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House Detectives Inspection Firms Find Defects, Give Buyers Peace of Mind

By Scott Craven

Consumers tend to believe, perhaps not unjustly, that spending \$100,000 or more plus interest over the next 30 years guarantees them a defect-free new home.

They likely would be disappointed to find their air conditioner was dumping condensate water into the attic. Or that framing was installed improperly so that very soon the roof would begin to sag.

David Swartz, President of Advantage Inspective Service in Phoenix, rarely find such glaring mistakes when he is hired by buyers to inspect new homes. But he always finds something.

Few people moving into a newly built home consider paying for an inspection. Their trust lies with the developer and city inspectors who make sure municipal codes are met. As a result, Swartz says, less than 5 percent of his business involves new homes.

Inspectors go where no buyers would be caught dead, such as on the roof and in the attic. They make a note of everything, often filling 10 pages with notes and suggested repairs.

That's a far cry from buyers who are proud of themselves for catching a nick in the drywall.

Doug Mittendorf of Phoenix hired Swartz and was surprised to find that the water pressure to his new home was so high it could have caused plumbing problems. It wasn't the pressure that shocked him but the fact that someone knew to check it.

Mittendorf, a real-estate agent, says he recommends inspections for all of his clients, whether buying a used or new home.

"It was invaluable to me," Mittendorf says. "Things were found I never would've thought about, and I've been in the real-estate business a long time. And these were problems that may not have been evident until the two-year warranty expired, and then I would have been out of luck."

Swartz steps slowly through a home still months from completion. His eyes move slowly across the maze of wires, ducts and two-by-fours. He spots a pipe that isn't anchored and makes a note of it.

Not matter this is an expensive custom home built on a north Phoenix hillside. Cost is no guarantee of a perfect job. In fact, nothing can guarantee a perfect job.

Mistakes have ranged from failure to anchor pipes within walls, which can result in hammering sounds each time a faucet is shut off, to fault wiring and structural defects.

Swartz makes a list of the defects and gives it to the buyer. It's up to the buyer to make sure the builder does the repairs, although Swartz says developers usually comply.

One reason errors aren't caught by the developer is the sheer number of homes under construction, says Rebecca Morris who, with her husband, John, owns Aztech Building Inspection of Phoenix.

The more homes that go up, the larger the number of cracks through which mistakes may slip.

"There are so many new homes going up, and builders have only so many supervisors to oversee everything," Morris says. "Sometimes that supervision is spread thin, so they can't catch everything because there's so much to do."

Morris says the bulk of her company's business involves older homes, where many of the mistakes that are found date to the home's construction.

"We find bad wiring and duct work that obviously hasn't been touched since the home was built," Morris says. "Repairs by that time can be costly. First-time home buyers are so excited to be moving in they usually don't give enough thought to the standards the home should be up to. That's when they need a professional."

Dan O'Connor wasn't interested in hiring an inspector to look at his home under construction until wind blew down much of the framing. The developer insisted on using the same trusses, saying the damage could be repaired. O'Connor wanted new materials used.

"After that, I didn't trust the builder, so I insisted on an inspector," O'Connor says. "He (the inspector) kept an eye on the rest of the process. If nothing else, it gave me peace of mind, and I'd certainly have an inspection done if and when I have another new home built."

Because it is inspectors' job to catch mistakes, they are not always welcomed on-site, Swartz says. He tries to do his job when construction workers aren't present. At the very least, he'll avoid the home if a foreman or superintendent is there.

He's working to convince developers he's not the enemy. After all, Swartz says, he's providing a service at no cost to builders. He's informing them of mistakes that will cost more to repair in the long run.

One inspection of a new luxury home revealed that a subcontractor had used aluminum wiring, which was allowed by that particular with but was a greater fire hazard than copper.

Swartz notified the builder, who was unaware that aluminum wiring was being used. The subcontractor was eventually let go.

“We’re a watchdog trying to ensure the buyer gets the best possible product,” Swartz says. “But some builders see us as annoying nitpickers.”

Not David Combs of Integrity Builders. He hires private inspectors to go over each home he builds. Errors are inevitable, he says, and it’s much easier to repair them before carpet and tile are installed and painting is finished.

The inspections have netted numerous, though minor, errors, Combs says. And that’s fine because he knows mistakes are going to slip past overworked municipal inspectors.

“just having an extra pair of eyes go over everything is a help,” Combs says. “Buying a house is the largest capital outlay you’re ever going to make, and hiring an inspector is relatively inexpensive. It’s the cheapest insurance you can buy.”