

Real estate info flows freely on the Web

By Anna Bahney, USA TODAY

Not so long ago, real estate websites offered little more than a thumbnail photo of a house and puffy prose about stainless-steel appliances. But with the housing slump making home buying a more considered investment — flippers and investors have all but faded from view — consumers crave more impartial information before they buy. And real estate sites are tumbling over themselves to provide the freshest, clearest data available.

The result is that buyers are empowered with more data about properties and neighborhoods than ever before. The bad news? You can lose days wading through it all.

On the websites spotlighted below, and many others, you not only get the price and square footage of the quaint neo-Colonial you've got an eye on. You can also access details about schools, photos of its fancy faucets, virtual tours of the kitchen and videos of a walk-through. You can even pinpoint locations of nearby hazardous waste sites and any sexual predators living in the neighborhood.

The sites are no longer limited to those strictly buying or selling, either. Several give estimates of home values and details on taxes, the number of fireplaces and recent improvements to homes not on the market. That can be of use to owners who are just considering selling or those who are buying next door.

Four out of five buyers used the Internet to search for a home last year, the National Association of Realtors says. The number of people who can access these multimedia sites — heavy with maps, pictures, graphics and video — is growing fast: 55% of Americans have a high-speed Internet connection at home, up from 47% in early 2007, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Still, the sites can be overwhelming, even intimidating. How do you navigate the map? What is a "Zestimate" or a "rent ratio heat map"?

For all their whistles and bells, these sites are only as good as the information they offer — and your ability to find it. Here's how five popular sites stack up:

Zillow.com

Serves: Homeowners, buyers, sellers

What it does: Shows sale properties on a map. Homeowners with homes not on the market can gauge interest in their property through the "Make Me Move" function. This allows people to select their own home on the site and include the sale price that would make them sell. Anonymous mortgage quotes are available on the site, with lenders approved by a third party and rated by users.

Listings: 3.1 million for sale and information on 80 million properties nationwide

Pros: The "Zestimate" function, which gives estimated values for homes not on the market, can be done for more than 70 million homes in the database. As with other map-based sites, it's great if you're focused

on living near a specific location — a school, a train station, a job, a street — because listings can be viewed relative to that location. The discussion boards on buying and selling are active and lively.

Cons: "Zestimate" works well for most areas, but sometimes details can be scarce because the company works with local and regional databases with varying amounts of data. Topeka and Omaha, for example, feature only the tax assessor's value for properties.

[Redfin](#)

Serves: Homeowners, buyers, sellers

What it does: Unlike the other sites listed here — which don't sell real estate — Redfin is an online brokerage that features homes for sale from multiple listing services, foreclosures and owners. It has a map-based search.

Listings: 475,000 sale listings and information for 16 million properties in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, Boston, Seattle and Washington, D.C. New York City is expected next year.

Pros: A map-based search delineates the desired area — whether a city, ZIP code or neighborhood. Users can look at the most expensive or least expensive in an area in a section of the website devoted to neighborhoods that also includes links to local blogs on housing and neighborhoods. Results can be easily downloaded as a spreadsheet to take when heading out to house hunt. Redfin also shows how many times a listing price has been changed and to what, in addition to how long the property has been on the market.

Cons: Though the figures on properties are deep and rich, the site provides listings in only seven metro areas. So if you're looking for a place in, say, Philadelphia or Phoenix, you're out of luck.

[Realtor.com](#)

Serves: Homeowners, buyers, sellers, renters

What it does: The official site of the National Association of Realtors presents properties for sale and rent from multiple listing services around the USA. It offers cultural and demographic data on neighborhoods.

Listings: 4.6 million sale and rental listings and information on 80 million properties nationwide

Pros: After a recent redesign of the site, prominent photos of homes for sale are featured on the search page. Listings can be viewed on a map, as large images or as a list with basic details. The listing pages include school reports, including location, distance from the property and ratings from GreatSchools (www.greatschools.net). The site is also good at presenting similar properties alongside the one you're viewing.

Cons: When you search, the only way to broaden your target area beyond a specific ZIP code or city is to include locations within a number of miles. So if you're interested in two neighborhoods not in the same ZIP code, you have to search for them separately to avoid getting results for everything within the radius.

[HotPads.com](https://www.hotpads.com)

Serves: Homeowners, buyers, sellers, renters

What it does: A map-based search that can be filtered by properties for sale, for rent or both within an area. There's also research attached to listings showing where the listing falls in relation to the median price for the city, neighborhood and county.

Listings: 175,000 rental listings and about 2 million sale listings nationwide

Pros: This is where to begin if you're starting from a premise as broad as "rent or buy." In addition to a search that shows sale and rental properties together by monthly payment, it has a "rent ratio heat map." This shows the areas that are better to buy in, vs. those where it's more practical to rent, according to the price-to-rent ratios (an affordability calculation arrived at by dividing the price to buy a house by the annual cost of renting a similar house). There's also a map of homes in foreclosure and listings for those properties.

Cons: Some rogue listings mistakenly appear in the wrong place — for example, a listing on a Washington, D.C., map was actually for a property in Oak Harbor, Wash.; a rental in Upper Manhattan was actually for a property in West New York, N.J.

[PropertyShark.com](https://www.propertyshark.com)

Serves: Homeowners, buyers, sellers

What it does: By culling public information from far-flung spots on the Web into one place, this site lets users sketch an in-depth portrait of a property. There are some listings for sale on the site, though they tend to be multifamily, commercial and investment properties.

Listings: Information on 20 million properties in Seattle, New Jersey, New York City, Miami-Dade County in Florida, Austin, Boston, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Washington, D.C., not necessarily for sale.

Pros: This is the site to go to for a free background check, with details about prior sales, land improvements, taxes and comparisons. Each property report includes demographic characteristics of the neighborhood, including whether there are sexual offenders living in the area. It also aggregates information about environmental issues near the property, such as air emissions, as well as zoning maps and urban landscape maps.

Cons: Pictures and information on comparables, building permits, zoning and title history are available only with a paid subscription. Free users have limited access from 3 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin