



## Everything You Need to Know About the Apartment You're Buying

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### *Before You Buy It*

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#### FOR YOUR CLIENTS...

*Editors' note: Larry Ubell and Matthew Barnett of Accurate Building Inspectors in New York City compiled this information for their website to advise clients about the importance of having a home inspection before buying a co-op or condo in the city. We think their advice for clients and home inspectors applies beyond the Big Apple. Check it out.*

Don't walk blindly into a big purchase. Whether a co-op or condominium is in a new or vintage structure, hiring a licensed home inspector may save you a lot of heartaches and thousands of dollars in the future. Caveat emptor—let the buyer beware.

#### **A Holistic View**

It's the perfect studio apartment—it comes with a parking space and a rooftop garden. You've taken a good look at

the apartment, but what about the building that surrounds that perfect apartment?

#### **The Building's Board Minutes**

When considering an apartment for purchase, start by asking to see the board minutes. You should know that not everything is in the minutes. Items may have been left out, not for malicious reasons, but because the management or building managers may not have the construction expertise to analyze the building systems or that perfect apartment. If you have any unanswered questions about the building, this is a good

time to hire a trained and licensed building inspector to help you uncover any problems that would affect the apartment and its livability.

### **The Building's Infrastructure**

A trained, licensed home inspector will help you understand the mechanical and electrical systems that support the apartment. An aging infrastructure, including the boiler, water heater and plumbing or electrical systems, can work fine if systems are well maintained, but problems with these systems could become constant interruptions to your life. One area to look for is whether the building has or may develop dampness issues. Is there evidence of a previous flood from a mechanical failure such as a pipe leak or burst? Is the location prone to a natural flood disaster? Though most pre-purchase inspections do not focus on environmental issues, it is important to consider that additional testing might be necessary to determine if leaks or flooding have made the apartment or building unsafe. A home inspector can advise you on these issues.

### **Who Owns the Problem?**

Typically, major building systems (for example, boiler, sewage drain lines and electrical boxes) are the co-op or condominium building manager's responsibilities, and systems and appliances within the apartment are the unit owner's responsibilities. So, when is an apartment problem a building problem or a unit problem? Does the condo association have enough money in reserve to pay for repairs or replacements? For example, a structural problem in the apartment is a building issue that may influence the long-term costs of owning the apartment. Therefore, when building maintenance issues are discovered, they should be discussed and negotiated before signing a contract, not after closing.

### **A Legal Perspective**

When making any major property purchase, you might consider talking with a real estate attorney who can advocate on your behalf and help protect you from pitfalls and traps throughout the transaction process. Your attorney may recommend a thorough inspection—this information can be used to compare your goals with the purchase costs and to negotiate a better deal. Food for thought: Clients who decline an inspection may be required by their attorney to sign a "no inspection request form."

### **The Inspector's Checklist**

The following list covers some of the issues we've found during thousands of pre-purchase apartment inspections. To correct some of these defects, you may have to bear the cost of repair, increases in monthly maintenance or additional assessments.

#### **Building's Public Spaces**

- Evidence of vandalism
- Stair and emergency stair defects
- Noxious odors in halls, cellar or basement
- Ventilation systems not working
- Entry door not working properly
- Apartment intercom or doorbell not working

- Elevator(s) do not level off at floors or landings
- Elevator clatters, makes noise during operation
- Side yards not being maintained and cleaned
- Building facade loose and cracked bricks
- Building shifting parapet wall
- Building settlement and failure evidence
- Sidewalk vault deteriorating, imminent danger of failure
- Is there an entity in the building that could prove to be objectionable (odors or noise)?
- Cheap construction materials

### **Apartment**

- Entry door lock needing replacement
- Entry door hinges needing replacement
- Poor visibility through peephole
- Noxious odors from previous owner's pets or smoking habits
- Sewer gas odor
- Water-damaged flooring
- Water-damaged leaks
- Active water leaks from apartment above
- Floor uneven, trip hazard
- Loose and sagging plaster
- Cracking due to settlement
- Missing or inoperative smoke detectors
- Fireplace missing damper
- Fireplace poor draft
- Leaking or poorly installed radiators
- Why was the apartment freshly painted?

## **Electrical**



- Inadequate amount of electrical outlets
- Improperly wired electrical outlets
- Electrical outlets that do not work
- Excessive use of extension cords
- No ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) in bathroom or kitchen
- Installed GFCIs do not trip
- Light switch next to shower or tub
- Electrical service (amperage) not adequate for apartment
- Bonded electrically subpanel box
- Exposed and open electrical wiring
- Electrical system not properly grounded

## **Plumbing**

- Dishwasher waste pipe not properly installed
- Sink traps not vented
- Improperly installed sink drain traps
- Low water pressure
- Hot water too hot or not hot enough
- Cold water is hot (piping mix-up)
- Sewer gas odors
- Leak under sinks
- Missing sink isolation valves
- Sink valve leaks

- Sink cracked, chipped or defective
- Leaking shower pans
- Aging and deterioration of waste pipes

## **Kitchen**



- Aging and deterioration of cabinets and countertops
- Poorly installed cabinets, door, drawers
- Stove hood not vented to exterior of structure
- Kitchen has no window or ventilation
- Gas stove not connected properly
- Stovetop burner not level

## **Bathroom**



- Door lock has no emergency opening method
- Loose, broken or missing tile
- Poorly grouted tile
- Leaking shower stall
- Active water leak from apartment above
- Does bathroom leak into lower apartment?
- Sewage backup residue in bathtub and shower bottom

- Sewer gas odors
- Room too small for toilet bowl clearance
- Door contacts toilet bowl or sink
- Low water pressure
- Toilet bowl does not flush properly
- Toilet bowl loose or leaks at base
- Showerhead loose, tub spout loose

### **Windows**

- Windows difficult to open or close
- Broken sash weight or spring balances
- Broken hermetic seals
- Broken glass
- Water and air leaks
- Missing child safety window-guards
- Lot-line-window(s)—could be lost as a result of adjacent lot-line construction

### **Terrace**

- Guard railing loose and defective
- Guard railing corroded and deteriorated
- Guard railings are climbable for children
- Decking broken or loose
- Blocked drains
- Leakage from terrace above
- Water leakage of terrace door flows into apartment
- Location compromises security

### **Vermin**

- Roaches, mice, rats, traps

- Insecticide residue

### **Noise**

- Running building ventilators or equipment
- Elevator next to apartment (noise)
- Garbage shaft next to apartment
- Adjacent building noise
- Rooftop building equipment noise
- Basement mechanical equipment noise

### **Fire Protection**

- Fire escapes not maintained properly
- Loose and missing stepladder treads
- Excessive corrosion and deterioration
- Window air-conditioning units projecting onto fire escape landing
- Debris and storage on fire escape landings
- Emergency stair doors locked or not working properly
- Missing or inoperative emergency lighting
- Fire stair defects, trip hazards
- Fire stair missing and loose handrails
- Fire stair and hall with cumulative debris

### **Roof**

- Aging and deteriorating roof membrane
- Poor condition of flashing elements
- Excessive ponding of water
- Active water leaks into apartments
- Rooftop building equipment not maintained
- Chimney evidence of deterioration

- Vent stacks broken or deteriorated

### **Heating and Domestic Hot Water Heating**

- Aging and deteriorating heating equipment
- Boiler using Cold No. 5 or No. 6 oil
- Combustion gas leakage from heating equipment
- Missing or broken boiler safety controls
- Poorly maintained heating equipment

*Accurate Building Inspectors® was founded in 1961 by Alvin and Estelle Ubell; Lawrence Ubell joined the company in 1983 and currently is the president and chief inspector (partner). Alvin Ubell is a vice president and senior inspector (partner); he is also a retired ASHI member. Matthew Barnett is a vice president and senior inspector (partner); he joined Accurate Building Inspectors® in 1986.*

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