Essential electrical checks before renovating an older home

Why the electrical system needs a close look

Older homes have a charm that is hard to replicate. But behind the plaster and paint, the electrical system may be decades out of date. Before you start any renovation work, it is wise to inspect the key electrical components. A thorough check can prevent unexpected faults, keep the project on schedule, and help you avoid costly emergency repairs later. This article covers the main inspection points that every homeowner should consider, with a focus on the switchboard and related safety devices.

Check the switchboard for age and capacity

The switchboard, sometimes called the fuse box or electrical panel, is the heart of the home's electrical system. In an older house, it may still use old-style fuses or a switchboard that was designed for a much lower electrical load. Modern homes run many more appliances, from air conditioners to home offices, so the switchboard must be able to handle the demand. Look at the model and any labels on the panel. If you see signs of rust, scorch marks, or a panel that feels warm to the touch, those are warning signs. A switchboard that is more than 25 years old should be evaluated by a licensed electrician. They can advise on whether a switchboard upgrade is needed to support your renovation plans safely.

Inspect the residual current device

A residual current device (RCD) is a safety switch that cuts the power if it detects a leak of current to earth. In many older homes, RCDs were not required when the house was built, so they may be missing entirely. If your property has an RCD, test it by pressing the "test" button. It should trip the power immediately. If it does not, or if it feels stiff, the device may be faulty. A working RCD is essential for protecting your family against electric shock. During a renovation, when walls are opened and wiring is disturbed, having a functional RCD becomes even more important.

Look at the cable insulation and wiring age

The wiring inside the walls can deteriorate over time. Older homes often have rubber or cloth-insulated cables that become brittle and can crumble when touched. This type of insulation is a fire risk. Even if the wiring appears intact, the insulation may have degraded where it passes through hot attic spaces or near light fittings. A visual inspection of exposed wiring in the roof cavity, under the floor, or at the switchboard can reveal cracking or fraying. Any wiring that

shows signs of age should be replaced as part of the renovation. It is much cheaper to replace wiring while the walls are open than to do it later as a separate job.

Assess the circuit protection

Circuit breakers and fuses are designed to protect the wiring from overheating. In an older switchboard, you may find old-style rewireable fuses or ceramic fuses. These are less reliable than modern circuit breakers and can be prone to nuisance tripping or, worse, failing to trip when they should. Check that each circuit has the correct rating for the cable it protects. For example, a lighting circuit typically needs a lower-rated fuse than a power circuit. If you find mismatched fuses or see that someone has used a higher-rated fuse than the cable can handle, that is a dangerous situation that should be corrected immediately. A switchboard upgrade often involves replacing these old fuses with a modern circuit breaker panel that provides better protection.

Look for signs of an overloaded circuit

Overloaded circuits are common in older homes where the original wiring was not designed for today's electrical loads. Signs of overload include flickering lights, a buzzing sound from the switchboard, or breakers that trip frequently. During a renovation, you may be adding new circuits for kitchen appliances, home entertainment, or workshop tools. An inspection should verify that the existing circuits can handle the extra load or that new circuits will be run. An electrician can calculate the total load and determine if the switchboard has enough spare capacity. If not, a switchboard upgrade will be part of the renovation scope.

Mobilehomeexteriors helps residential and mobile homeowners identify electrical warning signs before faults become emergencies. When you are planning a renovation, getting a professional electrical inspection early can save time and money. The electrician can provide a report that lists any deficiencies and recommend the necessary upgrades, including switchboard upgrades, so you can budget accurately.

Check the earthing system

Earthing (or grounding) is the system that safely diverts fault currents into the ground. In older homes, the earthing may be inadequate or even missing. Common earthing systems include a metal water pipe, a ground rod, or a connection to the building's steel frame. During an inspection, an electrician will measure the earth resistance and check that all circuits are properly bonded. Poor earthing increases the risk of electric shock and can cause sensitive electronics to malfunction. If your renovation involves installing a new kitchen, bathroom, or outdoor power point, proper earthing is a safety requirement.

Consider the location of the switchboard

The switchboard should be in a location that is easily accessible. In some older homes, the panel may be hidden behind a closet door, in a basement corner, or even outdoors. If the switchboard is difficult to reach, it may not be serviced regularly. During a renovation, you might have the opportunity to relocate the switchboard to a more convenient spot, such as a garage or utility room. This can make future inspections and upgrades easier. However, moving the panel is a significant job that requires planning and compliance with local codes. Discuss this with your electrician early in the design phase.

Plan for switchboard upgrades

A switchboard upgrade is often the single most important electrical improvement you can make in an older home. It brings the system up to modern safety standards, adds capacity for new circuits, and can include advanced features such as arc fault detection. The upgrade typically involves replacing the old panel, installing RCDs for each circuit, and adding surge protection. It is a job that should only be done by a qualified electrician. The cost of the upgrade is usually a small part of a renovation budget, but it pays off in peace of mind and safety. If you are unsure about the condition of your switchboard, Mobilehomeexteriors offers guidance on recognizing warning signs so you can arrange professional help before problems escalate.

Putting it all together

Renovating an older home is an exciting project, but the electrical system should not be an afterthought. By inspecting the switchboard, wiring, circuit protection, earthing, and RCDs before you start, you can identify any issues that need to be addressed. A professional electrical inspection is a small investment that can prevent major headaches later. The key is to plan ahead and work with a licensed electrician who understands the requirements of older properties. With the right upgrades, including a modern switchboard, your renovated home will be both beautiful and safe for years to come.