

Even High-End Homes Can Hide Huge Flaws

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The cabinets hung precariously to the walls, each held in place by only a handful of nails. Then there were the crack in the foundation, the termite damage in the floor joists and the furnace that had been spilling combustion fumes into the living space.

By the time Hollis Brown, a home inspector based in [Bethesda](#), finished his five-hour inspection of the sprawling [Fairfax](#) house, he had also uncovered appliances that someone had set in place but never hooked up, plumbing fixtures that did not work and an attic bare of insulation. His report documented more than \$100,000 in estimated construction defects.

This was no rundown fixer-upper. It was a "new" house -- built on an unstable 1940s foundation, it turned out -- carrying a \$1 million-plus price tag.

The mansions and million-dollar residences dotting the Washington area aren't immune to such problems, inspectors say. Instead, these homes, which are often larger and more complicated than traditional residences, often have more -- and more serious -- problems.

"Don't get me wrong now. This is not the norm," Brown said of the problems he uncovered in that Fairfax house. "Most new homes today are well built, and most builders are reputable businesspeople. The problem is that we never know when the odd situation is going to present itself, and the risks are significant."

This is especially true in high-end homes, where buyers are throwing around millions of dollars.

J.D. Grewell, an inspector in [Silver Spring](#), once worked with a homeowner who bought a pricey rowhouse in the District. The house had been extensively remodeled, and its new owner was particularly impressed that she could open the front door and see all the way to the back walls.

The owner's problems started when she hired a contractor for some simple remodeling. The contractor took a quick look around the house before delivering

the bad news: That nice view from one end of the rowhouse to the other was made possible only because the original remodeling crews had removed all of the load-bearing walls, beams and posts.

The new owner, now in a panic, called Grewell to inspect the house. Grewell estimated that it would take \$45,000 to replace the beams and posts. "If she doesn't get that fixed, worst case, her second floor can fall in," Grewell said. "I told her not to put anything up on that second floor."

Frank Lesh, a [Chicago](#) area inspector, said the most shocking problem he's seen in a high-end house was during a presale inspection of a multimillion-dollar residence near his home town.

The owners had the house built with four bathrooms. The owners, though, had never used one of the bathrooms upstairs. They'd also never so much as stepped into the bathroom's whirlpool tub.

One of Lesh's jobs as an inspector, though, is to fill any whirlpool tubs with water, switch on the jets and see what happens. In this case, the whirlpool jets didn't work. That wasn't a big problem. But when Lesh pulled the drain, he instantly heard water pouring down the second-floor stairs. He and the horrified owners could only watch as hundreds of gallons of water saturated the ceiling, walls and carpeting.

It turns out that the plumbers who installed the tub never attached its drain to any other plumbing.

Lesh, who is president of the American Society of Home Inspectors, the largest trade group for the home-inspection industry, blames such defects on the weakening relationships between contractors and their subcontractors. "Most builders hire subcontractors for virtually everything today," he said. "Years ago, they tended to work with their own guys. Now they don't know who the guys are. So they often don't know what kind of work is going on."

These problems happen for another reason common to owners of houses at all

price levels: Sometimes owners ignore maintenance schedules. The problem is magnified in larger homes, which have more maintenance issues for owners to ignore.

"We see a lot of houses, even the most expensive ones, that have not been properly maintained," said **Jacques Sirvain**, an inspector in [Potomac](#). "Over the years, systems are going down, and owners don't see it. Even in the higher-end market, very often people are not following the maintenance schedules for each season. They're not even checking the smoke detectors. And when a house is bigger, they miss even more things."

Other inspectors have discovered that what originally look like high-end amenities are actually expensive problems.

John Vaughn, based in [Monrovia](#), Md., once inspected a house in the \$5 million range. Everything was fine until Vaughn stepped into the back yard, which featured an extensive patio with suspended walkways and retaining walls leading to a large pool house. The retaining walls were collapsing. The walkways were crumbling. No one had compacted the soil before installing the patio, so its surface was cracked and buckling.

What would have been a tremendous asset to the buyers, then, had become a tremendous burden. Vaughn estimated that the owners would have to spend \$80,000 or more to replace the crumbling concrete.

For those still doubting the wisdom of inspecting those multimillion-dollar mansions, Nick Gromicko, founder of the National Association of Certified Home Inspectors, has one more example of what buyers might find in even the priciest of homes. Gromicko once found the remnants of a busy methamphetamine lab in one of the high-end houses he inspected. Because such labs can leave behind harmful residue, Gromicko had to list the evidence on his report.

"Maybe that's how those owners had enough money for a high-end house," Gromicko said.