

Domain

Why you Should Never Buy a House Unseen

June 20, 2015 Sue Williams



Needs to be seen: Buying a house without attending an open home is a high-risk investment strategy.
Photo: Getty

Buying a house without attending an open home is a high-risk investment strategy, says Sue Williams.

The woman was adamant. She'd seen her dream Sydney house on the internet and, since the expat's relocation back home from Japan was imminent and the property market was red-hot, she didn't need to attend the open home. She wanted to put in an offer over the phone immediately.

Finders Keepers buyers' agent Lisa Bradley was just as obdurate. "You can't buy a house without going to the open home, or having a family member, friend or agent go for you," she insisted. Eventually, she found herself sent to check it out.

And when she got there ... “This woman had a family of three children and two dogs, and while it was a lovely house, the fabulous views she’d seen on the net were because it was on the top of a cliff which you reached via a tiny one-person inclinator,” says Bradley.

“There was no mention of that. There’s no way she would have fitted in with her shopping, let alone any of the kids and animals. In the end, I found her a lovely and much more suitable family home in Wahroonga instead.”

With the market currently sizzling, stories are legion about buyers bidding for homes at auction without even looking inside. But most experts warn against it, saying buying sight unseen can so easily lead to disaster.

“That’s a very high-risk strategy,” says buyers’ agent Patrick Bright of EPS Property Search. “It happens all the time that I get to a property and wonder if it’s really the same one as I’ve seen in the photos.

“Wide-angle lenses are used to make rooms look much bigger, and they’re taken to discreetly avoid anything unsightly. Often, they’ll also show a fantastic outlook, but you can’t see from the image that there’s someone directly opposite looking right into your lounge room and there’s no privacy at all.”

Open for inspections are vital to go along to for any potential purchaser, agrees Nicholas Armstrong-Smith, principal of Century 21 Armstrong-Smith at Bondi Junction. Without that, no one can possibly know if a home might really fit their criteria.

“You just need a good look around to make sure it’s right for you,” he says. “It’s important to look for things like rising damp, and at the layout. You might have one bedroom upstairs, for instance, and a second bedroom downstairs, which might not be suitable if you have young children.”

Nathan Pacer, the managing director of CMS Real Estate in Glebe, says buyers should be sure to check off items on their wish-list. “They want kitchens and bathrooms to be functional, and they might want a garden – or not want one – but they might prefer to buy a dump if they want to renovate it themselves, and have budgeted for that.”

Potential purchasers should also always do their due diligence if they’re planning to buy a property, in terms of building and pest inspections, and strata inspections for apartments – to see whether they’re well run, and to make sure no special levies are imminent, says Bradley.

They should also check the floor plan and its actual dimensions, warns Simon Cohen, of buyers’ agents Cohen Handler, as often vendors or agents will put double beds in bedrooms and small two-seater couches without arms in lounges to make them look bigger. “Also, see if neighbours have built up or added parking, as then you might be able to. If they haven’t, it might not be possible for you, either.”

As for those neighbours, scrutinise them carefully, advises Peter Kelaher of PK Property Search & Negotiators. “You want to know if there are barking or vicious dogs next door, or young children with a backyard pool that’s likely to be noisy.”

What to look out for at an open home

However closely you look, don’t skip building, pest or strata inspections. That can turn out to be a very expensive false economy, warns Lisa Bradley.

Check for any signs of water penetration, says Peter Kelaher of PK Property Search & Negotiators. “Smell out any dampness.”

Look beyond the sexy, stylish, hired furniture to imagine what it’ll look like when that’s gone, says Simon Cohen. “And look to see what fresh paint or patch-ups might be hiding.”

Scour the neighbourhood to see if the location suits, says Nicholas Armstrong-Smith. “You might want it close to schools, particularly public schools, or shops and transport.”

Make sure power lines or power poles haven’t been photoshopped out of publicity images, urges Patrick Bright.

Arrange a private viewing at a different time of day to the public one, says Cohen. You might find a property changes completely without the morning/afternoon light.

And if the lights are on when you arrive, discreetly turn them off to see how much natural light there is, counsels Lisa Bradley. “Look behind any blinds or curtains too, to see if they’re hiding an ugly building.”

At any open home, take note of how many people are asking for contracts, so you’ll know if you have much competition, advises Kelaher. “You’ll then know if the agent is talking it up – or not!”

Ask the sales agents direct questions. Don’t be shy, says Bradley. “Too many people are scared to be direct but agents are obliged to answer honestly.”

Inspect the contract closely to make sure what you think might be yours isn’t maybe council land or common strata property, recommends Cohen.