

Topics: Central Park West Side Story

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By LINDA GROVER

Take the normal household-er's headache—the mortgage, the garbage, the stopped-up sink, the ridiculous light bill—then multiply by twenty, and you can understand the problems in our self-owned, self-managed West Side apartment building. A few years ago we were just impersonal New York apartment dwellers who were forced to form a cooperative or face having our house torn down.

We were not commune enthusiasts. But having come together for the sake of survival, we now manage to get along in a series of constantly shifting alliances, trying hard to love all our neighbors, if not concurrently, then at least consecutively.

The sheer numbers make things complicated enough—thirty-five bicycles lying around in the basement, a hundred and thirty rooms with lights left blazing—but what further compounds every difficulty is the variety of emphatic views on how to deal with it. Sometimes we don't even agree on what the problem is; while half of our families discuss ways to make the house warmer, the other half declare they are too hot already, and compelled to live with windows wide open all winter.

The lobby décor is another case in point—always an emotional one—with the new bright paint seen by one group as warm, vibrant vermilion, and by another as bordello red. Without a landlord or agent as buffer all we can do is to pass these resentments around among ourselves. Fortunately, most of the personal schisms don't last long; for while people living side by side in the suburbs can ignore each other for years, vertically stacked homeowners find that elevators are very small spaces in which to avoid speaking, and the intimacy of a shared plumbing leak frequently produces *détente*.

Children as Peacemakers

Other peacemakers are the children, who pay no attention to any of our intrigues. Sent to borrow a can of tomatoes, they go directly to the neighbor whom you've just slammed your door on.

At our house important matters are often settled with dispatch; it's the little ones that linger on. But we are sworn to keep talking—forever if necessary—until some viable compromise is found. We had, for example, lengthy debate over the appropriateness of some of the notices on the bulletin board which hangs outside the ele-

vator. (It was an inviting item about the burglar alarm being out of order that first caused a little stir.) Then a chiding note requesting late monthly payments was displayed on the evening one tenant had important dinner guests. The decision of the directors, painfully hammered out in a late night meeting, called for two bulletin boards, one for show and one for blow.

Happily, our untidy and verbose committee methods have proven the absolutely cheapest way to run a building. Our lady president, confronted with a \$6,000 estimate to repair a leaky boiler, which the miserly board of directors refused to approve, simply began chopping holes in the basement floor "where it looked damp" until she found a quite inexpensive hole in a supply pipe.

And I remember the time the Pigeon Elimination Committee saved a lot of money. After researching all the goos, pastes and electric shock treatments on the market, they solved the problem with a \$40 ABM system—a belligerent young hawk we named Melvin Laird, who was installed in a front window where he could menace anything approaching by air. It worked.

For all the bickering and battling, life in our collective

has more to recommend it than just being cheaper and more lively. It's also better. However we quarrel, the neighborly things are never withheld, and the essential privacy never violated. I count my residential blessings:

The certain knowledge that anyone in the house will take in a package, look for a lost cat, or warn of an impending parking ticket.

Passing on Clothes

The pleasant traditions—an Easter egg roll; the Pumpkin Cup awarded yearly to a small, costumed trick-or-treater; the backyard skating rink with its visiting children who come on winter afternoons to borrow skates from the communal box. And a small striped jacket, twelve years old, which has been worn by five different boys in the building.

These things provide a warm haven in this cold armed camp of a city. If our contact with our fellow residents is sometimes abrasive, so be it: it's contact.

In a city where most people merely live next to one another, somehow we manage to live together.

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Linda Grover, West Side housewife, is the author of the newly published, "The House Keepers."