



## HOW TO CHECK PLUMBING & ELECTRICAL WHEN BUYING A HOME

When purchasing a Memphis townhouse, detached home, or condo, it can be tempting to focus on the superficial aspects like granite countertops or hardwood floors. As a homeowner, however, you will be responsible for all aspects of the home's integrity, including the parts that are vital to the operation of the home. So, it's important when you go to viewings that you look for issues – particularly in the plumbing and electrical systems – that could end up costing you thousands of dollars in repairs down the road.

There are several red flags that you should look for when you go to your first viewing. If the home passes your initial assessment, you can hire a home inspector who will look for more advanced issues.

### **Water Heater**

First, take a close look at the hot water tank. Make a note of the age of the tank, the heat source, and the size. Most hot water tanks last around 10 years, so if the one in your prospective home is close to that age, you may need to replace it in the upcoming years, which will cost in the thousands if you hire it out.

You should also take note of the size of the hot water tank. In some

cases, if the home only has two residents, the owners may have opted to install a smaller hot water tank that won't be large enough for a growing family. Generally speaking, your hot water tank should be at least 50 gallons for a family of four, so consider that if you have a large family.

### **Toilets**

You should inspect the toilets and the floor around them to ensure they are in good condition. First, make sure the toilets aren't running, which can lead to very high water bills. If they are, this is an inexpensive do-it-yourself repair.

Second, make sure the flooring around the base of the toilet is firm and not soft underfoot. Flooring that feels soft or has a "bounce" to it can indicate that the toilet has leaked and rotted the subfloor, which is much more expensive to repair depending on the extent of the damage.

### **Tubs**

If the home has a jetted whirlpool tub – buyer beware. While these luxurious tubs were a popular addition to bathroom remodels in the 90's, current research suggests that a jetted whirlpool tub is extremely unhygienic and can harbor harmful bacteria.

On top of that, the piping systems in whirlpool tubs are notorious for developing leaks over time, and they're often undetectable until they start staining the drywall in your ceiling or leaking into the basement.

### **Drain Lines**

If your home passes your cursory plumbing examination, it's still a good idea to call in a home inspector who can do a more thorough assessment of the less accessible parts of your plumbing system. Hiring a home inspector is especially important if you are considering purchasing an older home. One important aspect of the home your inspector will check is the main drain line. Your home inspector can locate and assess the integrity of the main drain line to ensure it is in good condition. Drain lines are extremely expensive to dig up and repair if they fail, so don't skip this part of the home inspection.

## **Type of Piping**

There are many types of piping used in older homes, from cast iron to copper to aluminum, but there is one type of piping your home inspector should alert you to immediately, and that is polybutylene piping. This plastic piping was widely used between 1980 and 1995, but manufacturing defects have caused widespread failure of this product, resulting in leaks and millions of dollars in damage to homes across North America. If your home has polybutylene piping, you should negotiate a lower purchase price to reflect the cost to have it removed.

## **Electrical Panel**

For homes built in the first half of the 20th century, the electrical requirements for a home were much lower than they are today. As a result, many older homes have undersized electrical panels. When viewing a home for the first time, check the electrical panel. It should be at least 100 amps, but 200 amps are ideal. Upgrading your home's electrical service will cost thousands of dollars, so this is a great item to work into your offer if the panel turns out to be undersized.

## **GFCI Outlets**

Ground fault circuit interrupter outlets protect you from unintended electrical shocks in areas that have water present, like bathrooms and kitchens. If there is an imbalance in the current, the GFCI outlet detects this and automatically trips the circuit, preventing you from being hurt. Check for outlets in your potential home and make a note if any need to be added by the seller before sale. Since GFCI outlets are required by code in bathrooms and kitchens, their absence can also be a good indicator of potential electrical code violations in other parts of the home.

## **Knob and Tube Wiring**

If the home you are considering purchasing has an unfinished basement, you may be able to check for knob and tube wiring yourself, but if not, this is a job for your home inspector. Knob and tube wiring was a

commonly used method to wire a home from 1880 to the 1930's. It consists of sheathed wire supported by porcelain tubes. Knob and tube wiring is widely considered an outdated and dangerous wiring method today as it is susceptible to overheating and damage by rodents and renovations. The presence of it in a home may affect your ability to obtain home insurance, so it's important for you and your home inspector to determine the presence or absence of knob and tube wiring.

If you do find any of these plumbing or electrical issues, but you're still in love with the home, you don't necessarily have to walk away from the purchase. Depending on the state of the housing market in your area, you may be able to negotiate with the seller. You could either ask for a lower purchase price or ask that the work is completed before closing.

Whatever you choose, it's important not to overlook these issues, even if the home is perfect in every other way. Often, ignoring the issue will just make them worse and costlier to repair.

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