

Skeletons in Your Attic?

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Attics are always an adventure. What's yours like? Many people never go there, yet it can be a very important place to visit, especially when you have mechanical equipment hidden there.

How's your access? Do you have one of those cute pull-down ladders? When was the last time you checked it for loose or missing fasteners or broken pieces? Was it installed with appropriate nails or lag screws – not likely. Many people have been badly injured falling from an unsafe attic access ladder.

If you have mechanical equipment in your attic, how's your attic floor for access? Most people are allergic to putting their foot through the ceiling gypsum board. Do you feel comfortable doing the balance walk on your ceiling supports. Don't hire someone to go there and then get upset when they fall through. Loose or inadequate flooring can also give a false sense of security and increase the danger of a fall.

If you can't get there, you never find out about surprises until they become really ugly. Why is it people don't know they need a new roof until raindrops start falling on their head from a ceiling? Ancient furnaces can cause all sorts of dangerous conditions that could be caught before they cause expensive surprises, if they were checked once in awhile – at least once a year. Open ducts can mean very expensive utility bills and poor HVAC system performance year 'round. If your vent covers are dirty, you probably have one or more air leaks in your attic duct system.

- A newly refurbished house for sale had only a small scuttle hole in a closet, which was blocked by a furnace duct. The new furnace was in the attic, so it had to be installed while the side wall was open for re-siding. There was no way to do any kind of maintenance. When it dies, someone will have lots of fun getting to it. The seller was intending to get rich, refurbishing and flipping houses. Unless he found a ready sucker, this surprise was on him.

- The seller of a nice looking condo stated they had their AC person check out their system, and he gave it a clean bill of health. Yet, there was a three inch gap in the main duct, blowing half the conditioned air into the attic.

- The tenants of another property were considering buying the house from their landlord. The rafters near the access opening were visibly charred, had been partially repaired, and the visible smoke damage was covered with silver paint. The owner did not have an inspection when they bought the house and did not know there had been a fire in the attic.

- The front bedroom in a brand new house was considerably warmer than the rest of the house, even though the AC was churning full time during the entire inspection. Someone had removed half of the return duct in the attic, so virtually all conditioned air came from the attic space. That day, the attic space temperature measured over 140 F. You can imagine how many extra hundreds of dollars the buyer would have spent on electric bills before discovering the problem, and having it repaired.

- A very nice two story condo had no mechanical equipment in the attic. The roof was still young and showed no signs of deterioration, yet the upstairs bedroom ceiling had a six foot area covered with black growth with a visible sagging area. The only thing above the area was the AC refrigerant lines. The low pressure [cool] line had a four inch section that was not insulated. As the AC did its job the, cool section of bare pipe caused condensation to form and drip

down on the ceiling. Several hundred dollars in repair costs could have been avoided by a few cents worth of insulation. There was also virtually no ceiling insulation in the attic so utility costs were also excessive.

- The buyer and seller were on very friendly terms and the house appeared to be well maintained. A new furnace and AC system had been installed in the tiny attic space. When asked if they knew there was a spare furnace in the attic, the seller was very surprised. They had never gone in their attic and had paid the HVAC contractor an extra \$300 to carry off the old system. Now, the new system had to be removed to access the old dead one before it could be removed. You can imagine the nature of the resulting phone call to that HVAC contractor.

Water heaters in attics are a less than brilliant idea to start with. Especially when they won't fit through the opening, they often become large tombstones in the attic. Some attics have more than one old water heater in the collection. New, empty water heaters are relatively light and can be easily moved by two people. After they have been filled with several years' collection of sediment, they become very heavy, even when "empty" of water. Just imagine a 400+ pound rock dropping through your ceiling or attic opening. You could remove the roof and hire a crane, I suppose.

Rodents love attics. Any opening is like a neon sign saying "Come on in, the free hotel has vacancies". Most soffit areas have gaps at the ends. The bigger the opening, bigger the animal. Most houses with central AC systems have open space around the refrigerant lines into the house. Animals love those insulated lines – just like an escalator into the attic. On newer houses they even come with a cute little metal awning over the entrance.

None of these critters are house broken, so if you have a bunch of little brown "hot-dogs" littering your attic, you can be confident you have company, even if you don't hear them scuttle about in the quiet of the night. Another indication is little trails and holes through your insulation. They love it. Your local pest control operator can identify the type of animal and help you get rid of them. Be sure to close the holes they used for an entrance, or they will be back.

Cute little squirrels are rodents too. If you ever see one upside down, you will know they are like rats with fuzzy tails. They love to eat and destroy all kinds of things in attics, and harbor diseases too, so are considered pests, not pets.

It pays to check your attic at least once a year for "skeletons" lurking there – *before* they become ugly surprises. If you don't want to do it yourself, you can hire a qualified home inspector who knows what to look for. An annual pest control inspection is also a good investment, especially if you live in termite territory.

Every house needs an inspection, even new ones.

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