

Home inspectors list, explain common hidden defects

KNIGHT RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

DETROIT — What's the most common threat to the integrity of your house? Home inspectors say it's water in the wrong place. But often you can't see the leaks that cause mold and rot. Take the roof flashing around your chimney — impossible to inspect if you don't climb to the roof, but a common source of leaks that can rot the structure.

Homeowners don't have to wait until a potential buyer comes back with the home inspector's report. We talked to leading home inspectors from the two professional groups that certify professional home inspectors — the American Society of Home Inspectors (ASHI) and the National Association of Home Inspectors — as well as Lon Grossman, a member of both groups and a longtime home inspector.

The questions: What are the most common problems you see that home owners usually miss?

Here is a summary of the most common problems they find in a house.

Water leaks

Water saturating the earth around the house foundation because the soil doesn't slope away from the building.

Excess water at the foundation, because the gutters are plugged and overflowing or the downspouts stop too close to the house.

Water seeping into the roof around chimney or other roof flashing that's installed wrong or needs

repair or caulking. A cracked and deteriorated chimney cap that lets water seep inside the chimney structure. Note that a chimney cap should have a screen to keep out animals, ice and debris.

Some ASHI inspectors say that much of the wiring they see is done wrong. This is more than an appearance problem, it's a danger.

Obsolete wiring

Outdated wiring that is now overloaded with multiple extension cords and plugs.

Poorly installed wiring, like loose, hanging wires, wiring that's not in a conduit, wiring run under the basement floor joists rather than through them, ground wires that aren't connected.

"I've seen electricians do it too, not just home owners," said Grossman.

Nonprofessional wiring techniques used to finish a basement.

Heating

Deteriorating heating systems, including malfunctioning controls and gases that aren't safely exhausted from the house. Besides working smoke detectors with fresh batteries, the house should have a carbon monoxide detector near the furnace.

Other common problems

Old and incompatible piping and waste lines, slow water leaks, for example under sinks, at worn-out joints.

Natural-gas leaks, especially around older appliances and older valve connections — surprisingly common, inspectors say.

Poor ventilation caused by

oversealing the house without creating new avenues for air exchange.

Exposed and uncaulked gaps in the home's exterior, including windows, doors and wall surfaces and any place there's a break in the skin of the house.

Crumbling concrete or bricks or mortar.

Water damage to foundation walls, floor joists, rafters or the headers over windows and doors.

Miscellaneous flaws like sticking windows, dripping faucets, flaking lead paint or uncontained asbestos.

These flaws can show up in a whole neighborhood of houses built about the same time, says Mike Goewey, past president of the Michigan Chapter of the National Association of Home Inspectors, who owns Property Facts Home Inspections in Livonia. "When we inspect a home, we often find many of the same problems affect other homes in the area."

Lon Grossman owns West Bloomfield-based Technihouse Inspections. Grossman says different problems recur in homes built in different eras.

Here is Grossman's list of the most common problems that are specific to the decades when your house was built:

Pre-1950s homes

Houses from the 1920s-'40s might have the old galvanized plumbing. If so, its life is about 50 years, and it could be wearing out. You also may have the old sand-cast waste lines. Their walls can have thin spots and also

may wear out. On the other hand, your house is probably a high-quality structure, built with very good hardwood.

1950s homes

"In the 1950s we built homes with no real consideration for energy," Grossman says. A lot of those homes have "real junk windows" (steel windows and poor quality aluminum windows).

"All they did was let you look out. They're drafty, energy inefficient — no insulation value at all."

On the other hand, he says through the 1950s, houses were still being built with high-quality hardwoods, and the structure is often very sound.

1960s homes

During the war in Vietnam, much copper was diverted to make shell casings, and many, not all, homes got aluminum wiring.

"I probably find one every two or three weeks," said Grossman. "It can be a fire hazard; It causes arcing behind the walls."

Aluminum wiring ended in 1973, he says. If you have it, you should get help soon from a new product called an AFCI — an arcing fault circuit interrupter. This will detect an arc in the system and shut it down.

Although you could find one of these in an electrical supply store now, Grossman recommends strongly that you wait a year or so until there's a new generation of improved AFCIs. Ones in this first wave are known for failing so often that building inspectors have stopped

requiring them. If you have aluminum wiring, meanwhile, call an electrician each year to make sure connections are tight. Regularly lay your hand on your switch plates and plug covers to see if you feel any heat. If you sense a burning smell or see your lights flicker for no reason, call an electrician.

1970s and 1980s homes

"In the 1970s and '80s, the problem with houses was we started using cheaper materials, cheap construction" said Grossman. "Cheap woods, soft woods, pine on the outside, when hardwoods would have lasted longer."

With homes from this era, you should keep an eye on wood construction and replace parts if they start to deteriorate.

Other cheap construction techniques included poor quality windows — aluminum frame or cheaply done vinyl.

"You may eventually want to replace these with a higher quality new window," he said.

Also, the '70s and '80s saw the beginning of today's energy shortages. Builders and consumers adopted many energy-saving techniques, but not all were well done.

"We caulked and caulked and caulked and kept adding insulation to the attic, but we didn't add more ventilation," he said.

Grossman is a strong proponent of heavy insulation — he recommends up to R48 in the attic, vs. the R30 that's code minimum. But the

homeowner must make sure there's still good ventilation. Stand in your attic, he recommends. Even with heavy insulation, you should see a ring of light coming in from the edges. If it's not, your insulation has covered up the soffit vents.

"If insulation is stuffed into the eaves, as it usually is, that's bad. Pull it back. Put in baffles or chutes (sold in home improvement stores) to keep that area open."

1990s homes

"The biggest problem of the 1990s was composite sidings," said Grossman.

The wood products manufacturer Louisiana Pacific made many pressed wood sidings that look like wood and cost much less. But those sidings are rotting in damp climates like ours.

"You're seeing it in every subdivision," said Grossman.

If your 1990s house has pressed wood siding, check it. Lie down on the ground where you can see a bottom edge.

"Is it swelling? Is it discolored?" Grossman asks. "Look at the bottom edges for hairline cracks and black lines. If you see it splintering apart, it's delaminating."

If problems are starting, you probably have to replace the siding. The manufacturer may be liable for replacing the product.

This is not the same as the various fiber-cement wood-like sidings made since 1997 — such as the James Hardie brand. Those are very durable, he said.

Home improvement do-it-yourselfers are caught up in Web education

BY DAVID BRADLEY
The Associated Press

The Internet has flattened the learning curve for do-it-yourselfers faster than you can drive a nail into a board.

Project neophytes can check out the business end of a hammer. Seasoned pros can log on to weigh the plusses of finishing planers with new cutterhead locks.

The Internet is fully tenured as a home project teaching and research tool. And consumers are driving cyber learning to be even faster, more detailed and more convenient.

"For customers, it's all about speed. Their speed," said Meg Armstrong, Internet director for lowes.com, Lowe's home improvement Web site. "What they really say is give us what we want when we want it. They can explore as broad or narrow or as deep into a topic as they want to go."

Armstrong should know. Without divulging numbers, she says traffic at lowes.com doubled in 2003. Visitors stick around too; the average visit is longer as they hunt-and-click among more than 1,000 how-

to projects, project calculators and buying guides.

The marvel of the Web is megabytes of content condensed to the schedule and needs of individual Web surfers. Magazine stories pigeonholed by season are out the window. It's OK to bone up on late-blooming summer plants in February or compare snow throwers in July.

The Web increasingly is the first spot people visit in their cyber search for knowledge and products.

"Once someone gets the idea, I don't like my cabinets, we want them to visit

to get a grip on the project and their potential costs even if they aren't quite ready to buy yet," said Armstrong.

Web-based education has come of age just when a new generation of 20- and 30-year olds — groups most at home in front of a PC — are updating their first homes. "This group is so Web savvy, it is a natural resource for them," says Armstrong. For most surfers, the price is right, too. Most Web content looks to remain free.

Web users who like the taste of Internet learning will find it the whole enchi-

lada for projects. Beyond improved skill sets and research, homeowners can order goods online for in-store pickup or delivery. For the less-skilled, installation can be arranged, too.

Just as consumers warm to the Web, a behind-the-scenes race is heating up to capture consumer attention. Manufacturers who see the Internet as the ultimate research tool are rushing to

bring content and promotions to the main online portals such as lowes.com.

Armstrong says that while capturing consumer attention is important, so is the challenge to integrate what visitors see online with what they experience once in the store.

Still, there's only one way for home improvement and the Internet to go — faster and more focused.

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