

Tales from the Crawlspace 1

I will share anecdotal stories of my thirty plus years of engineering, construction and “adventures in home inspecting”. I will try and provide important information regarding condition, value, repair and maintenance of Real property. If you enjoy the column, please feel free to email me comments, questions, or even requests for future topics.

We shall “start at the bottom”, so to speak. Down in the forbidden dark, creepy dank and dusty place where the worst sins lay hidden from all but the most hardy seekers. The crawlspace is the last place anyone really wants to go, but it can be the most important. Over the years I have had many noteworthy crawlspace encounters. My favorite story was long ago and far away, I was inspecting an older craftsman style home in a very nice neighborhood. Overall the house was in great shape and well cared for. There was no one home but it was obviously occupied by a family with small children. There were toys in the backyard and a much loved playhouse. The crawlspace access was on the outside, through a plywood sheet laid over the opening which is pretty normal. I pulled the plywood aside and flashlight in hand dove “once more into the breach”. The space was tight near the entry and the bare dirt moist. I wriggled fifteen feet around a metal duct, to run headlong into a man. I found myself face to face with an unkempt, foul smelling bum. What we would all now call “homeless”. Although I guess this guy had a home, of sorts... At first I recoiled, feeling a little trapped in the confined space in this unexpected situation. After staring into each other’s eyes for a very long minute, I told him “I’m going back out, you have ten minutes, and then I’m calling the police”. Without further discussion I crawled back out. I waited at the hatch with my cell phone in one hand and a pipe wrench in the other. A few minutes later, he crawled out with two bags full of stuff and some blankets. The man looked about sixty but who can tell, he’d obviously been drug through a knothole a few times in life. He was filthy and held his hand over his face. I’m pretty sure full daylight wasn’t his normal environment. He gathered his things and shuffled off down the road.

When I went back through the crawlspace, he had obviously been living there for months, or longer. He had spliced into the wiring connecting lights and a George Forman grill. The George Forman grill is a favorite of homeless squatters everywhere. I wonder how smiling George feels about that? Regardless, there were other remnants of the bum’s tenure; a dug out area to sit up in, a “honey pot”, things like that. Keep in mind this is an occupied house, with children living in it. I notified the listing agent but never heard anything back. My clients did buy the house and at my recommendation, added an access door with a lock. To this day whenever I find a home with an outside crawlspace access, I recommend they install a cover with a lock. It’s not such a bad idea to limit access to children any way is it?

There have been many times I’ve found pests in crawlspaces that called for remediation, so far I’ve always managed to spot black widows without disturbing them. Once I ran into a whole family of raccoons, when I was deep into the space. You’d be amazed how fast and accurately you can crawl backwards when properly motivated.

Moisture intrusion, drainage, plumbing and structural problems all show up in the crawlspace first. Often these important defects are unnoticed in the upper floors and exterior. I have found several brand new (thankfully unoccupied yet) homes with incomplete or disconnected drains that would dump sewage directly into the crawlspace. Wouldn't that be "lovely" to find a year after moving in? Don't ever pass up on a home inspection because a house is new.

I do moisture intrusion with Infrared and laboratory mold testing as an ancillary service. I once was asked to test and determine the mold problem in a "fixer". The place was really a tear-down because of the pervasive mold throughout the house. I found that the kitchen sink (with disposal) drained directly onto the ground. All the pipe was there, it was just missing an elbow connecting it. This had obviously gone on for years, unchecked. This was hands down, the most disgusting space I've ever looked into.

In the final analysis, all aspects of every structure are important and interrelated. The basis of modern building science is a holistic approach to construction and building analysis. We see the structure as a whole, not as the sum of its parts. This final example illustrates how the lack of a one dollar plastic elbow, quite literally destroyed an entire house (it was eventually torn down). It's true that anything can be fixed, and personally I always want to fix everything. However sometimes, it's just not financially realistic. At the end of that particular day, I wouldn't even take the client's money for mold testing. Testing would have just been a waste of time and money. This may be the only house I've ever seen that was D.O.A..