Buying New Isn't Buying Perfect

Your House is a 3,000 Piece Jigsaw Puzzle

The House Scene

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Most people realize that buying an existing house is a lot like buying a used car. You are buying someone else's problems. But many buyers, particularly first-timers who haven't been to war yet with their builders, equate "new" with "perfect" and expect a newly constructed house to be flawless. There's nothing wrong with expecting - and even demanding – quality. After all, it's your money – and a lot of it. But perfection? Forget it.

For one thing, the typical house has more than 3,000 component parts. For another, they are put together by human beings.

According to the National Association of Home Builders, the materials used in a 1,700 square foot house include: 9,726 board feet of lumber, 2500 square feet of insulation, 6,500 square feet of gypsum wallboard, 302 pounds of nails, 55 gallons of paint, 750 feet of copper wiring, 280 feet of copper pipe, 170 feet of plastic pipe and nearly 200 plumbing fittings.

Furthermore, it takes dozens of workers to assemble all these materials into a house. The list includes among others: excavators, masons, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, roofers, sheet metal mechanics, ventilation mechanics, glazers, drywall finishers, painters, insulation and siding technicians, carpet, flooring, asphalt and gutter installers.

Now don't get me wrong. I am not insinuating for a minute that when building a house, Murphy's Law always applies. Most builders' work hard at eliminating mistakes before they occur, and correcting those that invariably fall through the cracks.

I'm not sticking up for shoddy construction practices either. But with all these people working on what amounts to a giant jigsaw puzzle, errors are bound to be made. In fact, building a house is a complicated process and that it's a wonder many more serious mistakes aren't made.

So, if you are buying a new home, expect to find a few problems that can be repaired easily either by you or your builder. Settling for example, is a natural phenomenon that causes drywall nails to protrude and cement to crack. It's annoying, but it can't be prevented. Houses settle as the moisture in the concrete, wood, paint and other materials evaporates. This process can take anywhere from eight to fourteen months.

Condensation is another problem that upsets many homebuyers needlessly. While condensation can be caused by moisture seeping into the house, it occurs most frequently when cold surfaces, such as windows, come in contact with warm, moist air trapped inside the house. As moisture is removed from the house during it's first year, the problem should go away. Until then, try taking moisture out by occasionally opening a window, operating a circulatory fan system or turning your humidifier down or off. Actually, moisture is responsible for almost all irritating problems most new homebuyers must endure.

The house is in constant movement during the drying process. And it also expands and contracts as the climate changes, absorbing moisture in the spring and fall and drying back out in the summer and winter.

Nail pops can be repaired easily by driving the nail back into the wallboard and repainting the area, so they are really no cause for alarm. And as long as the cracks in the basement, floor, or even the foundation wall, are less than 1/8" thick, they're probably nothing to worry about either. If hairline cracks don't go all the way to the floor or wall, they probably won't leak. But you should wait to make sure before repairing them with patching cement. Even if the crack does allow water into the house, chances are it can be fixed from the inside. But the problem area must be dry first, so don't get upset with your builder is he wants to wait to make the necessary repairs.

Because a house moves so much, eventually you're going to see an outline of the plywood beneath your vinyl floor. There's no getting around it.

The gyrations a house goes through usually aren't enough to crack the wallboard itself, but they sometimes tear the paper face that covers the seams between the wallboard sections. Normally, this only happens once, so a tear can be repaired when you repaint the wall. However, torn sheetrock tape can't be repaired if it's already been covered with wallpaper. That's why many builders advise their buyers to wait at least a year for the house to dry out before hanging wallpaper. If you paper the walls too soon, you can almost count on the paper shrinking at the top or the bottom, peeling back where the strips come together or rolling over where the pieces are overlapped.

Moisture will also cause alarm when your doors swell and bind. This is especially true of bathroom doors. Unless they are painted both at the top and the bottom, bathroom doors will absorb moisture like a sponge. Sandpaper can be used to smooth down the part of the door that sticks, and a little touch-up paint will make the spot look as good as new. At worst, you may have to move the strike plate a tad.

You may want to also check the hinges on any door that binds to make sure they are tight. Hinges loosen because of use, as do door knobs, locks, handles and other pieces of hardware. Even the plates covering the electrical outlet boxes

come loose over time. But all it takes to tighten them is a screw-driver, not a call to your builder.

Cabinet drawers and sliding glass doors also sometimes pick up dirt and bind. Apply a little soap or wax to the runners and you'll solve the problem.

New houses make lots of noises too. Floors squeak, refrigerators hum, heating systems swoosh and pipes gurgle.

In most cases, a squeaky floor is not indicative of a structural problem, or even that the plywood or joist below is broken. A nail that has pulled loose from the joist typically causes the squeak. When you step on it, it goes back down into its hole with a screech. To remedy the problem, drive a nail through the carpet and underlayment and into the joist. Use a finish nail, and you won't be able to see it.

You'll be more aware of heating and plumbing systems in new houses than in the older one because drywall is thinner than plaster and doesn't absorb as much sound. In addition, water runs faster through plastic pipe. And where cast iron and copper tends to deaden sound, plastic magnifies it. However, if your pipes bang like a drum when you turn your water off and on, you may have a real problem. It could be "water hammer" caused by pressure changes in the pipe. If this is the cause, the problem can be easily corrected by bleeding the air out of the plumbing system. But, if the banging is caused by the hole in which the goes through is not large enough, you and your builder are in for some major work.

The difficulty for homebuyers is knowing when something is a major problem and when it is not. For the most part, builders have learned to accept all sorts of trivial complaints from their customers as a part of the business. Nevertheless, they believe that if something is a minor nuisance, you should tend to do it yourself or overlook it. Only when a problem becomes annoying, they say, should you call them. Of course, a nuisance to one person can be a major problem to another. Just remember, the more you bother your builder with insignificant problems, the more likely he is to become fed up. And then, should you need him when and if something major goes wrong, you might have a difficult time getting him to respond.

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