

17 High-rise apartments

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Dreams are adaptable. Australian used to dislike flats and now many of them are happy to live in high-rise apartments that they own. As we said, our dreams expand to take advantage of new opportunities.

A NEW WAY OF LIVING

Before the 1970s very few Australians lived in high-rise flats or apartments, and if they did, they were either tenants of various State Housing Commissions, or lived in such unusual residential areas as Kings Cross and Potts Point in Sydney. High-rise living was almost 'un-Australian'.

Since the building boom of the 1970s things have changed. Melbourne, Sydney and the Gold Coast now have a fair sprinkling of 15, 20 and even 30 storey high-rise apartment buildings located close to urban facilities, or taking advantage of spectacular beaches and views. It is a new way of living for those raised in suburbia, one with unusual advantages and new adjustments.

VIEWS

From the buyers' point of view there is one good reason for going up; the view is often spectacular. And the higher up the better, if you can afford it.

But will you still have that view in five years' time?

In Chapter 15's section on 'Views' we talked about checking with the local Council concerning surrounding land being zoned for high-rise flats. If it is, then the answer is fairly obvious. Some time in the future, your panoramic view may have 40 living room picture windows in it, looking back at yours.

If it isn't so zoned, it doesn't necessarily mean that you can heave a sigh of relief. High-rise apartment buildings containing 20 or 30 storeys with 80 or 120 or more units are such massive investments on the part of a developer, that it is often worth the cost, time and effort to fight a Council to have land rezoned, if the site represents a real market opportunity.

Australian planning law is only just beginning to recognise residents' rights to views and sunlight and such rights are by no means guaranteed. The processes of the law, as anyone who has purchased a house knows, are complex. Planning laws and regulations are often difficult to interpret. Relying on the town planning zoning is no guarantee that in the future some astute developer won't build another high-rise development nearby, right in the middle of your favourite view.

NEIGHBOURS

For those who grew up and maybe raised families in suburbia, living in a high-rise apartment can often seem an isolating experience.

In our suburban houses, and even in townhouses and terrace houses, we can look out the window and see neighbours we know coming and going. We can lean over the fence and have a chat, meet while we are putting the garbage out, bringing the groceries in, or trimming the front lawn.

In high-rise buildings, corridors are made of blank walls, lifts serve 80 or 100 different units, lobbies are public thoroughfares, and underground carparks are hardly places in which to linger for a chat.

It is not that people don't get to know each other, they do. But it is often in spite of the planning. Big buildings simply create more anonymous situations. In the suburban street, you will see your neighbours often enough coming and going to be on chatting terms if you so desire. In high-rise apartments this is less likely, simply because the walls and the lifts cut you off. Streets, driveways, gardens, back fences and verandahs, let you see, and be seen in suburbia. There is no equivalent way of designing high-rise to provide the same opportunities.

On the other hand, if you value your privacy, high-rise living is likely to suit you down to the ground, even if you are 20 storeys up.

That is the trade-off. Less contact with neighbours, or none at all if you want it, and more privacy. It suits some and disturbs others. It's best to figure out which you like, as there is not much you can do to alter the basic pattern of anonymity which pervades high-rise apartment buildings.

SECURITY, PARKING AND LIFTS

Anonymity, 'without identity', also has its risks. Security is a concern of many high-rise dwellers.

In Chapter 15's section on 'Security' we looked at a few of the things you could check out for yourself. They are equally applicable to high-rise, though in some respects, the problems are both simpler and more acute.

Because most high-rise units are well above ground, entry from outside through windows or balconies is less likely than in a two or three storey townhouse building. However, because the public areas, such as underground carparks, lobbies, lifts and corridors are more anonymous environments and many more people live in the building, it is easier for unwanted intruders to go unnoticed. Consequently, in the new high-rise, access to these areas is often only possible with special keys, or by the decision of keyholders, through video or voice communication and electrically controlled locks.

Depending on the security risks in the locality, and the size and cost of the development, security staff may also be engaged in patrolling or controlling access to the building. In short, security risks and security measures are another aspect of the trade-off between the anonymity of living in dense urban areas and the privacy to be gained in high-rise buildings. Anonymous environments over which we have no personal view or concern have always provided the faceless opportunities criminals desire. The best we have achieved to date is to try and control who has access to those environments, and to watch such areas on closed circuit TV. Good security systems make such control a little easier but do not guarantee it.

If security is a serious concern, engage a good security firm to advise you. Your insurance broker may appreciate your foresight.

NOISE

Many high-rise apartment buildings are built in the noisy areas of our cities. Traffic noise is part of their natural environment. If it bothers you, chose an apartment that faces away from the main road, or is completely airconditioned and allows you the opportunity of closing all the windows.

In Chapter 15's section on 'Noise', we saw how you can check out some of the internal, as well as external, noise problems that are likely to arise. High-rise buildings, because everyone is stacked on top of each other, may actually be quieter buildings in which to live than many townhouse developments. There are fewer courtyards and common gardens for noise to bounce around, and bedrooms of different units usually don't face each other.

People of different ages often disagree on what constitutes peace and quite. Teenagers, and those over 65, have quite different ideas about noise. If noise is of concern, check it out using the suggestions in Chapter 15.

LIVING ON A BALCONY

Being high in the sky also denies you easy access to the ground and your balcony becomes your only private outdoor living area.

Is it large enough? Three and a half by 1.8 metres is the minimum you should expect. Anything less and you will have difficulty using it for an outdoor table setting.

Also 20, 30, 50 or more metres up in the sky it's going to be windy. Will the balustrade give you some protection and still let you see the view from a seated position in the living room? Glass balustrades are great in this respect, as long as they don't make you feel nervous.

If you like the outdoors, think carefully about the balcony and your needs, because this is your only outdoor private space. Make a list of all the things you'd like to do there and see if you have enough space, and if the design suits. The streets, common gardens, and parks nearby may not be a substitute if the balcony isn't large enough.

CLEANING THE WINDOWS

Ten storeys up it is hard to clean the outside of the windows unless you have a balcony walk that goes past them all.

Does it matter? It's a minor point but to some it does. Others are happy to let the wind-driven rain do the job.

Maybe it only matters for the view. Whichever way, it's a small point to consider, a point which can irritate some people.

DOES THE LAYOUT REALLY SUIT?

Chapter 12, 'Buying housing', sets out the ground rules for deciding what you want and what to look for when inspecting the property.

Deciding what you want when buying an apartment is not very different from deciding what you want when buying a suburban house. The difference is that most of us have not lived in apartments and do not have the experience that comes from growing up in one. After thinking through what you feel you might want, it's probably best to do a bit of looking around and check out if your needs can be satisfied in a high-rise apartment.

Usually the selling agents will have floor plans of typical apartments that you can take away, and compare with the houses or townhouses in which you have lived. The differences are interesting and you should be able to have some fun puzzling out the reasons. It will also give you a good idea of what layouts you can buy, and if they really suit.

As with townhouses, high-rise apartment buildings have advantages and disadvantages when compared with suburban houses. The best way to learn about them is by looking around and studying plans.

BODY CORPORATE AND PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

The Body Corporate principles that apply to high-rise apartments are no different to those for townhouses or home units (see Chapters 5 and 15). The property maintenance issues are, however, often quite different.

High-rise buildings are expensive and complex to build. Lifts, special exhaust ventilation shafts through the full height of the building for toilets and kitchens, more complicated plumbing from 50 to 100 bathrooms and laundries, special exhaust ventilation for underground garages, heavy electrical mains, fire detection systems, security surveillance systems and so on. When something goes wrong with a system, it may be not just one unit that is affected, but 50 or 100, with the multiplier effect touching everybody's hip pocket.

External maintenance is also expensive. There is simply more of the building, more windows, doors, balconies, sill flashings, reinforcing too close to the outside of the concrete, brickwork without sufficient expansion joints or drainage holes, below ground drainage systems, underground walls and floors to waterproof. You name it, there is a lot more of it, and builders, subcontractors, engineers, architects, and developers being human, and fallible, mistakes can and do occur. The results often involve expensive court cases and expensive repairs. Expensive for the Body Corporate and its members. Those repairs cannot usually wait until the court takes its time to arrive at a decision. It all becomes quite complicated. It is one of the costs and risks of living in a complex building.

That complexity also involves the Body Corporate in maintenance contracts for the lifts, security systems, public areas, common gardens, exhaust fan systems and common electrical systems to ensure continuous and effective operation of the building 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year.

Apart from having your solicitor check out the legal arrangements of the Body Corporate, you could be well-advised to seek advice from the property maintenance departments of real estate firms experienced in maintaining large buildings to ensure the maintenance funds and contracts are in good order. The cost of not doing so may be an unpleasant surprise a few years after moving in.

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Some developers offer prospective purchasers the possibility of having their kitchens, bathrooms, wardrobes, etc., fitted out to suit their own taste. If you can afford the cost, have the time, and can come to a suitable agreement over design and detail, it is certainly a good way to personalise your apartment.

It allows you to move a little away from the 'modern style' we noted in Chapter 15 under 'Internal furnishings' a section worth re-reading at this point.

CAN I HAVE IT CHECKED OUT?

Buying a high-rise apartment involves some new and different questions for Australians who are used to buying suburban houses.

Some of the steps outlined here, and in other chapters, will make it easier for you to check it out. Others, such as the quality of the building construction and maintenance contracts need experts. A good starting point is the Royal Australian Institute of Architect's Residential Property Inspection Service.