

From the Home Inspector:

When Things Go Wrong

There may come a time when you discover something wrong with the house, and you may be upset or disappointed with your home inspection. There are some things we'd like you to keep in mind.

Intermittent or concealed problems

Some problems can only be discovered by living in a house. They cannot be discovered during the few hours of a home inspection. For example, some shower stalls leak when people are standing in the shower, but do not leak when you simply turn on the tap. Some roofs and basements only leak when specific conditions exist. Some problems will only be discovered when carpets are lifted, furniture is moved or finishes are removed.

No clues

These problems may have existed at the time of the inspection, but there were no clues as to their existence. Our inspections are based upon the past performance of the house. If there are no clues of a past problem, it is unfair to assume we should foresee a future problem.

Contractor's advice

A common source of dissatisfaction with home inspections comes from comments made by contractors. Contractors' opinions often differ from ours. Don't be surprised when three roofers all say the roof needs replacement, when we said that the roof would last a few more years with some minor repairs.

"Last man in" theory

While our advice represents the most prudent thing to do, many contractors are reluctant to undertake these repairs. This is because of the "last man in" theory. The contractor fears that if he is the last person to work on the roof, he will get blamed if the roof leaks, regardless of whether or not the roof leak is his fault. Consequently, he won't want to do a minor repair with high liability, when he could re-roof the entire house for more money and reduce the likelihood of a callback. This is understandable.

Most recent advice is best

There is more to the "last man in" theory. It suggests that it is human nature for homeowners to believe the last bit of expert advice they receive, even if it is contrary to previous advice. As home inspectors, we unfortunately find ourselves in the position of "first man in" and consequently it is our advice that is often disbelieved.

Why didn't we see it?

Contractors may say, "I can't believe you had this house inspected, and they didn't find this problem." There are several reasons for these apparent oversights:

Conditions during inspection

It is difficult for homeowners to remember the circumstances in the house at the time of the inspection. Homeowners seldom remember that it was snowing, that there was storage everywhere or that the furnace could not be turned on because the air conditioning was operating, et cetera. It's impossible for contractors to know what the circumstances were when the inspection was performed.

The wisdom of hindsight

When the problem manifests itself, it is very easy to have 20/20 hindsight. Anybody can say that the basement is wet when there is 2" of water on the floor. Predicting the problem is a different story.

A long look

If we spent half an hour under the kitchen sink or 45 minutes disassembling the furnace, we'd find more problems, too. Unfortunately, the inspection would take several days and would cost considerably more.

We're generalists

We are generalists; we are not specialists. The heating contractor may indeed have more heating expertise than we do. This is because we are expected to have heating expertise, plumbing expertise, structural expertise, electrical expertise, et cetera.

An invasive look

Problems often become apparent when carpets or plaster are removed, when fixtures or cabinets are pulled out, and so on. A home inspection is a visual examination. We don't perform invasive or destructive tests.

Not insurance

In conclusion, a home inspection is designed to better your odds. It is not designed to eliminate all risk. For that reason, a home inspection should not be considered an insurance policy. The premium that an insurance company would have to charge for a policy with no deductible, no limit and an indefinite policy period would be considerably more than the fee we charge. It would also not include the value added by the inspection.

We hope this is food for thought.

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