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BUSINESS: CENTRAL TEXAS HOMES

New-home buyers can get pre-drywall peek

By ALAN J. HEAVENS
The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — New-home buyers have a major advantage over people who buy existing houses: They can see behind the walls without punching a big hole in the drywall or plaster.

Behind the plaster walls of pre-1940 houses can be found wood lath, horsehair or straw; discontinued wiring; gas lines that were disconnected when electricity was introduced; lots of dirt, and skeletons of long-dead small mammals.

The spaces on the unexposed side of drywall are much cleaner and better organized. That's because they are new, of course, but also because builders and contractors now follow a set of prescribed standards, or codes, that have been adopted as housing became an industry.

A look at what's behind the walls, known as a front-end or pre-drywall inspection, is one of two inspections generally offered to buyers of newly built homes.

"More and more builders are doing the pre-drywall," said Gary G. Schaal, vice president of sales and marketing for Orleans Home-builders Inc. in Bensalem, Pa. "Buyers are always trying to get in the house to see it in progress. So we give them the chance to do it in a



Elizabeth Robertson/Philadelphia Inquirer
Buyers can use the pre-drywall inspection to see where wiring, pipes and ducts are — handy knowledge for future remodeling.

safe environment with the superintendent."

Once the drywall is up and the house finished, buyers make what's known as a pre-settlement inspection, looking for last-minute problems before they take possession.

These inspections aren't intended to replace those of professional home inspectors the buyers may choose to hire, Schaal said.

"While pre-drywall and

pre-settlement inspections by buyers typically take an hour, professional home inspections are more thorough and can take as long as three," he said.

Midconstruction look

Buyer education and the development of good relations are the prime reasons for the pre-drywall, or as Realen Homes of Malvern calls it, the "midconstruction" inspection.

In the spring and fall, Realen offers the public as well as buyers the chance to see home construction from start to finish, said Virginia Jarden, director of sales and marketing.

"We take them to houses in different stages of construction, starting with the clearing and grading of lots," she said.

Although buyers are given one opportunity to look behind the walls, builders usually designate an employee to follow the process on each house from beginning to end.

In some cases, it might be the superintendent. But even the best superintendent might miss something, so some builders employ separate inspectors to find things that were overlooked.

For example, at Realen, Pat Lynch, a veteran "back-end" inspector — the person who checks

drywall installation, cabinets, doors and windows — is in charge of overall "quality assurance," Jarden said.

At the end of the process, there's also an employee who "tickles" the house, finding dings in the drywall, chipped paint on the appliances.

The object of a home inspection is an examination of visual and accessible major features of a house, said John Palczuk, a Raleigh, N.C., home inspector, and former president of the American Society of Home Inspectors.

Inspection guidelines cover all of a house's major systems and components: the exterior, roofing, plumbing, electrical, heating, central air, interiors, insulation and ventilation, Palczuk said.

Home inspections are not intended to point out every small defect and are not a guarantee of anything, he pointed out.

However, inspections can highlight the good points of a house, and inspectors can be sources of general information and provide an education to the buyer.

The final walk-through

The buyer comes in again about seven to 10 days before the house goes to settlement for a final inspection. Again, imperfections or problems are pointed out and corrected.

"If it is something simple, it is corrected before settlement," Schaal said. "If it is a bad cabinet door that needs to be back-ordered, that usually takes longer."

Unless a buyer is really up on construction practices, the items that appear on the lists of the builders' inspectors may not mean much. Often, 100 items or more are on an inspector's checklist, but a look at a few of them will provide a general idea.

If the house is to have a stucco exterior, for example, the inspector makes sure that the felt paper is lapped and stapled properly and that the flashing and drip capping will be sufficient to divert water away from the foundation.

He makes sure that the lumber used in framing the interior walls is the right grade, which involves eyeing hundreds of pieces of lumber.

The inspector checks that a row of framing studs is exactly in line. If any are out of line, the drywall will bow when it is nailed to studs.

Most buyers use the pre-drywall inspection to look at the mechanicals, to see where the doorbell wires are connected, and "to make plans for future changes," Schaal said.

"Many come to the inspection with cameras so they know where the wiring and heat ducts are," he said.