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Ode to the Lowly Fence

Fences take all forms. Historically, they were stone, straw and mortar, logs, and any material that kept intruders out. Today they are mostly metal, wood and plastic. Fences are designed to keep people or animals out or keep children and pets in – they usually work pretty well.

In countries around the world, you see mortar or concrete block walls surrounding houses to keep intruders out. These fences usually have broken glass shards cemented in place so an intruder would seemingly slice himself getting over the wall. Usually, smart thieves or kidnappers just wait for the gate to open and then they come in – they don't want to risk getting cut on glass - or they climb a ladder and put a heavy blanket or tarp on the glass and climb over.

So despite the best efforts of property owners to keep intruders out, fences only slow them down. An even better example is prisons where the fence is designed to keep people in – you know how that works - the prisoners seldom climb the fence, they just go around or under it!

However, adding a fence to a rehab property can be worth the expense, especially in certain situations. Following is an example where the cost of adding a fence could be returned many times over by an increase in the property's price.

I was out looking at a student's new REO property and had wandered through the house when I went out the back door to the screened pool area. The pool's water level was two feet too low, which is easily fixable. The screen over and around the pool area was in perfect shape. It was in such great shape that it appeared it had been completed the week before. The student found the screening and structure had been done by permit because the permit hadn't been closed out, which is also easy to fix. All that was the good news, but the bad news was very obvious.

The property's yard was fenced in with a mixture of chain link and pre-fabricated slatted wood. In essence, it probably kept animals and children in but what it couldn't stop was anyone seeing what the neighbor's house in the back looked like.

This house was not just pure ugly; it was straight out of a horror movie. Plywood, cardboard and tin sheets were used to expand the house itself. The yard had piles of rubbish and old cars scattered throughout the yard. At any moment you might expect a ghoulish monster to come out and with a huge smile say, "Hi neighbor, come on by and I'll have you for dinner" I'm sure that most of the kids in the neighborhood had scary tales of what they thought existed in the house.

So, there we are discussing what needed to be done to fix the property or just wholesale it. The students had a couple of offers to lease option or take back owner financing until the buyers could rehab and refinance it. The cash offers were too low to accept but it had been on the market for a short time. Ironically, one of the perspective buyers was a contractor who mentioned to the students to put up a fence so you couldn't see the neighbor's yard.

If you intend to rehab or have rehabbed, you know that it seems like the neighbors to your property can sometimes be the neighbors from another world. We had a great property that we rehabbed and from the kitchen window you looked out on a neighbor's really dilapidated wood shed. It was worse than ugly and looked dangerous.

I approached the owner about my paying to tear it down and hauling it away. I even offered to buy him a new shed but to no avail. A month later two hurricanes ravaged the neighborhood and when we went to see what happened to our rehab, we saw water flowing down the street as the main water main had been broken in front of our property. The only large tree on the block was in the swale of our rehab and the first hurricane had blown it at an angle of 15 degrees and broke the water line.

The rest of the neighborhood was severely damaged and my first thought was the nasty shed was gone – it had to be! Yea, it was still standing and almost seemed to have an attitude of, "I am stronger than a measly hurricane!" I offered to remove the shed again but the neighbor refused. I still can't understand how it survived. But I got a second chance- another hurricane came though about two weeks later and I knew this one would blow it away. Again, the shed with an attitude was still there! I resolved the issue by putting a stained glass insert in the kitchen window that allowed light in but obscured what was on the outside. That worked and we sold the property very quickly.

Five years later the neighbor called me and asked if I was still investing. He wanted me to buy his home. The first thing I asked was, "Is the shed still there?" The answer was "No", apparently someone in the neighborhood had set it on fire and he had removed the remains. I fully understand the arson's thinking.

Whatever type of fencing you use, install it "up to code", it's easy to do it right and if you get caught, you won't have to pull it all out. Up to code usually includes the types of fencing, height of the fence, size of posts, depth the posts are sunk in the ground, the distance between posts (very important and usually four feet), offsets from the property or the property line, and the material of the fence.

Whether you are buying a property that is fenced or you are fencing your property, the "ugly" unfinished side of a slated wooden fence, by code, should face your property. This means the neighbor gets the nice-looking side. If you buy a property with the finished side facing your property, it is not up to code. If a

neighbor complains, you will be looking at taking the sections down and reversing them. This could be a bargaining chip to use with the seller in a negotiation.

If you are going to put the fence in yourself the biggest tip is to get a powered auger to dig the holes. It will need two people to operate but it is worth renting, first to save time and breaking your back by digging each hole by hand.

My daughter had to replace her fence and the new code called for chain-link only, a specific height, and a hedge planted in front of the fence – even with specific types of bushes. All she wanted to do was replace parts of the formerly approved slatted fence. This new code requirement was ridiculous and later revised - but only after she had her old fence removed and the new fence and hedge installed.

So, whether you are wholesaling a property, or rehabbing it, consider the fence as a necessary evil. If the property comes with a slatted fence that looks ugly, try pressure cleaning it first. Then use a wood stain or just paint it to keep your costs down. Whatever the cost to replace or fix the fence, add 4 times that cost to your asking price and don't forget your labor!