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SIGNS OF BASEMENT PROBLEMS WHERE THE WALLS ARE COVERED

Many times a home inspector will inspect a basement, and note that the walls are freshly painted or covered with paneling. Some inspectors then assume that because the walls are covered with paneling, that they are no longer required to inspect these walls for these walls or report anything. The home inspector is correct in believing that they are not required to remove paneling or inspect the areas of a home that aren't readily observable. Very often a home inspector, after seeing a wall covered by paneling or drywall will make some notations and move on.

Sometimes a basement will show signs of recent repairs and a home inspector may assume that the repairs were properly made. The home inspector assumes that the basement repair contractor knew what he was doing and properly made repairs, relieving the home inspector of any further duty to report on the situation. Again, repairs not done properly, can lead to problems for the new homeowner.

Even though basement walls are covered by paneling or drywall, there may be some telltale signs that should put a diligent home inspector on notice of potential issues. If there are enough telltale signs, and the home inspector misses these, the buyer may be upset with the home inspector's job of inspecting the house. Some of the telltale signs of basement problems include the following:

1. Put a level on the paneling or drywall. Unless the furring strips or 2*4 supports behind the paneling were shimmed, the angle of the paneling may reflect the angle of the wall behind it. If the paneling isn't perpendicular, this is a red flag that the wall behind may be out of plumb.
2. Put a level on the electrical box if it protrudes from the paneling. If a wall is bowed, very often an electrical box will be out of plumb. This should put a home inspector on notice of potential problems.

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3. Look above the paneling. If the walls have been braced behind the paneling, the metal braces will extend up passed the paneling to a point where they're attached to a floor joist. These attachments to the floor joist will extend up above the paneling, and may be viewed by raising up a section of the drop ceiling. If metal braces attached to floor joists are more than 3/8" apart, this may indicate that the metal wall supports were not properly installed.
4. Fresh paint is always a suspicious sign. Sometimes people just paint their houses to brighten them up prior to sale. If the only fresh paint in the house is in the basement, this is suspect. If there is fresh paint, the home inspector should take a sharp tool and probed the mortar joints to see if some fresh form of a soft caulk was put in the mortar joints prior to it being painted over. You can even use your fingernail to test this.
5. If there are any signs of fresh or new mortar, anywhere in the basement, this is another situation that should cause the home inspector some concern. The home inspector should measure the mortar joints with a ruler to see if they are uniformly 3/8". If some of the mortar joints are wider than 3/8", this may indicate wide cracking where the cracks were merely tuck pointed.
6. Home inspectors should look for clean out pipes in the floor. These are plastic PVC pipes that protrude from the floor along the wall. Generally these are put in situations where the homeowner had an iron ochre problem. If a house is subject to iron ochre, this requires continued maintenance to keep the drain tile from plugging up and the home inspector should not that. You will also see orange staining in the sump crock.
7. If the floor is freshly painted, particularly where the floor paint continues up a few inches along the wall, this is often a situation where a buyer is attempting to prevent water seepage at the cove joint. This also is a potential red flag that there could be potential basement problems.
8. The home inspector should look for fresh dirt around the outside of the house or newer extensions to downspouts. If the dirt is fresh, or the extensions to the downspouts

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appear new, the seller may have attempted to deal with water problems. If these aren't disclosed on the condition report, the home inspector should mention this to the buyer. People generally don't put dirt around their house or extend their downspouts unless they have a water problem.

9. Another situation the home inspector should look for is the situation where people have painted the walls without removing furniture, pegboards, refrigerators, or cabinets. With a little probing, a home inspector can look behind some of these items to see whether the paint continues behind them. If a homeowner paints around various items in the basement without moving them, the homeowner is often trying to cover-up mold, mildew, or water stains and is not generally interested in permanently improving the appearance of the basement. The diligent homeowner who wants to do a good job painting the basement will move items against the wall and paint behind them. A quick, fast painting, without moving items along the wall is often evidence of a cover-up.
10. Look at the molding along the floor. Does the molding look newer than the paneling? Is the molding unusually wide, that is high from the floor? Very often old molding rots out because of the repeated water entry and instead of replacing the old paneling, a homeowner will just replace the molding. This covers up the rotted edges of the paneling where it meets the floor, and it makes the basement look there has not been a water problem. Plastic molding is usually used in these situations.
11. Look throughout the basement for any areas where wood has contacted the floor. The bottom of the stairs, is one good example, along with wooden cabinet bottoms, bottoms of doors, and the bottom edges of paneling. If there is even a slight bit of evidence of water staining in the past, this may be an indication of problems. It often takes quite a few exposures to water before any stains occur.
12. Consider the number of dehumidifiers being run in a basement. One dehumidifier is acceptable, but if there are two or three being run, this should raise a question. The

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seller should be asked about the number of dehumidifiers being run and the reasons for it.

13. Many houses have a brick apron around the outside of the house that is 3-5 feet high. These bricks rest on a brick ledge which is the top of the basement wall. If the brick apron is bowed, cracked or appears to be anything other than vertical, this can signify that the wall that is sitting on has shifted or moved. This again is an indicator that there may be problems with the basement walls which cannot be viewed because of paneling or drywall.
14. Look at the frames around the basement windows. While people can cover up basement walls with drywall and/or paneling, if a wall is out of plumb, very often the window will be out of plumb. Window frames should be plumb and if they are not this may be an indication that there are problems with the wall.
15. Look for groves or trenches cut into the basement floor. Some creative homeowners, who have water leakage problems, cut groves or trenches in their floor to allow the water to get to the floor drain. Some even pour little curbs in the floor with concrete in order to direct water in a certain direction. The basement may appear to be dry, but if there is evidence of groves, trenching or curbs, be wary of potential basement problems

Even though a basement may be covered with drywall or paneling, there are often telltale signs that indicate potential basement problems. If you see some of these telltale signs, the safest procedure is to point them out in your report and recommend that the homebuyer seek additional information from the seller as well as hire a basement consultant for a second opinion with regard to the basement. Don't assume that because there is paneling, fresh paint or drywall, that you need not inspect the basement any further.