

Scope

By BRUCE BARKER, ACI



ONCE AGAIN, The Word invites you to travel into the dark realm of terms that are often misused or misunderstood in home inspection reports. The Word hopes you will find this trip informative and maybe a little entertaining.

The Word's term today is scope, as in the types of buildings within the scope of the ASHI Standards of Practice (Standards). The Word finds this term interesting because we rarely think about such matters, including the risks involved in applying the Standards to unintended buildings.

Do ASHI Standards apply to condominiums?

The Word doesn't know. How can this be? The Word is supposed to know everything about the Standards! But seriously folks, the problem lies with the question itself. Condominium describes a form of real property ownership that usually is defined by state law. Condominium does not describe a type of building. A condominium could be any type of building from low-rise detached residential buildings to high-rise attached office buildings. The Word recommends that you describe buildings by their use and physical characteristics, not by their form of ownership. In other words, be careful about using the term condominium. Buildings that look like a condominium may not be, and buildings that don't look like a condominium may be.

Buildings covered by the Standards

Standards Section 13.1.C states: "These Standards of Practice are applicable to buildings with four or fewer dwelling units and to their garages or carports." One key term is dwelling units. The 2009 International Residential Code (IRC) defines a dwelling unit, in part, as a unit that provides complete independent living facilities including permanent provisions for living, sleeping, eating, cooking and sanitation. The other key term is the number four. Taken together, these terms imply that the Standards apply to buildings that are built and used as residences. These terms also imply that the Standards do not apply to buildings used for commercial or industrial purposes.

Converted residential buildings

Not all buildings that look like residential buildings are covered by the Standards. The most common example is the residential building that has been converted to commercial or industrial use. The problem with these converted buildings is that rules for commercial and industrial buildings are different from those for residential buildings. These differences include means of egress and handicap access provisions, fire separa-

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tion and suppression provisions, electrical and mechanical provisions, and provisions regarding the storage of hazardous materials. The building may have received waivers for these and other provisions, but it is difficult to know what, if any, waivers have been granted without a thorough public records search (assuming such records exist). The Word recommends that before inspecting such buildings you should consult with your

attorney to develop appropriate disclaimers covering provisions that are outside the scope of the Standards.

"Commercial" homes

Not all buildings used as homes may be covered by the Standards. The most common examples of such buildings are the high-rise multi-family building and the converted industrial building. Examples of problematic systems and components in these buildings include engineered foundations and structural components, three-phase electrical systems, refrigeration systems over five tons, and similar commercial grade systems and components. This does not mean you shouldn't inspect homes in these buildings. But like all systems and components with which you are unfamiliar, The Word recommends that you admit your lack of knowledge, disclaim these systems in writing, and recommend evaluation by a qualified specialist. Appropriate written disclaimers also are a wise precaution.

Tall homes

A home that may not fall within the Standards is one that has more than three stories above grade plane. The rules for what constitutes a story above grade plane are complex and usually apply to homes built on very steep lots where subbasements are necessary. The simple rules for determining if a basement is above grade plane are when the basement: (1) is more than six feet above finished ground for more than fifty percent of the building's perimeter, or (2) is more than twelve feet above finished ground at any point.

Homes with more than three stories above grade plane usually are built using the International Building Code. Whether such homes are within the scope of the Standards is open to discussion.

Townhouses

Townhouses are a type of attached residential building that may be built using the IRC. They contain at least three dwelling units, but may have more than four dwelling units in a building, and as such are not within the scope of the current Standards. The Standards Committee is considering whether to change this limitation to reflect current rules and practice.

A townhouse must: (1) be continuous from foundation to roof (not one unit over

another); and (2) be structurally independent; and (3) have at least two walls facing outdoors; and (4) have a door opening to outdoors (not to an interior hallway). A building that meets these requirements may be designed, built and used as a residential structure. It may or may not be a condominium.

The bottom line

Inspectors adapt the Standards to many different inspections and types of buildings and one could argue that the inspector's knowledge, not the Standards, is the limiting factor in whether an inspector should inspect a building that is not within the scope of the Standards. An inspector should never inspect systems and components with which he is unfamiliar. That's a given. The point is that the further you stray from the scope of the Standards, the more likely you are to miss significant deficiencies in systems and components that the Standards do not require you to inspect. This increases risk.

So be careful out there when inspecting buildings that fall outside the scope of the Standards. Be sure you have the knowledge to perform the inspection and the disclaimers that help protect you.

Memo to the Standards Gods and other authorities (wait a minute, isn't that the Standards Committee?): The Word does not reside on Mt. Olympus (just at its base) and welcomes other viewpoints. Send your lightning bolts or e-mails to inspectorbruce@cox.net. The thoughts contained herein are those of The Word. They are not ASHI standards or policies.

The Word thanks Mark Cramer for his help with this journey into the dark realm. ■



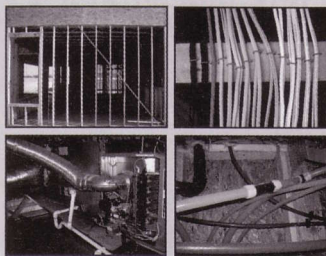
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