

# 38310 INSPECT

From Page 1C

the house meets the minimum code requirements, and the inspector for the builder, who makes sure the house is being built according to the builder's checklist.

"There is a general assumption by the public that houses that are new are built properly, and that's not always the case," said Jim Hemsell, of Hemsell Home inspections and state chapter president of Lone Star American Society of Home Inspectors.

The demand for an advocate for homeowners seems to parallel the demand for new homes themselves.

The National Association of Home Builders ranks Dallas and Fort Worth-Arlington fifth and 35th in number of homes built nationwide, with a total of 32,580 homes built in 1999, according to the most recent figures available.

Matching that pace, homeowners who often know little of construction techniques and procedures are hiring professionals to follow the projects through to completion.

The Trammells hired a third-party inspector — one who would critique every detail of the house from the slab to the framing to the final walk-through.

Diane Trammell said she believes that hiring HomeSource Consulting saved a lot of worry. The inspector did things like correct reversed faucet knobs, send back scratched windows and make sure the masons didn't dilute the strength of the mortar with too much sand.

Jeffrey Smith, who founded HomeSource Consulting two years ago, said he has met a lot of people like the Trammells.

"With low interest rates, money is affordable to the general public. That has a bearing on how much demand the homebuilders have on their product," Smith said. As a result, he said, the emphasis is sometimes on quantity rather than quality.

Third-party or phased inspections like Smith does have been

increasing in the Metroplex. This newfound niche, inspectors say, is the result of the breakneck speed at which houses are assembled in a unslowed sector of the economy, and the lack of statewide building standards or licensing requirements.

In this environment, subcontractors working in new territory are sometimes unfamiliar with the local building codes, they said.

"In the state of Texas, builders aren't licensed. Building codes vary from municipality to municipality," Hemsell said. "It's really a hodge-podged, patched-together system. There could be a tremendous change in the code."

A home inspection can cost about \$750 to \$900 and up, depending on the square footage and how long it takes to haggle out problems.

Hemsell said he never intended to get into phased home inspections. But as more and more customers requested the service in the past two years, he's given in. He estimates that phased inspections are now 10 percent of his business.

Aaron Miller of Aaron's Home Inspections in Garland said, "It's a growing market for us."

Miller said the third-party inspection portion of his business has increased fourfold in the last five years, and he does about 420 home inspections a year.

The popularity of construction inspections has grown in the last decade, particularly in fast-growing real estate markets, said Mark Cramer, past president of the American Society of Home Inspectors. Cramer, who lives near St. Petersburg, Fla., said he started making phased inspections after customers asked for them in the wake of Hurricane Andrew.

The hurricane's damage revealed hundreds of houses that were not built to storm standards in Florida.

"People are seeing how their houses are being built, and they're finding that their houses aren't being built the best way," he said.

Third-party inspectors usually have some construction experience and expertise, and homeowners should check their references.

Smith was once a project man-

ager for a builder and later worked in a homebuilder's warranty department. He said he has learned what goes wrong as a house ages. Many of his clients have experienced that, too.

"More often than not, they are people who have been down the new-home road at least one time," Smith said.

Hemsell said he finds most of the problems in the grey area between the point where the work of one subcontractor ends and that of another begins. Smith said that he often finds that home products aren't installed to manufacturer specifications or that the lumber is of poor quality.

Hiring a third-party inspector can give a client peace of mind, said Steve Wall, president of Choice Homes, the Metroplex's largest builder.

"We've seen that there are more third-party inspections than there used to be. We encourage that, because it's a benefit to the homeowner," he said. "We're certainly not infallible."

On the job site, some builders view the third-party inspector as an asset, but others see him as a gadfly, Miller said.

"They try to get across to the client that the city inspectors take care of that job, but the city inspector is simply inspecting for code compliance. That's a minimum building code," Miller said.

Diane Trammell said that her third-party consultant and the builder got along great — even if the builder was a little miffed.

"At first, the builder was offended that we hired an inspector," Trammell said. "His feelings were hurt, but Jeff saved us a lot of headaches."

Andrea Jares, (817) 685-3851  
ajares@star-telegram.com

## HOME CONFERENCE

Home inspections will be one of the items covered at the Star-Telegram's First Time Home Buyer's Conference:

Saturday  
9 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Arlington Convention Center