

HOW TO AVOID BUYING A MONEY-PIT

When we are in house-hunting mode we all want to find the perfect property. That means being able to spot the dud and avoid the costly pitfalls that come with buying the lemon.

Here are five traps to look out for when inspecting potential contenders for your dream home.

1. **Illegal building work:** In Australia all building work must comply with the Building Code of Australia (which is administered by the Australian Building Codes Board) and all major renovations and building work must be carried out by a licensed builder (unless the work has been carried out by the owner and is valued at less than \$11,000). Safety is of primary importance when any renovation or building work is carried out and all works must comply with the code.

How to check: Ask for the plans and relevant permits for all add-ons and renovations. If those aren't available find a reputable building inspector who will visit the property. This inspector will also be able to advise you how to bring it up to code, if it's not correctly permitted.

2. **Flood-prone property:** Most (if not all) coastal local councils have flood maps available and are easily found by a google search: "flood overlay [insert town name]". The Brisbane City Council recently updated its flood maps so remember to check to see if your potential purchase is in or near a flood zone. The Department of Natural Resources also offers a dynamic flood overlay map that is worth visiting:

How to check: Visit the world wide web and google "flood overlay" or "flood map" for your town. If your home is *near* a flood zone, it might pay to also check if you've got a sloping block and which direction the water comes from. Your property may not technically flood, but if nearby streets flood and your street is lower, it's possible you'll get a lot of water travelling through your block. Talk to the neighbours! Ask if their property floods in heavy rain or if they've observed anything about the property you want to buy during heavy rain events.

3. **Unstable foundations:** Moving foundations generally exhibit themselves by cracks in the interior walls or on the exterior brickwork at the base of the building. Cracks in the plasterwork are harder to spot than cracks in the foundation because interior cracks can easily be plastered and painted over for the sale process. Foundations can become unstable if a house has been built on timber stumps.

How to check: Look closely at the brickwork along the base of the building, all the way around. If there are any cracks or gaps in the mortar consider calling in a building expert who can advise you on the foundations.

4. **Rising damp or moisture issues:** Moisture can be problematic, especially if the property is built on timber foundations, which up until the 1980s, many houses in Queensland were. It can rot timber foundations, swell floorboards, and cause myriad problems with the home's structural integrity.

How to check: Look for bubbles in the paintwork, especially near skirting boards, look for lifting corners of wallpaper near the floor. It can be nearly impossible to spot if the home has been recently renovated or plastered and painted for sale. If you suspect moisture you can ask a tradesman or a building inspector to bring a moisture meter to the site to take readings. If there is moisture, talk to a qualified building expert about remediation measures.

5. **Termites:** The reality is that termites are a common problem in Queensland. There are lots and lots of houses that have been chomped on by an army of termites and this does not preclude these homes from being included on your shortlist. If termites have been gnawing away at your dream home and the owners have addressed it by having the areas treated and they've repaired the damaged area, then there's nothing to stop you buying the home. Ask about ongoing pest treatments – have they opted for termimesh? Or regular pesticide follow-ups? Who has been the pesticide agent and can you talk to them about recent treatments?

How to check: Termites can be hard to spot. In some instances you will discover them by the sound of them chomping on the internal timber, or in other cases someone's foot could go through the floor boards. A standard building and pest inspection will rule out termites.

Really, at the end of the day, it's up to you to do your due diligence, but if you understand the risks and know what you're looking for the chances of buying a lemon are much lower. Good luck!

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