



Slowly, however, it does seem that Australians are getting to grips with strata-living, albeit much more slowly than the populations of European cities for whom it's been a way of life for a couple of centuries. "There is a generational shift under way," says Bradley.

"People are more and more prepared to give up their quarter-acre block if there's adequate compensation in terms of proximity to resources and services, and the freeing up of time with less commuting and no lawns to mow. But there'll always be some individuals who don't adapt."

Such research is certainly in line with anecdotal evidence of those working in the sector. Over the past 20 years, strata lawyer Colin Grace, for instance, has seen many who've gone back to houses after trying out apartments.

"They've moved in for a simple life but then got caught up in rows with their neighbours or with the committee members," he says.

"Some people see it as others having too much control over their lives, or having too many restrictions."

He sees the largest group now moving into apartments – the empty-nesters – as those often having the most difficulty. After usually having successful careers and holding positions of considerable personal power, they

Goodbye to the burbs . . . older people love the security and low maintenance while younger people love the city lifestyle that units allow.

Photo Andrew Meares

find it tough to have to ask permission to put floorboards down in their own home, or to install Foxtel, or to start a renovation.

Arguments can flare, says strata manager David Ferguson, a board member of the Institute of Strata Title Management. In worst-case scenarios, members of the same family can even end up warring with each other. On the plus side,

Ideally, with strata living you live in a community that offers great support, with the same feel as living in a cul de sac in a conventional street.

as well as the convenience and security there's also the potential of a healthy sense of community.

"One of the ideals of strata living is the fact that you live in a community that can offer great support, a vertical cul de sac, with the same feel as living in a cul de sac in a conventional street," says Ferguson. "Everyone knows each other, they can network and help each other out; you can take turns taking kids to school."

Leading strata consultant Gary Bugden, now designing the

legislative framework for strata-living in Dubai, says that despite any perceived downsides, Australians' move into apartments will continue unabated over the next decade. Older people love the security and low maintenance while, at the opposite end of the spectrum, younger people love the city lifestyle that units allow.

"But psychologically, we're still not used to communal living," says Bugden. "Australians need to still go through an adjustment phase in their attitudes. And, sometimes, young people, Gen Y, are even less prepared for communal living. They're all about 'me', which can lead to problems when you have to live as part of a community."

Other research, now under way at the University of NSW's CITYFUTURES Research Centre, may soon back this up. "There is a body of researchers who claim that the perceived benefits of urban consolidation policies are based on assumptions and that little evidence exists to support these proposed benefits," says the project's head, Bill Randolph.

But new apartment-convert George Sirett says the good can definitely still outweigh the bad. He says it's important to get involved in running the strata if you don't like the way your home is being managed, but generally the move can prove relatively stress-free – if you're lucky.

"At best, it's like living perpetually in a hotel: other people do the work, and you just enjoy the lifestyle," he says. "It's the way of the future."

# It can be tough for those of a different strata



The shift from free-standing house to strata complex can bring on real psychosocial stress. Photo Robert Pearce

As the push to urban consolidation grows, many find the move from home to unit a challenge, writes **Sue Williams.**

When George Sirett and his wife Kathryn Thiel downsized from a large house in Sydney's Paddington into an apartment in a 19-storey block, they made a pact: they wouldn't discuss it for six months.

At the end of that trial period, they'd decide whether their shift into strata-living was their biggest blunder and they'd move back into

a house - or a roaring success and stay. Two years later, they're still happily unscathed.

"It was a big decision and we didn't know how it would turn out," says retired book designer Sirett, 61. "But as soon as we moved in, we knew we wouldn't be moving back out. We both love the convenience of apartment living."

Everything was a confrontation. We love the concept, but we had a horrendous time with personnel.

Sirett and Thiel, 58, are lucky, however, that their relocation turned out so well. New research, the first of its kind undertaken in Australia, has revealed that many home-owners suffer real psychosocial stress making the break from a free-standing house to move into, and live in, strata complexes.

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And with all state and territory governments committed to higher density housing, with 3.5 million Australians now living or working in strata-filled schemes, and the numbers rising fast, it's a level of stress that's likely to intensify in our cities hugely.

At the moment, in Sydney alone, a quarter of the population lives in units, and 450,000 more apartments are planned for the next 25 years. With land prices increasing, less space in our cities and regional development plans to promote denser urban living, spurred on by an ageing population and the adept marketing of "lifestyle" by property developers, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide are following on not far behind.

"Our study found that people weren't too unhappy about the physical side of strata-living, but they had more trouble with the personal side," says Graham Bradley, senior lecturer in psychology at Queensland's Griffith University, who co-wrote the new report with Chris Guiding, at its School of Tourism Leisure Hotel & Sport Management.

"The main issues were those associated with getting on with others, forming communities and the rules that govern interpersonal behaviour. Many didn't expect to



Today 3.5 million Australians live or work in strata-filled schemes. Photo: Jessica Shapiro

Disputes tended to be in connection with body corporate matters, and many appeared to receive little information beforehand about how their new lives would be managed, with confusion, differing expectations and conflicting preferences heightening the general level of anxiety. There was also little understanding of strata levies -- the quarterly fees paid to go into maintaining and running the complex -- and clashing ideas of what should be allowed and what should not.

"It can be very stressful -- there's children, there's pets, there's car parking problems, there's restrictions on what you can do because you're in a body corporate," said one interviewee in the study. "If you're coming from a home where you've been in control of everything including your yard, in a body corporate you have committees that you don't have in your own home. New owners have no perception of what it all means."

While most confess they ended up quite liking the move -- or the idea of it -- the politics and having to negotiate with different personalities does make it tiring.

"Everything was a confrontation," says one.

"We love the concept, but up until now, we have had a horrendous time with personnel."

say. In addition, while their homes were once their castles, apartment-living entails being bound by numerous bylaws enforced with financial penalties, and possibly legal action ultimately, for transgressions.

The report, *Settling in to Strata-Titled Housing: A Study of the Psychosocial Challenges Arising from a Move to Large-Scheme Body Corporate Living*, exposes some of the struggles many are having in embracing this fundamental lifestyle shift.

**It can be hard for many to accept that the walls, the front door, the windows are all common property over which they may have minimal say.**

confront restrictions with respect to what they could do to their own property, and often didn't like the enforcement of those rules."

For many Australians, born and bred on the notion of the quarter-acre block, moving into apartments does entail a fundamental mindshift. While the space inside their new homes is their own, it can be hard for many to accept that the walls, the front door, the windows and the flooring are all common property over which they may have minimal