

20 Questions to Ask Your Builder

These 20 questions will help you assess homebuilders' quality of construction.

1. WHAT QUALITY CONTROL MEASURES ARE IN PLACE DURING THE BUILDING PROCESS?

Using high-quality products is important, but it is no substitute for enforcing quality control measures during the construction process. Make sure your homebuilder has established quality control measures with specific inspections throughout the process to ensure your investment is protected.

2. WHO WILL OVERSEE THE CONSTRUCTION OF MY HOME?

A project manager should oversee the construction of your home on a daily basis. The project manager's expertise has a big impact on the overall quality of your home's construction. However, some homebuilders use the project manager position as part of the training process for new hires climbing the ranks of the company. Ask about the qualifications of the person supervising the construction of your home.

3. DO YOU HAVE A DEDICATED, IN-HOUSE SERVICE AND WARRANTY DEPARTMENT?

After closing, who will you call if you have a problem? Will you be able to call a service professional directly—or is there an answering service? Will the homebuilder's own employee respond to a service call—or a sub-contracted company whose reputation is not invested in your home? New home construction warranties vary little in the extent of coverage, but vary greatly in their execution.

4. WHAT IS YOUR TRACK RECORD ON WARRANTY ISSUES?

Can the homebuilder cite examples of how they handled maintenance issues that were technically not covered by the home warranty but should have been their responsibility? A homebuilder that cares about their reputation for customer service will go above and beyond what is required by the home warranty to rectify a construction problem. Ask for testimonials or referrals regarding their handling of maintenance issues outside of warranty coverage.

5. WHAT ARE MY OPTIONS FOR PERSONALIZING MY HOME?

To cut costs, many production homebuilders will reduce the number of design and structural choices available to you. Are design selections updated to reflect popular styles and technologies? Explore your options to make sure the homebuilder offers a wide variety of options that you like.

6. WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR CHOOSING DESIGN SELECTIONS?

Will you make your selections based on sample boards stored in the model home or will you have access to a large showroom with a variety of examples? Will you choose from photographs or will you be able to see and touch your choices? Will you get personalized attention or will you have to share your time with other customers?

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7. DO YOU USE REBAR IN THE FOOTER OF EVERY HOUSE YOU BUILD?

Prior to construction, the minimum specifications for footers are determined by an engineer who specializes in soil analysis. These specifications may not necessarily require rebar to reinforce the concrete. But with the high soil elasticity in the Central Virginia region, you'll want to have the strongest footer available—one built with rebar.

8. HOW IS THE CRAWL SPACE FINISHED?

Local building code requires a vapor barrier in the crawl space. Some homebuilders install the vapor barrier at the end of construction—right on top of construction debris and with little to secure it. A better method involves laying the vapor barrier prior to framing and securing it with a layer of gravel. This keeps the crawl space clean and protects the vapor barrier from construction debris.

9. HOW DO YOU TREAT THE HOUSE FOR TERMITES?

During the building process, many builders treat the soil and lumber for termites with poison. But the poison can be dangerous to humans; in fact, the building site usually must be evacuated after the poison is applied. A better alternative is to treat the frame with a natural chemical substance called borate, which is toxic to termites but completely safe for humans and animals.

10. HOW DO YOU ENSURE LONG-TERM PEST CONTROL?

An effective method for ongoing pest control is Taexx®, a series of narrow, perforated tubes that are inserted into the framing near the foundation during construction. Also known as tubes-in-the-wall, this system allows a technician to spray pesticides behind the wall away from pets and children without having to enter your home.

11. DO YOU USE DIMENSIONAL LUMBER OR ENGINEERED FLOORING FOR ALL OF YOUR FLOORING SYSTEMS?

Many homebuilders use both engineered and dimensional lumber flooring systems. Dimensional lumber flooring systems are more likely to crown, shrink, or squeak. Engineered flooring systems are multiple-ply planks, which do not change shape or split, limiting squeaks and improving stability.

12. DO YOU BUILD ROOF TRUSSES USING ENGINEERED OR STICK-FRAMED LUMBER?

Measured and built on-site, stick-framed roofs are susceptible to shrinking, lumber defects and other issues that can impact the long-term integrity of the roof. Engineered lumber trusses are precision-built in a factory with a high-grade wood fiber that resists shrinking, crowning, twisting and warping. Every piece of engineered lumber is virtually defect-free and is consistent in size and weight, providing greater support to the roof.

13. HOW CLOSE DO YOU SPACE STUDS WHEN FRAMING WALLS?

Spacing studs 16 inches apart provides stability, reduces warped walls and limits nail pops. In some non-load bearing walls, homebuilders will space studs 24 inches apart to cut down on their lumber costs.

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14. ARE THE WINDOWS SINGLE-HUNG OR DOUBLE-HUNG?

Single-hung windows have a stationary upper sash and a movable lower sash. However, both sashes are movable in double-hung windows, improving ventilation and making cleaning much easier. While many homebuilders install single-hung windows to cut costs, double-hung windows offer greater convenience and quality.

15. WHAT TYPE OF STRUCTURED WIRING DO YOU OFFER?

Will your homebuilder test and warranty structured wiring cables? Every cable should be tested and guaranteed in your home prior to purchase. If structured wiring is not installed and tested properly, its performance can be dramatically reduced. Make sure both the homebuilder and the manufacturer guarantee that your structured wiring will always perform to the required standards.

16. ARE YOUR HOMES WIRED FOR THE FUTURE?

Homes that use structured wiring networks to manage energy efficiency are just around the corner. Does the homebuilder build in an accessible and expandable network box to store all of the structured wiring? Does the homebuilder install conduit from the box to make future growth easy? A home with these features will be especially desirable in the future when it comes time to sell.

17. DOES THE THIRD FLOOR HAVE ITS OWN HVAC SYSTEM?

When some homebuilders finish a third floor, they often “piggyback” the ducts off the HVAC unit dedicated to the second floor. With the thermostat on the second floor, the third floor will always be too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter. If you decide to finish a third floor, make sure your homebuilder adds a third zone and thermostat.

18. WHAT BRAND AND GRADE OF PAINT DO YOU USE?

Standard builder-grade paint is, well, less than standard. Many homebuilders that use standard builder-grade paint will not touch up painted walls after performing warranty repairs because the paint varies so much in consistency that it will not match. Look for a homebuilder that applies a final coat of high-quality paint with a roller, which provides a thicker, smoother surface. Also ask if they will guarantee to touch up paint that will match the walls after performing warranty work.

19. DO YOU USE POLY FIBERS IN ALL OF YOUR CONCRETE?

Poly-fiber reinforced concrete helps to control cracks and dramatically increases the strength of concrete slabs.

20. ARE YOUR FIREPLACES VENTED TO THE EXTERIOR OF THE HOUSE?

Some homebuilders install non-vented gas fireplaces—yet another cost-saving method to watch out for. Non-vented fireplaces require leaving a window open slightly during operation to prevent the possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning. Doesn't that make the extra cost of a vented fireplace sound worthwhile?