

If these walls could talk...

...they'd tell you about the noise, the rats and other potential problems with your new apartment. Since they can't, here's how to arm yourself before signing a lease.

By **Vadim Liberman** Photographs by **Thomas Mangieri**

So you've finally found "the one." You're enamored of everything about this apartment, from the pressed-tin ceilings to the promise of early-morning light, and you're eager to take the plunge. But before you hand over that wad of cash to your broker and sign the lease, you might want to get better acquainted with your potential home. Is the tenant upstairs the chairman of a midnight-clog-dancing club? Is your prospective landlord friends with Abe Hirschfeld? There's only one way to find out: Investigate. You'll save yourself heartache if you uncover your apartment's issues before getting in too deep. In a perfect world, you'd be able to take your time and check on everything from the landlord's track record to the apartment's rent history. But in the "snooze and you lose" world of NYC real estate, you usually have time to find out just the basics. We give you both options, so read on—before it's too late.

SOUND ADVICE

To suss out the noise situation, first gag your blabbering broker. Now what do you hear? Light footsteps? Faint music? That's normal. But who knows if the slackers across the hall blast Nine Inch Nails from 2 to 4am?

In a perfect world: Visit both the neighborhood and the apartment itself at various times of day—especially at night, when other tenants are bound to be home and partyers will be vacating nearby nightspots. You could also



WHAT A DIFFERENCE THE DAY MAKES, PART I Visit your prospective address in the afternoon and you'll probably find a quiet, tranquil block (turn page)...

call your local City Council member (the main council office at 212-788-7100 will direct you) to find out if there's any noisy construction planned in or around the building. Most important, talk to other tenants, who will surely be happy to gripe if they are often awakened in the middle of the night.

In the real world: Know that if you're on the ground floor or near a stairwell or an elevator, you're more likely to hear people pass your apartment—especially the tanked ones. Also, check the acoustics in your stairwell and hallways to see how loud your neighbors' voices will sound as they clomp by your door. Nearby bars, subways, hospitals, college dorms, homeless shelters, and police and fire stations are bound to create a ruckus—as will a major street or avenue. If there's a carpet on the floor, check to see if there's a thick pad underneath it; that will cut down on the din from below—and provide insulation that could lower your heating bill.

RISK FACTOR

Unless you're eager to see yourself as a crime victim on the 6 o'clock news, do a safety check on the new object of your affection and on its surrounding streets.

In a perfect world: Go to the New York Police Department's website (nyc.gov/nypd) to access neighborhood stats for recent crimes. (You'll have to know your precinct; to find out, call the NYPD at 212-374-6735.) Just as a new flame looks better through beer

goggles than in unforgiving daylight, a neighborhood can look quite different after nightfall than it did when you visited on a Sunday afternoon. Drop by at various times: Are the streets bustling? Is it a ghost town after midnight? Do cops patrol the area? Are squatters puking on your doorstep?

APARTMENTS

In the real world: Conduct your own little lockdown operation. Do doors, windows and the security gates on windows latch completely? Does the intercom sound clear, or fuzzier than the announcements on the subway? Are the building's mailbox area, halls and doorways well lit? When it comes to avoiding predators, mirrors in public corridors are a plus.

PEST PATROL

You're certainly not hoping for creepy-crawler roommates, so inspect meticulously.

In a perfect world: To learn about the building's history of vermin-related violations, head to your borough's office of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, or HPD (212-863-8000), where you can purchase records of past reported problems.

In the real world: Look for crevices, since every floor and wall crack provides a potential entryway for critters (rats can squirm through openings as tiny as half an inch). "And be sure to look for rodent poop—especially behind the stove," adds Jenny Laurie, director of the citywide tenants organization Metropolitan Council on Housing (212-979-0611). Look in cupboards and closets for traps, too, because where there are traps, there are unwanted creatures.

THE HEAT IS ON—OR IS IT?

Because you want some hot loving from your place—in the form of heat and steamy showers—know how reliable that warmth will be.

In a perfect world: If heat is not included in the rent, get a sense of what you'll be shelling out to ConEd by making a written request to your landlord to see what it has cost tenants in the past; you're entitled to this info, thanks to an energy law called the Truth in Heating Provision. Furthermore, check to see that the building's boiler is up to code at the borough's Department of Buildings (DOB) office (find your local branch by calling 212-312-8000), where you'll find public-access computer terminals. Your borough's HPD office can also help you research past violations.

In the real world: Find out if you'll control the unit's temperature and if every room has heating, and check the hot water flow (and pressure) by turning on faucets. But be aware that once you've moved in, you can lodge complaints about a lack of heat and hot water by calling the city's complaint line at 212-824-HEAT. The rules are: From October through May, if the

outdoor temperature is below 55 degrees between 6am and 10pm, then the apartment must be heated to at least 68 degrees. Between 10pm and 6am, it must be at least 55 degrees inside. So get a thermometer.

A THORN IN YOUR SIDE

Your apartment comes with instant baggage: the landlord, sometimes accompanied by a fall guy in the form of a super. And getting to know them is as important as making sure your toilet flushes.

In a perfect world: If you're really enterprising, you can trek to the borough's housing court to find out if there have been cases

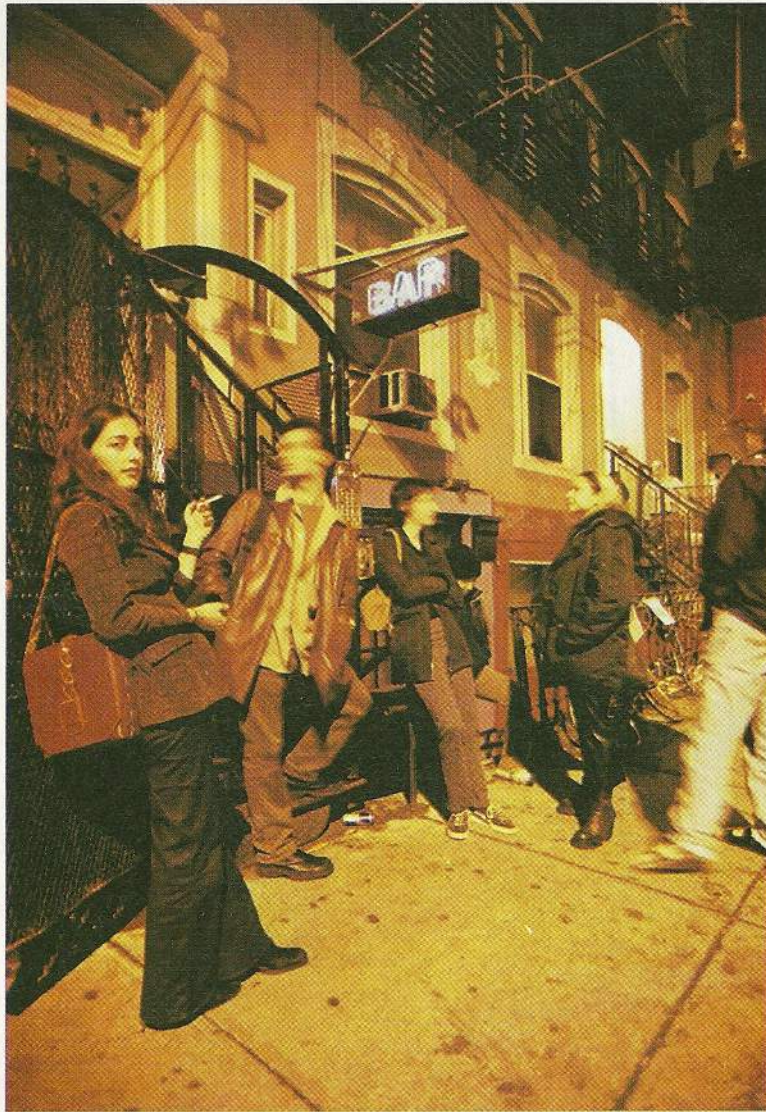
floors, ceilings, paint, etc.) through HPD.

In the real world: Ask the tenants in the building how they like the landlord and/or the super, and how quickly problems are remedied. Also, look around the place for wall and ceiling cracks, peeling wallpaper or paint, linoleum tears, chipped tiles, stained floors, squeaky stairs, nonworking appliances, running toilets, drafty window casings—you name it. The landlord may promise to fix this or replace that, but as Met Council's Laurie says, "If it's not in writing, it doesn't exist." So before signing the lease, take photos and write down everything you want done. If you plan on repairing things yourself, write that on the lease, too, and negotiate a rent reduction in exchange.

WHAT PRICE FREEDOM?

Your landlord can charge you whatever he pleases—unless the apartment is rent-stabilized, meaning (usually) that it's in a building constructed before 1974, with six or more units, and has a rent of \$2,000 or less.

In a perfect world: Find out if the place is rent-stabilized by looking up the building's address at housingnyc.com/questions/zip.html. To learn whether the landlord has raised the rent beyond its legal limit, bring a copy of the lease to the borough's office of the statewide Division of Housing and Community Renewal (718-739-6400). The amount it can be upped varies each year, depending on what the city's Rent Guidelines Board decides in its annual vote (and it can go beyond the limit if there have been "major renovations"). If you don't have a lease yet, one housing expert suggests buying a standard rent-stabilized lease from a stationery shop, filling it out with the proposed rent and forging the landlord's signature (shhh...this is illegal). "They'll never know the difference," the adviser says—as does a DHCR representative. If you find the rent to be illegal, play it slick and take the apartment, advises the Met



WHAT A DIFFERENCE THE DAY MAKES, PART II ...so try to drop by again at night, when the peace may be broken by blaring music and rowdy bar crowds.

filed against the building's owner—or against tenants by a particularly litigious landlord. Also, a nonprofit tenant-rights group like the Community Training Resource Center (212-964-7200) will scrutinize a proposed lease free of charge; this will tell you if you're entering into a fair deal. Or, head to the borough's DOB office and examine the building's history of maintenance complaints and violations pertaining to elevators, boilers, plumbing and electrical work. You can access other violations (for

Council. Then, immediately file a complaint with the DHCR to have the rent lowered—you may eventually find yourself staying there for free for a while, as you live off the excess rent you paid. Of course, if you can't afford the illegally inflated rent, and don't have the time or energy to drag your case through the sluggish court system, you're better off finding another place.

In the real world: If you can afford it, take the apartment—and then investigate the rent history. ■