

# Ghettos in the sky

For many tenants, living the high life in an overcrowded unit can be far from mighty, writes Justin Vallejo

**T**HE views from level 27 of Regis Tower in downtown Sydney are almost postcard perfect. There are the sparkling harbour glimpses, a world-famous skyline and an open horizon beyond Anzac Bridge.

Problem is, I can't look past the two Korean bikers sleeping in bunk beds on the balcony to fully appreciate the spectacular vista below.

The "city campers" are cold and tired, they don't speak much English, and don't realise they are living among Sydney's secret ghettos in the sky.

Pit St is the epicentre of overcrowded Sydney but the squeeze is being applied everywhere the eye can see from their lofty perch. It's in the city, the suburbs and by the beach.

This quiet morning on level 27 is the start of a typical day in the two-bedroom apartment of Susan Kim and her teenage son Jeong, which is home to nine tenants. I found myself here after answering an ad posted on a noticeboard in a Chinatown corner store. It was written mostly in Korean but for the details: "Second Room \$120 p/w, Sun Room \$110 p/w, High Level, Nice View, Call Jeong".

Twenty minutes later I had accommodation for a week and a front-row seat to a bizarre scene being played out repeatedly throughout the residential monoliths in and around World Square.

Jeong, who translates for his mother, says they both sleep in the main room while another four sleep on bunks in the second "sun room", which was a section of the balcony enclosed by thin windows.

But on arrival, the balcony tenants' beds departed as expected and I was relegated to a sleeping bag on the lounge room floor.

What's the deal?  
There is a shared bathroom, two fridges

## From previous page

and the common living area (no bigger than a single-car garage) was filled with the laundry of eight men and a woman.

"Yes, lots of people in the building live like this. It's very common here," Jeong says. "The swimming pools and spas in the block can get very, very busy."

This is not the so-called "rental crisis" cooked up in the minds of real estate agents to convince tenants to pay \$30 a week more than their house or unit is really worth.

It is the disturbingly real, little-known and very ugly side of a city where tenants and landlords dance in the grey area of law by making unapproved renovations to walk and plumb in order to cram as many people into as little space as possible.

After it became clear what was happening, City of Sydney council introduced new development consent laws to limit the number of adults who can occupy a single bedroom and restrict short-term rental accommodation.

But the new rules don't apply to any building constructed before 2006, leaving councils, the brigades and government departments to catch people out on technicalities such as fire safety orders.

The Institute of Strata Title Management (ISTM) and Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore have called for councils to have more power to enter

## For what we pay here we could probably get our own room in Korea

and inspect these properties and to regulate and control the practice.

"It's not that these kind of short-term rentals should be stamped out, they need to be separated from long-term residents so checks and balances can be introduced," ISTM director David Ferguson says. "People just need somewhere to live and the laws are being flouted because of that."

When former NSW Housing Minister Matt Brown was discovered to be renting one of his investment properties to multiple tenants, he was denounced by the Real Estate Institute of NSW.

Institute president Steve Martin says the situation was a result of hard tax and stamp duty saving developers away from building new rental accommodation stock.

"What we see here is the symptom, not the disease," Martin says. "We are not condoning over-crowding and multi-tenant residences, but see them as a predictable result of the huge shortfall between the demand for accommodation and what is available."

While the Kim family's apartment is crowded, she is not doing anything inherently illegal in renting it out. The unit is small but comfortable and it doesn't take long to fill in with the disparate group of international students and young migrant workers Susan Kim, who became a permanent resident after migrating to Sydney seven years ago, moved into the new unit after

buying it for \$350,000 earlier this year. She doesn't work and with \$810 a week income from a full house of tenants, she doesn't have to. Her husband visits from Korea for three months a year.

"I like it here, it's very new and clean," she says. "I have lots of friends here that also rent out to Koreans."

Tenants Sung Hyun Moon and Hoyun Il Kang are in their 20s and here to learn English and a trade as chefs.

With the smell of traditional Korean kimchies and less than traditional microwave sausages lingering throughout the unit, their culinary merrits don't exactly inspire.

"Hahaha, Justin! That's a joke, hahaha," the friendly pair laugh in what little English they have as I struggle to down their spicy meal.

For them, this is neither a ghetto, a slum, nor the result of historically low building approvals. Living in each other's pockets is a cultural way of life.

In western Sydney, overcrowding is at its worst in areas such as Auburn, Ashfield, Bankstown and Liverpool, suburbs where many migrants flock after moving to Australia bringing with them their homeland's living habits.

Each year this year, Auburn Council issued more than 460 orders to dismantle illegal conversions in a single unit block where urge-ethnic families had jammed into small units.

The recent Section 430 report by the Department of Local Government into

Auburn Central blasted the state of the development, revealing more than 20 two-bedroom units had been illegally converted into six- to eight-bedroom units. In these units smoke alarms were covered and fire doors wedged open for access to a building with far less security keys than the real number of residents.

Illegal toilets were set up on balconies and connected to laundry drains and plumbing. Garbage overflowed through the hallways, baring out of the garbage bins or crumpled with far more waste than the building was designed to bear.

Auburn Mayor Le Lam says his area is an ideal target for illegal building conversions. The council has hired a crack squad of staff to raid and inspect units that don't comply with development, fire and safety regulations.

"We have lots of students and families seeking cheap accommodation and unscrupulous unit owners have been taking advantage of this growth market," Lam says.

"They figure why build new accommodation when you can do an illegal conversion and stack people in. We're not backing off. In the next few months our compliance team will continue the blitz on the area."

While it is migrant families in the west, the targets of eastern suburbs landlords are travellers and backpackers looking for a good—and cheap—time close to Sydney's famous beaches.

The Department of Fair Trading has issued a warning to backpackers and students in share accommodation about dodgy landlords. In one instance three backpackers had each paid a \$700 rental bond for a Coogee apartment that was never returned.

It turns out the unit owner had no idea the property was being sub-let to the backpackers by a middle tenant. She was fined \$1100 by the department, but it has done little to stop the lure of overcrowded units in the east.

Back in the city on level 27 of Regis tower, the cold morning is starting to thicken. Sung Hyun Moon and Hoyun Il Kang

after spending so long sleeping on a balcony. The language barrier is hard to break, but through English student Hyoll Jung their frustrations are clear.

"They don't like the cold, they get sick and the blankets aren't warm enough," Jung says. "For what we pay here we could probably get our own room in Korea, but everyone in Sydney wants to be in the city."

"There are hundreds of places like this advertised on Korean websites like Hoto.com. We are happy to stay here while we are in Sydney, but hopefully we can get permanent visas and return for good one day."