

Housing Boom Creates Rise in Pool Inspections

Find out what every pool pro needs to know

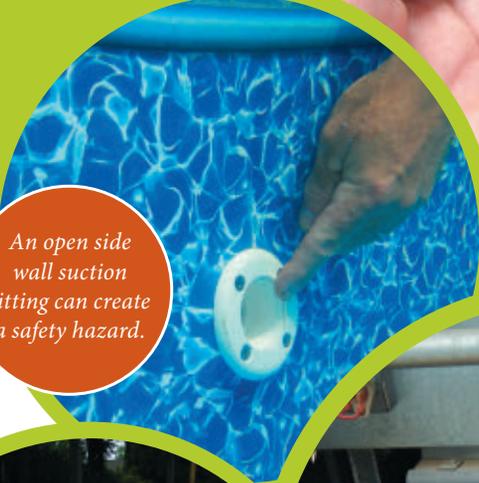
by Peter Muehlbronner

POOL INSPECTIONS? I'M already a seasoned inspector performing home and commercial inspections. Why not? Pool inspections will be easy – or so I thought.

That was more than 15 years ago. And yes, it was a great decision to expand my business into the backyard. As I was conducting home inspections, many clients would ask, “Can you take a look at the pool?” For years I would stay as far away as possible, thinking it was too much of a risk; an entirely new set of systems and issues to understand. Plus, it would add a great deal of time to each of my property site visits.

Over time I began to realize I was missing a valuable business opportunity, so I decided to start performing pool inspections. Was it easy? Hardly. Were my early inspections good? Well, there’s a saying that goes something like “you don’t know what you don’t know,” and looking back, I didn’t know nearly enough.

I will be the first to admit I’m still learning today. In my opinion, any true professional must have the desire to continually improve their knowledge and



An open side wall suction fitting can create a safety hazard.



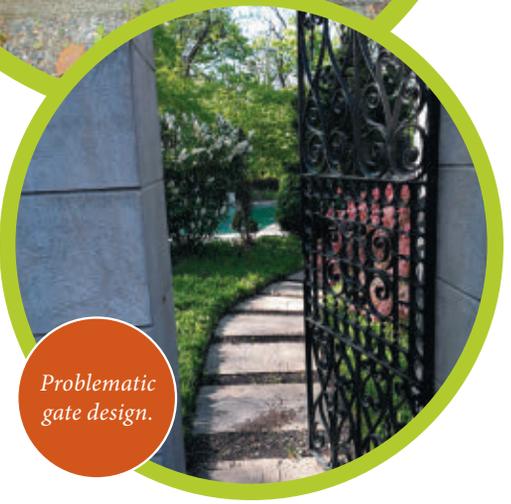
Bonding components are often the source of concern.



This rusted heater should be replaced.



An example of uneven transitions.



Problematic gate design.

keep up with the technology and trends. If a question comes up on-site and I’m not comfortable answering it, I say so. But I also assure my client that I will follow up with an answer to their question once I have the opportunity to perform a bit of research.

As an inspector, I am always asking: *What is it? What does it do? How does it work?* Having an insatiable desire to learn

more and seek out information coupled with the confidence to offer my opinion and provide sound advice; that's really what my business is all about.

GETTING UP TO SPEED ON POOLS

For me, the training offered by the pool and spa industry – including PHTA, NESPA and the PennJersey Chapter – over the past 15 years has helped hone my technical game to a point where I'm very comfortable "talking pools." I love going to The Pool & Spa Show each year to take classes or walk the floor. I always return with a little more information (or a new piece of equipment!) and look at my next pool a bit differently. Sometimes just talking to the pool professionals I meet in a class, on the floor or at an evening social make my time at the show worthwhile. Putting this knowledge to work as an inspector is what I enjoy.

IN THE REPORT

It's important to understand: inspections are not pass or fail, nor a rating from 1 to 10 (clients ask for this all the time).

As I define it, an inspection is a careful evaluation of conditions, with the ability to recognize when something isn't quite right (defect-recognition), the ability to explain why it's not right and the willingness to give some direction as to what needs to be done. And, you must be willing to put it all in writing.

Checklists are not enough to qualify as a report; a long list of technical terms and code references may boost the inspectors ego, but most information will go over the client's head. A 74-page diatribe will only frustrate clients trying to determine what real issues exist.

The report should be a well-organized narrative accurately outlining conditions. The inspector is not out to create issues or "kill" a real estate deal, but rather to simply convey findings allowing the client to make informed decisions. In the real estate world, the term often used is "material defect." So I'm after material defects. In a nutshell, this is an issue which, in the inspectors opinion, is significant due to the cost, safety or adverse impact on value.

Standards are available as to what should and should not be inspected. The American Society of Home Inspectors (ASHI), for one, provides such guidelines. These are minimum standards, and following to a "T" is

a solid foundation for a good inspection. In most cases, to be of value to your client, an inspector will exceed the standards in several directions.

Clarity in a report is essential. Think - *What is the problem? Where is the problem? Why is it significant? What action is recommended?* A good report follows those steps and typically includes pictures of the issues. "A picture is worth a thousand words." So photographing areas of concern and including them in the report is expected these days.

Warning: every issue visible in the picture must be clearly described in the report; otherwise, an attorney will make life miserable.

INSPECTOR VS. CONSULTANT

I identify as a consultant. This gives me a bit more leeway in how I offer my services. Some clients simply want the facts, while others want me to walk them through the issues or take time to explain how things work. When working for an attorney or insurance company, they simply need a professional opinion of a situation or occurrence.

And being a people person helps. Reading a client and exceeding their expectations is vital. In some cases setting expectations is required. Relationship building is paramount to working as a consultant. Professionalism. Honesty. Integrity. Consistency.

While doing my job, I engage with many people. Clients typically include homeowners, realtors, attorneys and insurance adjusters. NESPA members should understand that, ultimately, my findings will fall in the lap of the pool professional.

Inspections find and create work for the pool repair professional. That's not the point of the inspection, but rather the reality of it, and that's OK. It's essential to keep the two separated: inspectors inspect; repair professionals repair. This keeps a balance, prevents conflicts of interest and increases credibility, which is important for everyone.

AN EYE ON SAFETY

The most common material defects fall into these areas:

- Fence/Safety Barriers
- Coping/Tile/Surround
- Electrical/Bonding
- Water Loss
- Safety

Safety weaves its way through just about every issue. As I perform an inspection, safety is constantly on my mind. Fence and barrier adequacy, electrical/GFCI/bonding issues, diving/depths/clearances, railing/ladder/egress issues, design elements, entrapment issues, trip hazards, hazardous mechanical situations, chemicals/storage, safety cover conditions, and the list goes on. To discover the danger, sometimes you need to think like a 10-year-old!

Often the first question is: "Do you know a good pool contractor that can fix the issues in the report?" I value the relationships I have built with many local pool professionals, and I realize my place in the process. I do not offer repair or services on any pool; I'm a true inspection-only professional. If a specific pool contractor has referred me, I will normally suggest the client reach out to them and see if they can address the issues. I cannot recommend specific contractors (conflict of interest) in many cases, so the NESPA website is a good resource for my clients.

These days pools are adding value and interest to homes. I often ask my real estate clients if they were looking for a home with a pool, or did the pool just kind of come with the house? In recent years, the trend toward buyers seeking homes *with* a pool has definitely increased. This is good for all of us! |



Peter Muehlbronner is president and founder of AHI, Inc – Consulting. Since 1997, AHI has provided residential and commercial inspection services. In 2008, the company added residential pool inspections to its offerings, which currently is the majority of Muehlbronner's work. He is a PHTA, NESPA, and Penn Jersey member and holds, among others, CBP, CPO and ASHI Certified Inspector (ACI) credentials. More information about his company can be found at www.ahiconsulting.com.



Interesting in learning more? Muehlbronner sat down with NESPA's Executive Director Dominick Mondri for an episode of our podcast, NESPA New Depths. He shared more about the ins and outs of swimming pool inspections for real estate transactions. All of the episodes can be found at www.nespa.org.