

Heritage property ownership in South Africa

There's nothing quite like the romance, charm and grace of a heritage property, but many people are wary of buying into the historic market for a variety of reasons.

'For some, it's the expectation of high prices and excessive maintenance that puts them off; for others, it's the seemingly endless rules and regulations governing their preservation and care. According to Tony Clarke, Managing Director of the Rawson Property Group, however, the realities of owning a heritage property are not always as imposing as they may seem.' "There are a lot of benefits to owning a heritage property, Clarke reveals. Some of them are intangible - the pride and prestige that comes from owning something truly one-of-a-kind; of living in, and taking care of a real piece of our country's past - and some of them are actually quite down-to-earth and practical.

He goes on to explain that many heritage properties in South Africa occupy prime locations on larger-than-normal, well-established grounds. Their rooms tend to be more spacious and elegantly proportioned than their modern counterparts, and their high ceilings and architectural detailing are often complemented by luxury finishes like hardwoods and exotic marble.

"It's these factors", says Clarke, that influence the desirability - and therefore the price - of heritage homes. The fact that they have heritage status is often completely incidental - any beautiful, spacious home with expensive finishes on a larger plot than its neighbours will command a higher price than one with less to offer.

Of course, not all heritage properties are grand manor houses previously owned by the colonial elite, and South Africa is dotted with suburbs boasting collections of characterful - but comparatively affordable - historic homes in various vernacular styles. When buying into one of these suburbs, it's important to be aware of the heritage status of the whole area, as well as the status of your own home, especially if you intend to do maintenance works or any kind of renovation.-

"Heritage properties are protected by law at national, provincial and local levels, and you'll need to check with your municipality to get the specific details applicable to your exact property," says Clarke. Broadly speaking, however, there are three tiers of rules that apply to anyone who owns a heritage property, or a property in a heritage area.

Tier One is a Heritage Overlay Zone, usually found in historic suburbs like Chelsea Village in Cape Town. It protects the unique character and style of an area as a whole, and affects all the properties in the zone, regardless of their individual heritage statuses. Tier Two is specific to individual properties, and applies to any building older than 60 years or of particular architectural value, and Tier Three applies only to buildings officially classified as National Monuments or Provincial Heritage Sites.

"If your property falls into any of these tiers, you'll need to get approval for any building work you plan to do," says Clarke. "The higher the tier, the more stringent the rules, but that doesn't mean you'll necessarily have to bend over backwards to put a new coat of paint on your home."

As Clarke explains it, the entire purpose of the heritage regulations is to preserve buildings of historic importance for future generations. That means preventing you from doing the required maintenance and improvements to keep your property in good repair is not in the best interests of anyone involved. "As long as you aren't trying to make changes that will detract from the historical importance of your property or the properties around you, you shouldn't have trouble getting the necessary approvals," says Clarke."

As for the amount of maintenance required on older properties as opposed to newer constructions, Clarke believes this depends entirely on the state of the home and the care of the previous owners. "I always advise buyers to have a professional inspection done before making any property purchase, and that advice is twice as valid for historic homes. If it's been properly cared for, your heritage home shouldn't cost significantly more to maintain than any other, but if it has severe defects that need to be seen to, it could be an expensive endeavour to rectify them without contravening any regulations."

To the right owner, a heritage home can be a unique treasure to be cherished not only for its cultural importance, but also its unique character, charm and style. If you're considering buying a heritage home, however, it's important to go in with your eyes open, fully aware of the potential restrictions that come with the responsibility of protecting a piece of our country's past."

To find out more about South African National Heritage legislation, visit <http://www.nhc.org.za/>, or contact your Provincial Heritage Authority or City Heritage Department for more details on local regulations.

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