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January 8 2005

Desperately seeking peace and quiet

Noisy neighbours arouse complaints

Poor insulation destroys privacy Judging by the number of emails I've received in the past three weeks, I seem to have touched a nerve when I wrote about a client's "frisky neighbours" on December 18, 2004 (<http://www.aaron.ca/columns/2004-12-18.htm>).

Apparently, my client and his wife are in good company with many other Torontonians who have experienced problems as a result of the activities of the neighbours on the other side of the common wall in a condominium, duplex or semi-detached house.

The design of his condo results in back-to-back bed placements. "When we are in bed," he wrote, "we can clearly hear conversations and activities (especially sex) in the other unit."

He was understandably worried that if he could hear the neighbours so clearly, they could also hear him. The noise problem was interfering with his sleep and his health.

Ian Drummond wrote to tell me about his lengthy run of bad luck with noisy neighbours. "In the early '80s, I had Moaning Myrtle living in the apartment next door," he told me. "I was young and bold then. I knocked on her door one night and asked her to move her bed to another wall. That helped."

For five years in the 1990s, Drummond wore earplugs to bed to deaden the noise from two yapping dogs in the apartment above him. In 1998, he moved to a west-end condo with wood divisions rather than cement block between the units. The newlywed couple next door made the most of their home, he said. The rapture was deafening.

He complained to the builder, who repeatedly told him the walls met the building code.

His new neighbours are great, he tells me, even with a baby daughter. He solved the noise problem by generating just enough white noise to block out stray sounds from next door.

If noise is an issue, he advises, you must let your neighbours know as courteously as possible, invest in a fan and a humidifier, and then laugh about it.

A theme that cropped up in a number of reader emails was hardwood or granite floors and lack of carpeting. I received several complaints from residents in buildings that have bylaws requiring carpets or broadloom, but it seems that they are not adequately enforced.

Another couple told me they were forced to sell their downtown condo because the loud music and noise from shoes on the hardwood floor above were intolerable. In addition, the adjacent townhouses all had rooftop patios where noisy gatherings took place regularly.

When they finally moved to an older midtown condominium, they discovered they had merely traded one source of neighbourly noise for another. Their new upstairs neighbours are at their most active between midnight and 5 a.m. doing laundry, dropping things and dragging furniture across the floor. The reader is hoping to get the condominium board to begin legal proceedings shortly.

Another reader who calls himself Privacy Freak lives in a North Toronto semi. The two houses, divided by double-layered brick and plaster walls, have sound insulation so poor that when the neighbour's bedroom phone rang at night, he would answer his own phone.

When younger neighbours moved in, Privacy Freak would tell his friends that as much as he admired the neighbours' libido, he wished they would keep the head of their bed from banging against the party wall.

Privacy Freak eventually solved the Banging Betty problem by installing a "floating wall" with three overlapping layers of drywall to deaden the noise.

Ian MacMillan had a similar problem with next-door noise. On close investigation, he found that the electrical outlet boxes were installed back-to-back without insulation, and were acting as a noise conduit. He covered the outlets with duct tape, and put bookcases in front of them. That solved the problem, but I wonder whether this would present a fire safety issue.

Lynn has lived in her condominium in the Entertainment District for six months. The hallway and elevators are on the other side of her bedroom wall and she says the noise is unbearable, particularly during the summer party season.

If you're buying a rowhouse, townhouse, semi-detached house or condo, it might be a good idea to forget the granite countertops or other frills and instead spring for a double common wall as a sound barrier in the bedroom. Ask your builder about sound insulation.

Do you have a Moaning Myrtle or Banging Betty next door? Have you solved the problem? Have you tried and failed? I'd love to hear from you.

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