



The Sydney Morning Herald

JULY 10-11, 2010

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Happy campers

Our friendliest apartment blocks, p4



The true value of friendship

Buyers are prepared to pay more for a Melrose Place-type environment, writes **Susan Wellings.**

When good neighbours become good friends, it can not only make apartment buildings much more enjoyable places to live but also boost the price of the property.

One of the key things professional strata record searchers look at in apartment blocks or complexes when they're examining buildings on behalf of potential purchasers is how friendly, harmonious and happy the residents are.

"That's definitely something that's included in our strata reports," says the director of I&D Strata Searching, Matt Trachtenberg-Ray. "What a lot of people fail to understand when they move into strata buildings is that they are moving into a community and the harmony of a building is just as important as how much they have to spend on fixing the concrete."

For as well as such harmony making a building a far more pleasant place to live, with neighbours chatting in lifts rather than enduring stony silences and greeting each other on common property, it also means it's much more likely that disputes will be settled quickly and amicably rather than through expensive legal action.

"It's the tone of a building that's important," says the president of the Institute of Strata Title Management, David Ferguson. "A good building that's supportive of the social fabric can be like having an extended family and, in turn, not to have a friendly building can be disastrous. "It's incumbent on people, and especially office-bearers, to make people welcome and run the building in a positive way. Where a building is known for a good living environment, there's

more demand for apartments and inevitably the competition will force prices up."

That might mean buildings that host book clubs, wine-tasting evenings, playgroups, social occasions, sporting ventures and even – such as in the case of the city's Highgate building – group holidays in far-flung destinations, such as Yemen.

At the vast Jacksons Landing in Pyrmont, for example, there are Friday drinks, BYO dinners, quarterly meals in local restaurants, tennis, a singing group, dog-owner get-togethers, newsletters and an annual Christmas charity fund-raiser concert.

"A lot of people now know each other as a result of them and it really enhances the building," says Regina Knowles, who organises many of the events. "It creates a very friendly atmosphere, which people love."

Smaller buildings can be just as welcoming. In JoAnn Holloway's 12-unit complex in Bexley, there's an affable ambience. In-house dinner parties for residents are a regular occurrence and everyone pitches in if there's a problem.

"It makes it a very happy place to live," Holloway says. "Occupants are always happy to help each other with chores, like moving furniture, gardening and even rescuing washing from the clothes line if it rains. One elderly resident often passes on home-made biscuits and enjoys having a chat, while one time, when I was sick, a neighbour immediately offered to help and dropped off a meal. It's wonderful."

It all comes down to attitude, says the vice-president of the apartment owners' peak group, the Owners Corporation Network, Brian Wood. If people say hello when they pass each other and engage rather than ignoring each other, it oils the wheels of a building.

"A good atmosphere in a building is completely fundamental," he says. "If you have a good relationship with other owners, then you'll get disputes or problems being resolved sensibly and practicably rather than escalating stupidly."

Indeed, friendliness is the very reason that Robert Dodds recently decided to buy into the Motto building in Erskineville. He was happy to buy a one-bedroom apartment for \$510,000 – \$20,000 over the reserve – because he has friends already in the building who say it's a very sociable place to live.

"During inspections I got the feeling that it's a bit like *Melrose Place*," says Dodds, in reference to the American TV show about the comings and goings of people in an apartment building. "I liked this apartment's big balcony, which'll be great for entertaining, but the residents seem to be young professionals who are all pretty outgoing and friendly. It looks like a great place to buy into."

MIDDAY AT THE OCEANA

On a sunny weekend, there can be any number of residents socialising over a glass or two down by the barbecue, cabana and pool at Elizabeth Bay's 65-unit apartment building Oceana.

"It's just a very friendly building, with great amenities, which we all share with goodwill during warmer days," says Ross Appleton, who's lived there for nearly four years.

"We're a diverse group of demographics and age groups but we do interact well and socialise with each other."

There are many formal, organised activities but, every Christmas, everyone gets together over drink and food. And after each AGM – instead of, as in some buildings, trying to tear each other's throats out over disputes – everyone socialises, with wine, beer and nibbles laid on.

In addition, if there are any major issues happening, such as the proposal to extend the nearby Elizabeth Bay marina, nearly every resident is happy to sign a petition. "If there are any disputes in the building, the sociable, friendly atmosphere enables us to work out a way around it," Appleton says.

Oceana chairman Paul Johnson says it was a deliberate strategy to



create a cordial feeling throughout the building. "We wanted to help people communicate more and it's often much easier to raise issues when you're talking over a beer," Johnson says. "It works very well."

ICE-BREAKER AT HORIZON
 Having a concierge in an apartment building often provides a pivotal point for residents to get to know each other, says lawyer Richard Gration. At his building, Darlinghurst's Horizon, people will often stand and chat to the concierge and others will join in,

helping to create a friendly atmosphere for everyone.

"The concierge is a significant factor in pulling people together," Gration says. "It's almost an ice-breaker that gives people the ability to make contact with one another.

"We also have regular organised social functions for residents, especially designed to facilitate neighbours meeting each other. They are always very well attended, with around 80 to 100 people."

One resident paid caterers out of his own pocket for cocktail food

while, for Horizon's 10th birthday, a penthouse owner opened up his \$15 million apartment for a function, which was attended by about 150 residents. There are also discussions happening about a tennis day on the complex's court.

"A friendly atmosphere also means that the number of neighbour disputes tends to be a lot lower than that you'd expect from a building with 260 apartments," Gration says. "People feel they can talk to one another like adults rather than rushing off to the courts or to the CTTT."



Mixers ... Oceana residents (above, from left) Tony Mansfield, Ross Appleton, Kate Messenger and Michael Ellies share a drink; Horizon concierge Nina Stampetta (left) enjoys bringing together the building's occupants, including (from left) Richard Gration, Neale Bettman, Deborah Aitken and Mark Broadley. Photos: Fiona Morris