

MARGARET WENTE

The lowdown on living in the sky
Globe and Mail, Saturday, May. 14, 2011

A few days ago, my husband and I officially became the owners of a brand new condo. It took us a long time. For years, my husband swore he'd never move. He liked our little bungalow in the Beaches, with its smelly basement and its rotting eavestroughs and its endless streetcar ride to work. "Who wants to live in an overpriced glass box in the sky?" he would grouse.

When you are confronted with opposition such as this, there's only one thing you can do. You have to wait it out. This took several years. Now my husband boasts that it was his idea to move to Cachet Towers.

Cachet Towers isn't its real name, of course. The real name is more subtle and refined. It is meant to appeal to aging boomers who fear that condo living is basically vulgar. These people would never be caught dead in buildings named Pinnacle or Success. In fact, the entire sales campaign for Cachet Towers was designed to assure the target market (us) of their superior taste and sensibilities. Our building would be a magnet for artists and intellectuals, we were told, before a single unit was ever sold or built. To reinforce the point, all the floor plans were named for dead British writers.

I now know many things about buying a new condo that I can pass along to you. Since you are unlikely to read these things in the condo ads or the real estate section, I'm happy to share.

The first thing to know is that the move-in date is a total fabrication. If they say it will be two years, it will probably be four. By then, you will have driven yourselves completely nuts trying to figure out when or if to sell your house, and what to do then. Some friends who also moved into Cachet Towers spent nine months living in their office, out of garbage bags. This is not uncommon. We sold our house and rented a halfway condo for a few months, which stretched into a year and a half.

The second thing to know is that if you want the builder's wine fridge, it will cost \$5,000. Upgrades are a racket. Also, picking your hardware and finishes is a process that's designed to make you totally insecure. Are you really going to settle for the standard-issue doorknobs? Surely you deserve something more intellectual.

But never mind. By the time you move in, you won't remember what you picked because it was so long ago.

For some reason, I expected that our new condo unit would look just like the model suite in the ads. The moment we turned the key, all would be serene and perfect. Instead, we moved in to a construction site. There were large cracks in the plaster, and nothing was quite finished. In Ontario, we learned, the legal definition of a "habitable dwelling" is something that has running water. It does not include shower doors, an elevator that stops at your floor or a place to hang your clothes. We learned that it's important to make friends with the workmen, whom you must persuade to take pity on you. My friend Virginia makes them cappuccino and fresh-baked cookies. This is far more effective than yelling at the people in the customer care centre, whose job is to write down your complaints and throw them in the garbage.

Eventually we got used to picking our way through construction debris. And now that the workers are leaving, we'll sort of miss being woken at dawn by the sounds of drills and table saws. Now the rest is up to us. We still have boxes full of stuff that we are afraid to open. There are no curtains in the bedroom and we have no idea how to operate the stove, which seems to have been designed by a deranged German rocket scientist. Apparently we can sign up and take a lesson.

There are plusses and minuses to condo living. We like the neighbourhood and the views. We can take the subway to work and pick up dinner at the gourmet grocery, a.k.a. the Hundred-Dollar Store. We have friends we can visit in our bare feet. Our parking space is way too small. We miss our garden, but not too much.

As for artists and intellectuals, I have to say that Cachet Towers is a little disappointing. People seem pretty ordinary. They don't sit around reading Proust or performing string quartets. Mostly, they sit around gossiping and griping like everybody else. They gripe about the developer, the taxes, the flowers in the lobby and the condo fees, which are twice as high as they expected, then congratulate each other on how wise and smart they are to be there. These discussions are a crucial part of condo culture.

Last week, we got a final bill for land transfer taxes, reserve funds and other stuff we'd never heard of. It was shockingly astronomical. "I told you so!" cackled our friend the Condo Queen, who's been warning us about the pitfalls of condo ownership ever since we fell for Cachet Towers all those years ago. But there's no going back now. We're stuck with our glass box in the sky. And we kind of like it.