

Do-It-Yourself checklist for the Home Buyer

It's been said so often it has become a cliché – **the family home is usually the biggest investment anyone ever makes**. Yet too many people launch themselves blindly into it without sufficient care.

It's hard to imagine a car buyer going ahead without first checking over the motor or at least having a test drive. A house buyer outlaying ten or twenty times as much often does just that!

The Property Assessment Service run by Archicentre Australia (the Architects Advisory Service) is set up to help the home buyer make the right purchase decisions by providing important information on defects, repair costs and renovation potential. Given the increasing proliferation of timber pests – such as termites – adding a Timber Pest Assessment Service alongside the Property Assessment is now commonplace.

However, if you are a “do-it-yourself” purchaser, here's a checklist you might find handy.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

So, you've seen the house you want? But you need a final going through look – “just to be sure”. Before embarking on your assessment, you will need to take a ladder, long shank screwdriver, a good torch and a power point tester (available inexpensively from most large hardware and electrical Stores). It is also advisable to wear old clothes or overalls.

Take care when inspecting the property. Defective roofs, for example, could pose a serious risk if walked on.

EXTERNALLY – FOCUS ON THESE POINTS...

The Garden

- Check the condition of fences and gates. Examine the base of gate posts and fence posts, the bottom “plinth board”, and at the junction of rails and posts for rot. These are the areas of greatest deterioration.
- Look for large trees too close to the house. These could cause structural subsidence, particularly in brick or brick veneer homes with timber floors or “waffle pod slabs”.
- Make sure the water run-off from the garden doesn't flow, or pond, underneath or around the house, causing excessive damp conditions. It is also worthwhile noting the location of poisonous trees & shrubs (such as Rhus or Oleanders) which could harm children and pets.

Out-Buildings

- Check the structural conditions and water-tightness of rooms and walls of garages and sheds; look for water stains on timbers and metal sheeting.
- Look for fire hazards, loose or broken power points and badly wired electrical fittings.

Outside Walls

- Carefully check walls to ensure that they are straight. In timber houses, sagging weatherboards could mean the timber stumps have rotted, or concrete stumps or brick piers have subsided. Minor cracking in masonry of older houses can generally be ignored, but large cracks or bowed brick walls could mean that the footings have subsided – needing further forensic assessment and possibly expensive remediation.
- Check for rotten weatherboards, windows, doors and verandah posts.
- Thoroughly check the condition of the mortar between the bricks. If it has been eroded away it should be cleaned out and re-pointed by a bricklayer. Different coloured mortar indicates a repaired brick wall, which could either be a responsible repair or a patch-up. Look to see if this mortar is cracking again.
- Brick and brick veneer houses should have plenty of sub-floor ventilators beneath floors. Inadequate ventilation and dampness are major causes of many sub-floor problems.
- Look for buckled, badly fitted or water stained eaves, which may be an indication of roof or gutter problems.

On the Roof

- Lean your ladder against the guttering and look for a wavy roof line. This may indicate a structural problem (see “roof space”).
- Look for broken roof tiles and loose ridge and valley tiles allowing bird and possum entry as well as water leaks.
- Check that corrugated iron sheets are in reasonable condition and well nailed down.
- Ensure that valley and eaves guttering are free from holes and rust. Even small holes can create large leaks. Extensive replacement is often necessary.
- Make sure that flues and chimneys are structurally safe and the flashings around them are secure against water penetration.

Under Timber Floors

- Look under the floor for props or bricks holding up the floor instead of stumps, piers or dwarf walls.
- Check for subsiding stumps or brick piers, or whether excessive wedging has occurred between these structural supports and the floor bearers. If these structural supports need to be replaced, the costs could be quite high. With timber stumps, look for stumps with the heaviest water stain and dig away up to 100mm of the soil below ground level. Check for rot by scraping the stump and seeing how much breaks away. This can indicate the approximate life expectancy of the stumps.
- Inspect timber framing and floors generally for rot, mould and evidence of borers. Borer attack in some species of Pine may be due to Anobid borers. These will eventually destroy the timber and should be treated immediately.
- Check to see that the earth is not excessively wet. Dampness problems accompanied by inadequate ventilation encourages rot, borer and termite attack.
- Look carefully for termite “shelter tubes”. Termites build mud shelter tubes, between 5mm and 50mm up stumps or piers and brick walls to connect their nests in the ground to the timber on which they are feeding.
- If you are in any way unsure about borers or termites, the house should be checked by an expert.

In the Roof Space

- Look for sagging roof framing, cracked or broken tiles, rusty iron roofing and leaking ridge or valleys. A defective roof can be a very costly repair item.
- Check for shoddy or damaged electrical wiring. Do not Touch!
- A pungent odour or rat-like droppings could indicate the presence of vermin. Possums can damage ceilings and should be removed. (it is illegal to poison them.)
- Note whether or not the ceiling has been insulated.

Concrete Floors

- Although the underside of concrete floors cannot be inspected, check if there is any exposed perimeter to ensure that the plastic waterproofing membrane is not exposed but protected by fibre cement on a similar covering.
- Concrete floors are not immune to termite attack – as service penetrations provide a ready bridge.

INTERNALLY – FOCUS ON THESE POINTS...

These checks should be carried out in each room of the house.

Timber Floors

- At regular intervals, jump lightly on the floor to detect any rotten floorboards, borer infestation or looseness in the floor framing. While this test may be a guide, it by no means guarantees that any timber stumps or floorboards are in good condition.
- Check to see if the floors are level, or there are gaps between floor and skirting. If stumps or piers are sinking, floors will always fall away from fireplaces or brick walls. This is an invaluable check in houses which have been recently renovated, but not structurally upgraded.

Concrete Floors

- Look for signs of dampness, such as lifting or buckling floor tiles and rotten carpet. Dampness in concrete slabs can be hard to trace and expensive to remedy.
- Ducted heating systems under concrete floors are susceptible to water leaks. Lift the floor vents and check for evidence of water or rusted ductwork. Water penetration will render the heating system entirely useless.
- If cracks in the concrete are millimetres wide, they could indicate a significant structural problem.

Walls

- Check that walls are straight and true. Deviations could be either warped framing timbers, or the onset of structural problems - re-check footings or stumps.
- Look for cracks and general movement and be particularly wary of freshly painted or wallpapered areas. In these cases, look for evidence of recently filled cracks, a sign of sub-floor structural problems.
- Carefully inspect brick walls for sign of dampness. This may be evident through the presence of white or brownish deposits. Rising dampness may also cause skirting and architraves to rot, and paint and wallpaper to lift. Rising dampness or salt damp can be particularly expensive problems to cure.
- Tap solid brick walls for a hollow sound or a change in tone. Both could indicate a plastered or rendered-over patch up of a significant rising damp problem.
- Look for cracks beside chimneys and look for doorways and windows that aren't square or are jamming. These usually indicate structural subsistence.
- Lightly tap walls and tiled surface with the handle of your screwdriver. A hollow sound could mean loose plaster or tiles.

Ceilings

- Check that ceilings are straight and true and look for cracks or signs of movement at cornices. These could indicate roof or wall framing deficiencies, possibly illegal wall-removal.
- Look for water stains and mould growth which could indicate excessive condensation or roof leaks.

Windows and Ventilators

- Make sure that the windows can be opened and check for broken window panes. The sash cords in older double hung windows may be broken or need replacing.
- Check for excessive condensation and mould growth on windows and walls. Locate the source of musty smells. The causes could be inadequate ventilation, subfloor dampness, roof leaks, lack of insulation or often a combination of these.

Electrical Systems

- Check that the light switches and power points work.
- Test all power points with the tester. This will indicate outlets that are incorrectly wired. The most common problem is power points which are not earthed.
- Look for signs of burns around switches, fittings and fuses.
- Wiring in many older homes may be sound, provided that it is left intact. If additional power points or lights are required, the entire electrical system may need replacing.
- If you are at all in doubt about the condition of the electrical system, you should have it checked by a licenced electrician.

Plumbing System

- Check all plumbing fittings for cracks or leaks.
- Test the water pressure in hot and cold taps. It is worthwhile turning on several taps simultaneously to ascertain if there is any appreciable pressure drops.
- Partially fill the bath or laundry tubs and observe whether or not the water drains away properly. A sluggish flow or gurgling in the pipes could indicate that the sewer drains are damaged or blocked.
- Look for damp ground in the vicinity of the drains, which could be cracks or leaks in pipes, needing replacement.
- Check for dampness and soft soil where downpipes meet the ground. Downpipes may not be plumbed to the stormwater drains and must be, to avoid structural and dampness problems.

General

- Examine the house for appropriate room layout, orientation to the sun, views, relation to neighbours, traffic noise, and if not optimal whether the house can be improved at an affordable cost.

RENOVATIONS AND ADDITIONS

If the house has recently been renovated, or if extensions have been carried out, check with the local council to ensure that a building permit was obtained. Illegal alterations could become your responsibility, particularly if they contravene building codes.

If you are buying with a view to doing extensions in the future, check council requirements for set-back distance, maximum site coverage and restrictions on types of construction. You may need professional advice.

Archicentre Australia's Renovation Feasibility Design Service can provide an essential strategy for your proposed renovation. The feasibility study is designed to show you how to obtain the best and most cost effective result.

If your intended home has a reasonable bill of health, it is worthwhile contacting the local council to ensure that it is not likely to be affected by future road widening, re-zoning or other planning proposals.

Your solicitor will advise you on what action you need to take to ensure that there are no problems with titles, contracts and finance.

If you get into difficulties with your home assessment or would rather have an expert do it for you, an Archicentre Australia Property Assessment Service can be provided. This Architects Advisory Service can be contacted on 1300 13 45 13 – or visit www.archicentreaustralia.com.au

