

Prospective Houses

Determining their Quality

As a prospective homebuyer, you need to be able to distinguish between a quality build and potential Kryptonite but you're not Superman. You can't see inside the walls and you certainly can't tell how much rebar is in the concrete, but there are things you can do, and examine, to get a good sense of the level of overall craftsmanship.

The most obvious method for deducing quality is to hire a home inspector who will crawl in, under and all over your prospective house looking for issues related to the structure and mechanical systems. This is a crucial step but there are a few things you should be aware of. First, understand that no two inspectors are alike. Some are more thorough than others, so pick one that has been recommended to you by your real estate agent or friends who have used their services in the past. Ideally, you are looking for someone who one might describe as "a little too thorough".

Years ago, I had an inspector spend 8 hours going through a house I had built, touching and testing EVERYTHING. He asked me what felt like a million questions and by the end of the day he had left no stone unturned. As the builder, I was a bit put off by this. Someone dissecting the finished product of a 4 to 5 month long project can be tough to watch. However, I recognized that as a buyer, this was the guy I would want inspecting my own prospective house. Since that day, the inspector who gave us the toughest inspection we have ever had has been our go-to recommendation for anyone seeking a home inspector. Tough love gets results.

Understand that sometimes inspectors make mistakes or misread the building code. If there is an issue on the final report that your builder or renovator disputes, just have them provide the applicable building code or specs for the item in question. Just because an item appears on a report as a deficiency does not necessarily make it so. Don't panic. Ask your project manager to verify its veracity and they will recommend how to move forward. If your builder or renovator disputes something on an inspection report, they should be able to provide some kind of documentation to back up their claim. The timing of inspections may seem strange, given their place in the buying process. By the time you have an inspection done, you have already identified a house that you like and want to buy. So let's look at how you might discern the quality of the houses you are considering before the home inspection.

A Few Things to Look Out For

If the house is not 100% finished while you are assessing it, take a close look at the job site. Is it orderly? Is it clean? Are there piles of trash and disorganization everywhere? The level of organization on a job site directly correlates with quality of construction. As a part of my hiring process for new employees and subcontractors, I make it a point to look in their cars. A messy car generally means a disorganized worker. The same goes for a construction site. A messy site could mean a lack of oversight and supervision.

Interior fit and finish: In a house that is completed or nearly completed, ask yourself if there is a high level of attention to detail or do things look kind of thrown together? Are lights slightly crooked, are cabinet handles loose or maybe not installed in the ideal manner. Do the doorstops work properly or are they damaging the doors or walls? Are the doorknobs on tightly? Is the paint work clean or sloppy? Painting is one of the most overlooked finishes in a house. Examine the quality of the painting. If it is sloppy, that is a sign that the project manager is willing to settle for subpar work. Examine the tile work. Are there a lot of crooked tiles or clumps of material stuck to them?

Exterior fit and finish: Often overlooked, these are key indicators of quality. Are the vent stacks (white plastic pipes protruding from the roof) painted black or matched to the shingle colour to blend in with the overall house? Or are they plain plastic, sticking out of the roof like sore thumbs? Are the HVAC vents (dryer and bath fans) installed correctly or are they crooked and misaligned? Is the siding around these vents properly installed or are there ugly notches and just a general feel of slapdash work? Does the exterior paint have good coverage or can you see the raw building material in some places? Do genuine hardwood floors extend throughout the entire house or are the bedrooms carpeted? Carpeting bedrooms can save some money, but this type of penny pinching could be an indicator of the builder or renovator's approach to the entire build. I would caution against buying a house from someone who is cutting corners to save a relatively small amount of money. Maybe they spaced the framing members out a little farther to save money on lumber or they used cheap laminate flooring that resembles genuine wood but doesn't hold up nearly as well. Unless you are shopping for a starter home or are on a very tight budget, steer clear of this kind of construction.

Is the utility room or area clean and organized or is it sloppy? Is there paint all over the floor in this area? Are tubes and wires haphazardly hanging around or does it look like professionals installed the water heater, furnace, ductwork and wiring? While you certainly will not be entertaining guests in your future utility room, the organization and cleanliness of this area is a look into the mindset of the project manager.

These are areas of a house that are easy to evaluate but can give you real insight into how well it was built or renovated. Paying close attention to these indicators might help you avoid a lengthy inspection report and potential warranty issues down the line.

I can also share a lesser-known indicator of construction quality: interior doors. Are they solid or hollow core? Hollow core doors are cheaper to buy but easier to damage. Solid core doors have material that fills the entire interior of the door slab, giving it more weight and heft while also making it much more difficult to break or damage. When looking over door hardware and door stops, check to see if any of the doors are broken around the door stop. Replacing doors is a real pain, and in my personal experience, a house full of kids will probably equate to a house full of damaged hollow core doors. While a house with hollow core doors isn't necessarily poorly built, a house with solid core doors is probably higher quality overall. Installing solid core doors shows a preference for better materials, despite the fact that most people do not notice this detail.

Lastly, don't let paint colours be a deal-breaker. We all have different emotional reactions to different colours and might decide we don't like a potential house because it features a colour we can't stand. Paint colours can be changed and your seller will probably change them to your preferred colour scheme if it means closing the deal. Try to look past exterior or interior colours and see the house for what it really is.

When it comes down to it, at Ballast Design Build we believe a house must embody three qualities: It must be solidly built, it must be built with function in mind and it must be beautiful. Firmitus, utilitas, venustus.