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Serving the Greater Houston Area

Plumbing in Older Homes: The System Houston Resale Buyers Most Easily Overlook

Match the era, then test: cast-iron drains, the two key tests and the repair routes — in one guide

A home's plumbing is two systems: the supply side is pressurized, and a leak makes noise; the drain side runs on gravity, and a failure stays silent. This guide works through the era-to-material map, how cast-iron drains fail from the inside, what the hydrostatic test and the camera scope each prove, the repair routes and their reference magnitudes — so that before an older home closes, the system underground becomes arithmetic instead of a gamble.

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The Silent System: Test Before You Buy

1. First, draw the system in your head

A home's plumbing is really two systems. The supply lines carry pressurized city water to every faucet and toilet; if they leak, they spray outward — loud, and found early. The drain lines carry no pressure: shower water and toilet water flow by gravity along a slope toward the municipal sewer; if they fail, they seep slowly and collapse slowly, hidden underground and beneath the foundation slab, silent for years. The headaches in Houston's older homes are, precisely, the second system. An earlier article on this site covered [foundations](#) and clay shrink-and-swell; the drain lines in this guide end up, in a good share of cases, expressing themselves in soil around the foundation that has been softened or washed away — the two systems sit next to each other underground, and on a tour they should be thought about together.

2. The era map: Houston's pipes changed by generation

Broadly, you can match by build era. In homes from the 1960s to the early 1980s, the main drain lines are predominantly cast iron — in its day a good material, strong and durable, but with a service life on the order of forty to fifty years, and doing the math, that cohort of homes is now reaching expiry collectively. In still older homes, the supply side commonly uses galvanized steel pipe, whose inner walls scale and rust, so water pressure drops year by year. After the 1980s, drains gradually moved to plastics such as PVC and ABS, with copper for supply; further on, in recent homes and renovated older homes, supply increasingly uses PEX, and drains are basically PVC. On a tour, ask the era first, then glance at the material, and you will know roughly which chapter the home's plumbing story has reached.

3. How cast-iron drain lines fail

Cast iron fails from the inside. Gases in the wastewater form an acidic environment at the top of the pipe, rusting from the top down; the bottom of the pipe sits in flowing water year-round, rusting from the bottom up. The rust layer flakes off layer by layer, the pipe wall grows thinner and thinner, and rust nodules narrow the bore further. Eventually there

are two endings: either the bottom of the pipe rusts through and collapses, soil pours in through the opening, and drainage slows until it blocks entirely; or a whole section of pipe breaks apart and offsets underground, and the water drains straight into the soil beneath the foundation. The symptoms show up in very everyday ways: several drains throughout the home slowing at the same time (not a single sink's problem), gurgling bubbles elsewhere when you flush, a bathroom with a sewer smell that never airs out, one patch of the yard inexplicably greener and lusher than the rest (there is "fertile water" watering it from below), and soil around the foundation that stays damp over the long term. Each of these signs alone can be explained away; three or more together should point your thinking toward a failing main line.

The supply-side signals are simpler: clearly low water pressure, yellow rusty water when a faucet first opens, and rust-streaked galvanized pipe joints. Supply-pipe problems generally do not injure the foundation, but they are an item that sooner or later joins the whole-system replacement plan.

4. How you actually check: two tests that prove different things

Many buyers assume that an inspector turning on the faucets and flushing the toilets twice counts as inspecting the plumbing. In fact that only proves "it still works today"; it proves nothing about how many years the main line underground has left. To actually clear the drain lines, you rely on two dedicated tests.

One is the hydrostatic test: the drain system is sealed, filled with water and pressurized, and you watch whether the water level drops within a set time. If it drops, the system has a leak somewhere. It answers "does it leak?" — it cannot answer "where, and how much wall is left?" The other is the camera scope: a camera travels through the pipe, and on the recording you can see rust, collapse, offsets and root intrusion, all of it. It answers "how bad is it?" — but it sees along one line, and the conclusion should be drawn together with the pressure test. The two tests have different strengths, and in older-home transactions they are often done as a pair. On cost, a camera inspection commonly falls in a reference range on the order of a few hundred dollars, with the pressure test priced separately — both subject to actual quotes. Spending those few hundred dollars during the option period, in exchange for a definite answer about what is underground, is a good trade on an older home.

5. The repair routes

If one local section has failed, repair that section locally: where the break's location is clear and the rest of the pipe is still in fair condition, excavating and replacing the bad section is the most direct route. When the whole main line has reached its age, there are generally two big routes. One is rerouting the drain: abandon the old line under the foundation and run a new line around the perimeter of the home, or above, so the foundation is barely touched. The other is tunneling under the foundation: workers dig in from the side to beneath the slab and replace the old line section by section — the tunnel is charged by length and must be backfilled and compacted, which is why it is expensive, but the benefit is that the interior floors stay completely intact. On the supply side, if the galvanized piping has aged as a whole, the common approach is a full-home repipe in PEX, with the piping run through the attic and walls — no floors to break, and a relatively controllable schedule.

There is no flat price; it tracks pipe length, burial depth, the degree of failure, and whether the foundation has to be touched. A local repair commonly falls in a reference range on the order of a few thousand dollars; a full main-line replacement or a tunneling project reaching ten to twenty thousand dollars, or even higher, is not unusual; a full-home supply repipe is yet another range. All of the above are market references; for a specific home, rely on the plumbing company's test report and formal quote, and do not apply numbers from the internet directly.

6. Buying an older home: the plumbing questions to get answered

What year the home was built, what material the drains are, and whether they have ever been replaced or repaired; whether the seller ever had whole-home drain blockages while living there, and how many times the lines were cleared; whether there are hydrostatic test or camera scope reports, even from a few years ago — they still have

reference value; and how the leak and repair items are marked on the disclosure. For homes from before the 1990s, I suggest writing “drain testing” straight into the option-period inspection checklist, alongside the inspection, the foundation and the roof — because once this system strikes, the size of the repair bill is in the same league as those items, and it is the quietest of them all.

7. To close

Plumbing is the most “silent” system in a resale home: when it is good, it has no presence at all; when it fails, it settles the bill all at once. Its advantage is that before it fails there are signals, it can be tested, and it can be quoted — all of it can be settled before closing. Match the era, recognize the signals, and complete the tests, and an older home's plumbing turns from a gamble into arithmetic.

If you have an older home in mind, send me the address: I will first match its era against the pipe material it most likely uses, and then we can tour it together on site.

If this is sitting inside your transaction right now, ask me — free consultation: (347) 774-5396 | owenrealestatetx.com

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This guide is general information only and is not a plumbing inspection conclusion. For a specific home, rely on a licensed plumbing company's hydrostatic test and camera scope reports.

Feel free to share this guide with friends who may find it helpful.