A DO-IT-YOURSELF CHECKLIST FOR THE HOME BUYER

Australian Institute of Architects

The family home is traditionally the biggest and most important investment that most Australians make. Unfortunately, for many, their dream home turns into a nightmare because of unexpected repair costs, overcapitalising through poorly thought out improvements or for paying too much in the first place.

Archicentre, the building advisory service of the Australian Institute of Architects, is Australia's largest and most experienced provider of pre-purchase inspections, having checked over 400,000 homes for prospective buyers.

This checklist is a handy guide to help home buyers purchase their homes wisely.

Four Key Points for a Profitable Investment

- Buy at or below the market. Undertake research to ensure that your home is similarly priced to others in the area. Some buyers report negotiating $10,000 or more off the price with an Archicentre prepurchase inspection.
- Don't buy a lemon. Have it professionally checked or at least use this checklist. Archicentre inspections are backed by $15,000 structural and pest guarantees and professional indemnity insurance.
- Buy with improvement potential. Download Archicentre's **Do-It-Yourself Design Guide for the Home Renovator** for home renovation and improvement guidelines. Archicentre's pre-purchase inspections for home buyers are undertaken by architects who can give you on the spot advice on improvement potential.
- Do your homework. Become familiar with stamp duty, mortgage registration fees, transfer fees and moving costs. All of these can be determined from the internet and may cost tens of thousands of dollars in addition to your deposit.

Australia's Lemons

Archicentre keeps statistics on house defects in every state and suburb. They vary from state to state, by construction type and age. Following are the Australia wide incidences of the most common and expensive faults and their possible repair costs in average size homes.

Cracking	50%	$350 - $65,000
Roofing	49%	$500 - $48,000
Timber Rot	43%	$200 - $15,000
Rising Damp	34%	$1,500 - $30,000
Electrics	32%	$250 - $9,000
Illegal Building	29%	$0 - $80,000
Stumps/Piers	28%	$350 - $24,000
Framing	20%	$0 - $15,000
Water supply	14%	$550 - $8,000

For more detailed information on repair costs, download the **Archicentre Cost Guide**.

Cover Ups

Unfortunately, when some home owners realise the cost of repairing faults in their homes, they undertake extensive cover ups and then put their homes on the market hoping that prospective buyers don't discover them until it is too late. The following are the most common cover up techniques.

- Props or bricks holding up the floor instead of stumps or piers.
- Painted roofing hiding rusted corrugated iron sheets.
- Props in the roof space holding up broken or termite damaged framing.
- Freshly painted, wallpapered, or panelled walls hiding rising damp or structural cracking.
- Painted tin concealing rotten weatherboards and windows.

What You Will Need

So you've seen the house you want. But you want to make sure that it's not a lemon.

Before embarking on your inspection, you will need to take a ladder, a long shank screwdriver, a good torch, a tape measure, a mask and a power point tester (available from most hardware and electrical stores).

It is also advisable to wear old clothes or overalls.

Please take care when inspecting the property. Never walk on roofs and don't leave finger marks or cause damage. Archicentre checks many more items than those listed below and uses some specialist testing devices, but the following is a useful guide.

The Inspection – What to Look For

The Garden

- Check the condition of fences and gates. Examine the base of posts, the bottom "plinth board" and at the junction of rails and posts for rot.
- Look for large trees too close to the house. These could cause structural subsidence, particularly in brick or brick veneer homes with timber floors.
- Make sure water run-off from the garden doesn't flow underneath the house, causing excessive damp conditions.
- It is also worthwhile noting the location of poisonous trees and shrubs (such as Rhus or Oleanders) which could harm children and pets. Download the **Archicentre Kidsafe Home Safety Checklist** for other potential dangers to children.

Out-Buildings

- Check the structural condition and water-tightness of garages and sheds. Look for water stains on timbers and metal sheeting.
- Look for fire hazards, loose or broken power points and badly wired electrical fittings.

Outside Walls

- Carefully inspect the walls to ensure that they are straight. Sagging weatherboards could mean timber stumps have rotted, or concrete stumps or brick piers have subsided. Minor cracking in brickwork can often be ignored, but large cracks or bowed brick walls could mean an expensive under-pinning job may be required. Download Archicentre's **Cracking in Brickwork** technical sheet if you are unsure.
- Check for rotten weatherboards, windows, doors and verandah posts.
- Thoroughly check the condition of the mortar between the bricks. If it has been eroded away it should be cleaned out and re-capped by a bricklayer. Different coloured mortar indicates a repaired brick wall, which could be a shoddy patch-up.
- Brick and brick veneer houses should have plenty of sub-floor ventilators beneath floors. Inadequate ventilation and dampness are the major causes of many sub-floor problems.
- Look for buckled, badly fitted or water-stained eaves, which may be an indication of roof or gutter problems.

On the Roof

- Lean your ladder against the guttering and look for a wavy roof line. This may indicate a structural problem (see "roofspace").
- Look for broken roof tiles and loose ridge and valley tiles allowing bird and possum entry as well as water leaks.
- Check that corrugated iron sheets are in good condition and well nailed down.
- Ensure that valley and eaves guttering are free from holes and rust. Even small holes can create large leaks. Extensive replacement is often necessary.
- Make sure that flues and chimneys are structurally safe and the flashings around them are secure against water penetration.

Under Timber Floors

- Look under the floor for props or bricks holding up the floor instead of stumps, piers or dwarf walls.
- Check for subsiding stumps or brick piers, or whether excessive wedging has occurred between these structural supports and the floor bearers. With timber stumps, look for stumps with the heaviest water stain and dig away up to 100mm of the soil below ground level. Check for rot by scraping the stump and seeing how much breaks away. This can indicate the approximate life expectancy of the stumps.
- Inspect timber framing and floors generally for rot, mould and evidence of borers. Borer attack in some species of pine may be due to Anobiid borers. These will eventually destroy the timber and should be treated immediately.

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- Check to see that the earth is not excessively wet. Dampness problems accompanied by inadequate ventilation encourage rot, borer and termite attack.
- Look carefully for termite "shelter tubes". Termites build mud shelter tubes, between 5mm and 50mm up stumps or piers and brick walls to connect their nests in the ground to the timber on which they are feeding.
- If you are in any way unsure about borers or termites, book an Archicentre Pest Inspection or download the Archicentre **Termites and Borers** technical sheet.

In the Roofspace

- Look for sagging roof framing, cracked or broken tiles, rusty iron roofing and leaking ridges or valleys.
- Check for shoddy or damaged electrical wiring. Do not touch!
- A pungent odour or rat-like droppings could indicate the presence of vermin. Possums can damage ceilings and should be removed. (It is illegal to poison them.)
- Note whether or not the ceiling has been insulated.

Concrete Floors

- Although the underside of concrete floors cannot be inspected, check if there is any exposed perimeter to ensure that the plastic waterproofing membrane is not exposed, but protected by fibre cement or a similar covering. Concrete slabs are susceptible to termite intrusion

Inside

These checks should be carried out in each room of the house.

Timber Floors

- At regular intervals, jump lightly on the floor to detect any rotten floorboards, borer infestation or looseness in the floor framing. Check to see if the floors are level, or if there are gaps between the floor and skirting. If stumps or piers are sinking, floors will always fall away from fireplaces or brick walls. This is an invaluable check in houses which have been recently renovated, but not structurally upgraded.

Concrete Floors

- Look for signs of dampness, such as lifting or buckling floor tiles and rotten carpet. Dampness in concrete slabs can be hard to trace and expensive to remedy.
- If cracks in the concrete are millimetres wide, they could indicate a significant structural problem.

Walls

- Check that walls are straight and true. Deviations could be either warped framing timbers, or the onset of structural problems - re-check footings or stumps.
- Look for cracks and general movement and be particularly wary of freshly painted or wallpapered areas. In these cases, look for evidence of recently filled cracks, a sign of sub-floor structural problems.
- Carefully inspect brick walls for signs of dampness. This may be evident through the presence of white or brownish deposits. Rising dampness may also cause skirting and architraves to rot, and paint and wallpaper to lift. Rising dampness or salt damp can cause health problems. Download Archicentre's **Treatment of Dampness** technical sheet.
- Tap solid brick walls for a hollow sound or a change in tone. Both could indicate a plastered or rendered-over patch-up of a significant rising damp problem.
- Look for cracks beside chimneys and look for doorways and windows that aren't square, or are jamming. These usually indicate structural subsidence.
- Lightly tap walls and tiled surfaces with the handle of your screwdriver. A hollow sound could mean loose plaster or tiles.

Ceilings

- Check that ceilings are straight and true, and look for cracks or signs of movement at the cornices. These could indicate roof or wall-framing deficiencies, possibly illegal wall-removal.
- Look for water stains and mould growth which could indicate excessive condensation or roof leaks.

Windows and Ventilators

- Make sure that the windows can be opened and check for broken window panes. The sash cords in older double hung windows may be broken or need replacing.
- Check for excessive condensation and mould growth on windows and walls. Locate the source of musty smells. The causes could be: inadequate ventilation, sub-floor dampness, roof leaks, lack of insulation or often a combination of these.

Electrical Systems

- Check that the light switches and power points work.
- Test all power points with the tester. This will indicate outlets that are incorrectly wired. The most common problem is un-earthed power points.
- Look for signs of burns around switches, fittings and fuses.
- Wiring in many older homes is quite sound, provided that it is left intact. If additional power points or lights are required, the entire electrical system may need replacing.
- If you are at all in doubt about the condition of the electrical system, you should have it checked by an expert.

Plumbing System

- Check all plumbing fittings for cracks or leaks.
- Test the water pressure in hot and cold taps. It is worthwhile turning on several taps simultaneously to ascertain if there is any appreciable pressure drop.
- Partially fill the bath or laundry tubs and observe whether or not the water drains away properly. A sluggish flow or gurgling in the pipes could indicate that the sewer drains are damaged or blocked.
- Look for damp ground in the vicinity of the drains, which could be caused by cracks or leaks in pipes, needing replacement.

General

- Examine the house for appropriate room layout, orientation to the sun, views, proximity to neighbours, traffic noise, and if not optimal, whether the house can be improved at an affordable cost.

Renovations and Extensions

If the house has recently been renovated, or if extensions have been carried out, check with the local council to ensure that a building permit was obtained. Illegal alterations could become your responsibility, particularly if they contravene the building regulations.

If you are buying with a view to doing extensions, check council requirements for set-back distances, maximum site coverage and restrictions on types of construction. You may need professional advice.

Archicentre's Design Concept Service can provide a low cost feasibility study for your proposed renovation. Thousands of Australians have successfully completed renovations, extensions and improvements commencing with one of these services.

If your intended home has a reasonable bill of health, it is worthwhile contacting the local council to ensure that it is not likely to be affected by future road widening, re-zoning or other planning proposals.

Your solicitor will advise you on what action you need to take to ensure that there are no problems with titles, contracts and finance.
If you get into difficulties with your home inspection, or would rather have an expert do it for you, Archicentre can be contacted throughout Australia on **1300 13 45 13** or www.archicentre.com.au

We will carry out a complete inspection and report and they can also give you advice on intended extensions or renovations.

National Telephone 1300 13 45 13

www.archicentre.com.au

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