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HOME INSPECTORS MAGAZINE

Measure and Record the Basement Walls

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Most home inspectors spend a significant amount of effort evaluating basement walls. This is because basement problems can be one of the most expensive problems that a new homeowner may encounter. Home inspectors have learned that if they're unsure about basement problems, they should refer the homebuyer to an expert. In many situations home inspectors, merely record the fact that there may be some bowing or hairline cracks in a basement wall. If the walls are not bowed significantly or the cracks are very small, this usually isn't a serious problem and the home inspector often doesn't express much concern in these situations.

One thing the home inspector should be concerned about is a change in the basement walls after the inspection is over. Very often a home inspector will inspect a basement during the winter, and observe very few problems. If after the inspection, we experience a wet period, or the frost expands the ground, cracks may open up and bowing can significantly increase. A homebuyer may look at the walls a year after the purchase and notice fairly wide cracks and significant bowing and wonder why the home inspector didn't catch this. Many people do not realize that the status of basement walls can change dramatically over a short period of time.

Home inspectors need to protect themselves by recording the amount of bowing and the width of the cracks in the basement. By measuring the amount of bowing with a plumb-bob or level, and by describing the width of the cracks, the home inspector can document the condition of the walls at the time of the inspection.

For example if a wall is within an eighth of an inch out of plumb, this should be noted. Sometimes if a wall is fairly long, the home inspector should consider measuring it in two or more locations. If a crack is a hairline crack, it should not only be described as a hairline crack, but should be recorded as a crack less than thirty-seconds of an inch.

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If there is more than one hairline crack on any one wall, each of these cracks should be measured and documented.

If the home inspector follows these simple procedures and a year later the walls bow in, and the cracks open up, it will be very simple for the inspector to point to the measurements in his report and explain to the buyer what happened.

Without following these procedures, there can be a dispute as to the condition of the walls at the time of inspection. Many times basement walls are painted while the cracks are open and paint gets inside the crack. The inspector then inspects the house while the cracks are closed and does not note any serious problems. Later on the cracks open up. The buyer and possibly an expert may see paint inside the cracks. This can lead them to believe that the cracks were open for a period of time and that the home inspector should have noted this in his or her report.

It also is wise to include in your report that the condition of the walls may change over a period of time. You may want to write this out or include it in your standard language. It is good to orally notify the buyers of this possibility also.

A year after the inspection, buyers won't remember what you told them and they won't remember the condition the basement walls were in at the time of the inspection. They will assume that the cracks and bowing that they see were present at the inspection and that the inspector didn't notice. You protect yourself by including this information in your report. If you do so you are much less likely to be involved in litigation down the road. It is always better to over explain, and include as much information in your report as possible.