

Viewing Homes: What to look for

Once you and your agent begin to identify properties that fit your criteria (including price range), it's time to go and see them in person. While touring houses can be fun, it's important to view them with a critical eye. Looking beyond the cosmetics and the floorplan, to the things that could potentially be major issues, can save you time and effort.

Here are the major items you should inspect or consider, in just about any property.

Exterior:

First, always park in the driveway (if there is one). So many people don't - which is very odd because if you buy the place, you're going to drive in and out of that driveway A LOT. Is it steep? Will it be hazardous in the winter? Do you have to back out into a busy street (which could be quite dangerous)? Is there a dip at the bottom where you'll scrape the front end of your car every time? Or is it a shared driveway and, if so, how do you feel about sharing access or snow removal duties with people you don't yet know? Some buyers will not even consider a home with a shared driveway.

Take in the overall picture. Is the roof or wall slanting in a way it shouldn't? Look for tall trees that will need maintenance. The ground should slope away from the house so rain water and snow melt are carried away from the house, not toward it - especially if the house has a basement.

Look at the gutters and downspouts. Again, water should be directed away from the house and not allowed to pool near the foundation.

Finally, look closely at the roof. One sign of age and/or wear and tear is the condition of the shingles. Most roofs are made of asphalt shingle. Look to see if the edges are curling up. The long, flat thing on the roof peak is a ridge vent - which is good. If there isn't one of these, look for a gable vent, located on the side of the house where the roof peaks, and/or soffit vents under the eaves. Vents keep air flowing which helps keep mold from growing in the attic.

Interior:

The main systems you should be able to see are the heating/cooling, water heater and sump pump (if there's a basement).

HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) - Look at the condition. Is it dusty and rusted? If so, chances are it hasn't been well maintained. Look for the maintenance sticker where the

technician writes the date the unit was inspected and/or serviced. You can also usually find the date of manufacture on one of a few labels. A furnace doesn't last much longer than 20 years.

Water heater - similar to the HVAC system. Look for obvious signs of neglect. A gas water heater must have a hood and pipe to carry exhaust out of the house. The manufacture date can be much harder to find on a water heater.

Boiler (for home heating oil) - again, overall condition/cleanliness and the date of manufacture is what you're looking for. If the house is heated with oil, look for the storage tank either in the basement or just outside the house. It's big - 275 gallons - so it's hard to miss. If you smell fuel, that could be a problem.

Sump pump - let your nose guide you when you enter a basement. Take note of any musty smell, which could be a problem - or not. Cinder block walls are porous, so you'll always have some humidity in the basement (poured concrete walls are preferable). This could be difficult to determine if the basement is finished. In the case of mustiness, look for a de-humidifier (looks like a small a/c).

Also look for the sump pump, which is usually in a corner. There will be a sump pit (a hole) in which the sump pump sits. As the pit fills up, the water is automatically pumped outside via a pipe. Look for signs of the pit having overflowed. In fact, check the base of all the walls for signs of water damage. Slight staining around the sump pit is probably no big deal. Water stains and mold spores (black spots) all around the basement probably is a big deal.

Windows – look to see what material they're made from and their condition. Try opening and closing a few. Old windows might be single pane, which is not energy efficient. Wood windows tend to look the best but are susceptible to moisture damage if not well maintained. Vinyl windows are very common and tend to be quite efficient. A window can be expensive to replace and once you start counting, the cost to replace them all can be cost prohibitive.

Electrical panel – open the panel door and look at the overall condition. You'll be able to tell if it's old. Check to see that all circuit breakers (or fuses) are labeled. It's a huge pain to try to find which breaker controls which outlet or switch in the middle of a nighttime power outage. Also look for the amperage (often on the main switch at the top). A medium sized house with 3 or 4 bedrooms should have at least 150 amp service. Any less and there may not be enough power coming into the house for your needs.