

BATHROOM INSPECTIONS

By
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A failed bathroom inspection could be a “revolting development” for the home inspector if practiced “**field procedures**” are not followed. Like every other system and component in the home, the inspection of each and every bathroom must be orchestrated with specific standards of practice that direct the inspector to investigate, evaluate and disclose conditions observed at the time of inspection. In this article, I have attempted to touch upon some of the field practices that I routinely follow when inspecting a bathroom, plus I have inserted a little levity for the novice and seasoned inspector to interpret. So, I invite you to make a “pit stop”, “see a man about a horse” or simply read between the lines. (And remember, don’t leave the seat up!)

Firstly, I advise that you practice a little “**risk management**” by always remembering to **C.Y.A.** Anytime there are obstacles that prevent you from doing a thorough inspection, such obstacles should be recorded in your report and further investigation should be recommended. In regards to the bathroom inspection, a partial list of such obstacles might include:

- Sink cabinet was full of storage
- Water was shut-down at
- Broken fixture
- Clogged drain
- Pressure piping leaks
- No electricity
- Out of paper, etc.

Let me write this article according to my “field practice” for a simple 3-fixture bathroom. Starting at the bathroom door, does the door open & close? Does the door have a lock release that works from the inside and an emergency hole for Mom or Dad to use from the outside when junior is crying and stuck in the bathroom? Teach your client what that little peep hole (not pee hole) in the handle is for, and you may gain one more feather in your hat (provided you can find the key)!

By now, you may have already turned on the light. But, let’s back up a step. Does the light work? Is there adequate lighting? Is the switch too close to the tub or shower? Does each switch work? Are there mystery switches? Cover plates, etc. Enough already walk into the darn bathroom and invite the two buyers, brokers, parents and the owner to the party.

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Once inside, I suggest that you start by looking up at the ceiling or you may quickly be distracted by your client's questions about the fixtures and those ugly stains. We all know that bathrooms are often stacked one above the other and that bathroom ceilings frequently exhibit water stains, water damage, mildew, etc. So, take out the "mag-light" and / or the moisture meter and look up at the ceiling or an apple may fall on your head. Don't miss the drywall tape separation, the peeling paint and the mildew. C.Y.A.

Say, does the bathroom have a heat source and a means of ventilation? Nice looking fan.

Just look at the sharp edges on that broken soap tray and the tape & plastic on the shower wall.

OK, let's move on to the fixtures. LISTEN to these "words of wisdom". See that sink, see that toilet, see that tub? Well, **DON'T TURN THEM ON YET!** Have you ever turned on a faucet only to find that there are no drain pipes attached? Have you ever flushed a toilet without first lifting the seat to see that it was clogged? I think you get the picture. Nothing like a little property damage to rain on your parade, ruin your day, dampen your smile – that's enough. Grab a towel!

Now that you are educated, lets sneak up to the sink and choose wisely. Take hold of the corners of the sink cabinet or pedestal sink and try to rock it slightly. If movement is detected, record it. Pull the sink stopper up and down. Most of the time the handle goes up and down nicely, but it is not connected to anything – Mrs. Buyer may be most upset when she is unable to soak her delicate items in the sink because it and your report won't hold water! NO, don't turn the water on, yet! Just take a moment and check the faucet, handles and "reostat" – you know what to look for or you would not be a home inspector. Did you notice the missing caulking around the sink rim and the water damaged countertop?

The creaking & snap-crackle and pop sounds you hear are your knees as you kneel down in front of the sink to pray. Yes, you do need to get down on the floor and open the sink cabinet door to get a good look inside. Bending over to look under the sink will not position you to see all of the items of interest and only leads to embarrassing flatulence! (Don't worry, you can stay behind and screw the door back on the cabinet after the inspection.) Yes, we all know what kinds of H.B.A aids folks store under the sink, but we are not inspecting those. You need the flashlight in one hand (yes, turn it on), and the other hand to move enough things aside so that the doctor can perform an internal examination. Take a gander at the shut-off valves, pressure pipes, piping in an outside wall, DWV pipes, S-trap, rust, corrosion, amateur piping, bandages on the pipes, unique leak collection devices, pitch, etc. Don't worry about the completely water damaged cabinet floor or the holes knocked out in the drywall within the cabinet as your client will never care and never will notice! NO, don't test the shut-off valves or you may own

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them as well. Have you bumped your head yet today?

Next, leave the sink cabinet doors open, turn the faucet on and monitor the pressure piping and waste piping for leaks. At this time, you may need to demonstrate that home inspectors have the fastest reaction time in the word and that “Murphy’s Law” of surprise leaks is a constant risk in our profession. If things are dry inside, move upwards and inspect the sink drainage. Now try the stopper mechanism and see if the sink bowl holds water. So what if there is a hairline crack in the sink bowl, if it is not leaking who cares! C.Y.A. If you care to fill the sink and test the function of the overflow, happy risk management to you.

What’s that you say, the water smells like rotten eggs? No problem, just hold your nose and move on. By the way, does this home have public water or well water? Try the hot water, you know, that leaking and corroded valve “on the right”. Next, take out your handy-dandy rectal thermometer that is stored in a convenient warm place and measure and “record” the temperature of the hot water. Make sure you tell your client that they are very fortunate to be buying a house with water hot enough to make coffee directly from the tap! Just look at that steam. Draw a happy face on the mirror. C.Y.A.

Leave the cold water running and head for the head, I mean the toilet. On the way, don’t forget to pick-up that bathroom area rug and record all the missing tiles beneath it. The sharp edges of those cracked and missing tiles are great for scraping calluses from your feet. Next, press your feet on the floor on each side of the toilet to check for water damage to the sub floor. Do you notice a spongy feel or colorful yellow water bubbling beneath the soles of your feet? (Just imagine sitting on the John and suddenly finding yourself in the basement, up to your neck in And picking ceramic splinters out of you’re!)

Turn on your flashlight again and examine the toilet bowl inside and out, then the tank. If any hairline cracks are noted, then recommend urgent toilet replacement to prevent possible personal injury and / or water damage. (But it’s not leaking says the broker.) Take a look at the shut-off valve and riser pipe. Yes, the one with the tape on it. Don’t sweat the sweating tank, just use your finger to write “Kilroy was here” on the front side of the tank and move on to greater challenges. Oh by the way, you may want to stop a moment and retrieve your digital camera from the bowl!

At this point, your own personal hygiene must be considered. Putting one’s hands all over someone else’s toilet does not make one healthy, wealthy and wise. I suggest that you lift the seat and use your knees or shins to try and rock the toilet bowl. Any movement should be recorded with an appropriate recommendation for repair. (Advise your clients to install new toilet seats.)

Remove the cracked tank lid and look for the date & signature, you know the one –

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George Washington slept here in 1776! Flush the toilet and monitor the drainage, then examine the fill mechanism as the tank is refilling. Replace the lid, “jiggle the handle” to stop the runaway toilet and follow the water stains to the tub.

Just as you did at the sink and toilet, stop to smell the roses; that is stop and look things over. How are the shower walls protected from water infiltration? Check for eroded grout, loose and missing tiles and suspected hidden moisture damage. (You did bring along your X-ray eyes didn't you?) Did you ever step into a one-piece unit to check for oil canning problems or notice hairline cracks? Are the shower door and that decayed window in the shower area made of tempered safety glass? Do you really want to touch that mildewed and decayed window to test its function? Let's give the tub / shower valves the old “shake test,” and then turn on each faucet individually. Don't forget to document a loose valve assembly or a defective shower door or Mr. Murphy may invite you to court.

If the tub & shower pass your initial scrutiny, then turn on the faucets and monitor the flow rate (divide your heart rate by 10 to get 5 gallons per minute) and the drainage while listening for those old tell-tale gurgling sounds (not your stomach). Test the stopper device and then move on to the diverter valve and the shower. If the stopper assembly is defective, then take a minute to remove your shoe and demonstrate the “big toe” technique.

Did you remember to test the hot water again? Nothing like a nice invigorating cold shower in the morning – clients love them! By the way, that low spout without a one inch air gap will be great for resting your feet on when taking a bath, and those old separate hot & cold valves sure do simplify getting scalded.

Leave the water running at the tub and sink and flush the toilet again to evaluate each fixture for changes in functional flow and drainage. Forget which bathroom is the highest, perform simultaneous fixture testing in each bathroom in the home. Nothing beats the surprise achieved when a shower suddenly gets hot after the toilet is flushed or suddenly goes cold when the washing machine is filling. Did you notice that the cold water pressure was OK but the hot water pressure was weak? No problem, just advise your client to run a hose to the neighbor's house in the middle of the night!

Thank goodness this hypothetical bathroom does not have a whirlpool bath or a shower stall for after listening to all of that running water; you may need to use the facilities. Do think anyone will notice that hole you accidentally poked in the shower wall?

I am not going to talk about a GFCI because this bathroom has no outlet anyway! All I see is that extension cord running under the door to that loose do-it-yourself light fixture above the sink. Besides, the 2-slot outlet on that fixture is way out of reach!

In all seriousness, we can jest about field procedures, but nothing beats indoor

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plumbing and Standards that foster professionalism. There are numerous other inspection considerations within the bathroom that I did not touch upon in this article. I had no choice, no “TP” again!

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