

The Changing Face of Home Inspections

It wasn't that long ago it seems that home inspections were an unheard of thing. In fact when I bought my first old home in 1974, it wasn't even brought up in conversation. Back then if someone was interested in the condition of a home they were going to buy, they would just have a contractor give it a look over. However, these contractor evaluations eventually proved insufficient, law suits followed and we saw the birth of home inspection as a discipline unto itself.

When I bought my second older house in 1979, home inspections were still not on the radar for most and even when I sold that home in 1982, it had never been inspected. My next home, purchased in the late 1980's, went through a pest inspection as part of the purchase and sale as that was in vogue at the time. Still, a home inspection wasn't really talked about that much. By the 1990's, home inspections were becoming more commonplace and in the late 1990's as the housing bubble grew, the demand for inspectors grew in kind. The later decline of the housing market and state requirement for licensure took many out of the industry, but regardless, the home inspection is now an integral and critical part of the home buying process.

Along the way, home inspections have become more sophisticated and the days of just showing up in a truck with a flashlight and a ladder are long gone. Technology which would have been unheard of as part of a home inspection 20 years ago is now becoming more accepted and affordable. Thanks to the media, consumers are also becoming more educated and aware of homeownership issues. In turn, they also expect more from the inspector. Today, gas sniffers, moisture meters, infrared cameras, carbon monoxide detectors and so on can be found in many inspectors' tool bags. Reports are high quality computer generated and generally contain a wealth of digital photos that give consumers an intimate understanding of the issues at hand.

If there is a downside to all this technological trendiness, it lies with the reliance on technology in and of itself. There is no technology which can affirm the lack of any issues with a structure. There is no technology which can take the place of understanding how structures work and how and why they fail. There is no technology which can take the place of common sense and a thorough home inspection.

With every change in the building and energy codes there are unintended consequences and tomorrow may bring a different perspective to what we thought we understood today. The energy crisis of the 1970's is a prime example as we sought to tighten up structures and make them more energy efficient while at the same time inadvertently creating issues with indoor air quality which we still work to resolve today. Unfortunately, most folks don't have an inspection until a house is sold so all these advancements and changes in the inspection industry have a ripple effect for the real estate agent trying to help buyers and sellers complete a transaction. It is an understatement to say things have become more complicated and often, inspection findings are less straightforward than in the past. Issues that are discounted as nitpicky or unfounded can often have much greater significance than one realizes when one understands the building science behind them.

Inspectors therefore find themselves in the role of educator more and more, not only with their clients, but with the real estate agent. In the end, change is the only constant and for the home buyer, who may have to pay for problems down the road, it only reinforces the importance of having an inspection performed by a trained and experienced individual.