house warming parties, I thought about exactly who was buying these houses and why are they "improving" them. I asked myself why would people build bigger homes, often in the flood plain, and during a period of increased likelihood that globing warming and high energy costs will negatively impact them. Some of it is ego, and they do it because they can. But they, we, do this because we want a "big house" experience where generations of families will come and enjoy these carefree summer times together. We do it because we hope that our children and their children will come to visit us and have experiences that we cannot recreate in our suburban homes or urban apartments. We do it because we don't want to go back to the year-round places where we actually grew up, because those places are often full of the potential problems of a family that needs to get to school, run a household, meet deadlines and make ends meet.

We do it because the summer is different from where we normally live, a place of carefree freedom that we hope to create in this real estate called the summer home.

Daniel Calano is principal and managing partner for Prospectus Inc., Cambridge, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540