

# WANTED: well managed apartments

The sale of apartments can be hampered by a minefield of legal issues, maintenance problems and management mishaps. In fact, a brand new apartment building can pose as many problems as a well established one. Changing the way apartment buildings are managed is a complex mission but a network of dedicated apartment owners have been quietly achieving their goal across Australia. Story by Sue Williams.



**Sue Williams** is an apartment-owner, journalist and author who was the founder of the OCN and currently serves on its Executive Committee. She also wrote the book *Apartment Living: the complete guide to buying, renting, surviving and thriving in apartments with her partner, Jimmy Thomson*, published by ABC Books.

**A real estate agent** friend stopped me in the street the other day. “You know, we’re getting great prices for apartments in your building,” she said. “And they’re selling almost as soon as they go on to the market.”

Well, it is in a good area of Sydney, I reasoned, and it does seem a good time to buy with all the chaos in the financial markets. She stopped me dead. “No, it’s much more about how well-run your building is,” she

said. “It’s all credit to you guys on the Owners Corporation.”

So while location, location is always critical in every form of real estate, in apartments, it’s also about organisation. If potential purchasers can see that the current owners are making sure their apartment complex is properly maintained, are constantly updating its facilities, are building up a healthy sinking fund and have drawn up a planned schedule of

works well into the future, as well as keeping the way in which it’s managed totally transparent, that’s a huge bonus for everyone.

Yet that’s not always so easy to attain. When we started out in a brand new 134-unit block seven years ago, we were in chaos. We had terrible defects, the developer had appointed a building manager who plainly wasn’t up to the job – and refused to compile a defects report because of a clear conflict of



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interest – a Chair of the Executive Committee with financial links to the developer and a group of owners who had no idea what to do.

When the problems threatened to overwhelm us, however, we had the bright idea of approaching other buildings to see if they’d had similar experience of such difficulties. What we found shocked us: everyone in new, off-the-plan bought complexes were pretty much in the same mess. The result? Together with Executive Committee members of some of the biggest apartment buildings in Sydney, we formed an organisation, the Owners Corporation Network (OCN), to work together to help



each other over our respective hurdles.

That was seven years ago, and the OCN is still going strong today, turning into a national organisation with branches and associated bodies throughout the country, with more than 14,000 members drawn from both large stratas and small.

For us, it's important that strata complexes throughout Australia are well-run, well-resourced and those in charge are well-educated, as everybody then wins: owners, tenants, and all the professionals who work with us, including building and strata managers, and real estate agents.

But with so many reports of problems in

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strata – defects unrectified, fights between neighbours in the courts, parking problems, rows over pets, sudden special levies imposed because of lack of maintenance or unforeseen problems – the OCN has been

determined to try to extend its reach too.

As well as bi-monthly meetings, speakers and lots of networking opportunities, we also run regular public seminars on a variety of apartment topics to educate people further about how best to run their buildings. We've also just established a Helpline and e-mail address for our members to call or write in with any problems. We'll advise them on past experiences (and the knowledge gleaned over seven years of such hitches!) or put them in touch with professional help for specific difficulties.

The OCN has garnered enormous support from strata managers too, who see the value in having a much better educated set of owners to work with. With one strata firm, Strata Associates, enrolling their clients in the OCN, we now plan to roll out similar membership opportunities for the customers of other strata companies.

Some of our biggest supporters have turned out to be real estate professionals too. Initially wary, they've now embraced the organisation wholeheartedly, seeing how it's become a win-win situation for everyone who has anything to do with apartments.

"If only all buildings were like yours," my agent friend sighed the other day. Well, they could be. Just watch this space. The OCN's website is [www.ocn.org.au](http://www.ocn.org.au)