

# 'The builder can just about get away with anything.'—apartment owner

Continued from page 1.

Each shortcut may amount to little savings, but many contractors agree that in a large complex, it can mean the difference between going broke or making a profit.

"A contractor may start out with a fixed price and before he knows it, the price of plywood has doubled, his loan interest has risen, the roofing costs more and his help is expecting a raise.

"That's why builders use materials that are at minimum standards and sometimes below," one construction worker said.

he'd never know it," George Tate, apartment owner and builder, said.

"The builder can just about get away with anything," he added.

"If he really wants to, the builder can do anything. The inspections are made before the walls are covered up so he probably could go back and pull out anything he wanted to," Ken Davis, structural inspector for Chapel Hill said.

"But we do make surprise inspections so I would hope that sort of thing wasn't going on."

Some residents, however, feel it is up to

many people either won't look for faults or have no idea where to start.

"On the list of priorities, price comes first, then location and then design. Structural soundness is near the bottom of the list," Tate said.

For those who want to know how to recognize a well-built apartment, the following is a list of suggestions from construction workers and builders:

**Heating and insulation**—If at all possible, check the attic and wherever the furnace is located. There should be at least six inches of insulation in the attic and if it is possible to glance inside the walls, there should be about three inches there.

However, since these regulations were only added to the building code in 1975, before complaining about missing insulation, make sure the apartment wasn't built before then.

Also check the furnace ducts. If these same ducts are used for air-conditioning, they are required by law to be insulated.

**Appliances**—Since many apartments now include dishwashers, garbage disposals, stoves and refrigerators as standard features, make sure all of these work.

Check the kitchen fan. If it is the type that blows out the air right above the stove, it is required to have a charcoal filter in it (builders say the other type is better anyway).

And if the refrigerator is on when you walk in, one builder suggests to unplug it. Much can be learned from the way it shuts off. If it sounds like a broken crop duster that may be a sign of future trouble.

**Walls and floors**—Beginning with the walls, use a bright light (200-250 watts) and scan the walls. This enables you to see any flaw that's there. If you notice the studs are two feet apart, the builder was taking short cuts. Be careful.

If you notice cracks in the walls or on the edge of the ceiling, don't panic. Usually, this only means settling has occurred. But if the apartment is new or the cracks are many, this might be something else.

Rayvon Williams has suggested that the

potential dweller look at the carpet. Had he noticed that the carpet was rotten underneath, he might have been warned of his calamity.

If there are any sags or slopes in the floor, however, be cautious. This is a definite sign of faulty construction. If the apartment is furnished—or even if it is not—try moving the furniture around. Many times a sagging floor or a weak piece of plywood may not be noticed until a sofa is placed on it.

**Bathroom**—Check this room out thoroughly. State law requires the floor to be waterproof, so look for cracks in the caulking—one sign is loose tile.

The tub should have an overflow hole and make sure all bars, towel or otherwise, are very secure to the walls. And don't forget to test the water. One lady, recalls a builder, had her pipes tapped into a sewer line.

**Doors and windows**—Check the windows. It is not unheard of for all the locks to pop off the first time they are used, so test them.

Check both doors and windows for air

leaks. And be sure to test the outside locks, with the key if possible.

**Painting**—If you are the least bit fussy about cleaning, make sure the walls are enamel. This appears as a glossy finish. It is easier to clean and it lasts longer.

The paint job can also tell you just how much effort might have been put into the rest of the apartment.

Many of these things may seem like common sense and some may seem a bit strange to the person showing you around, but these checks can save you money and inconvenience later.

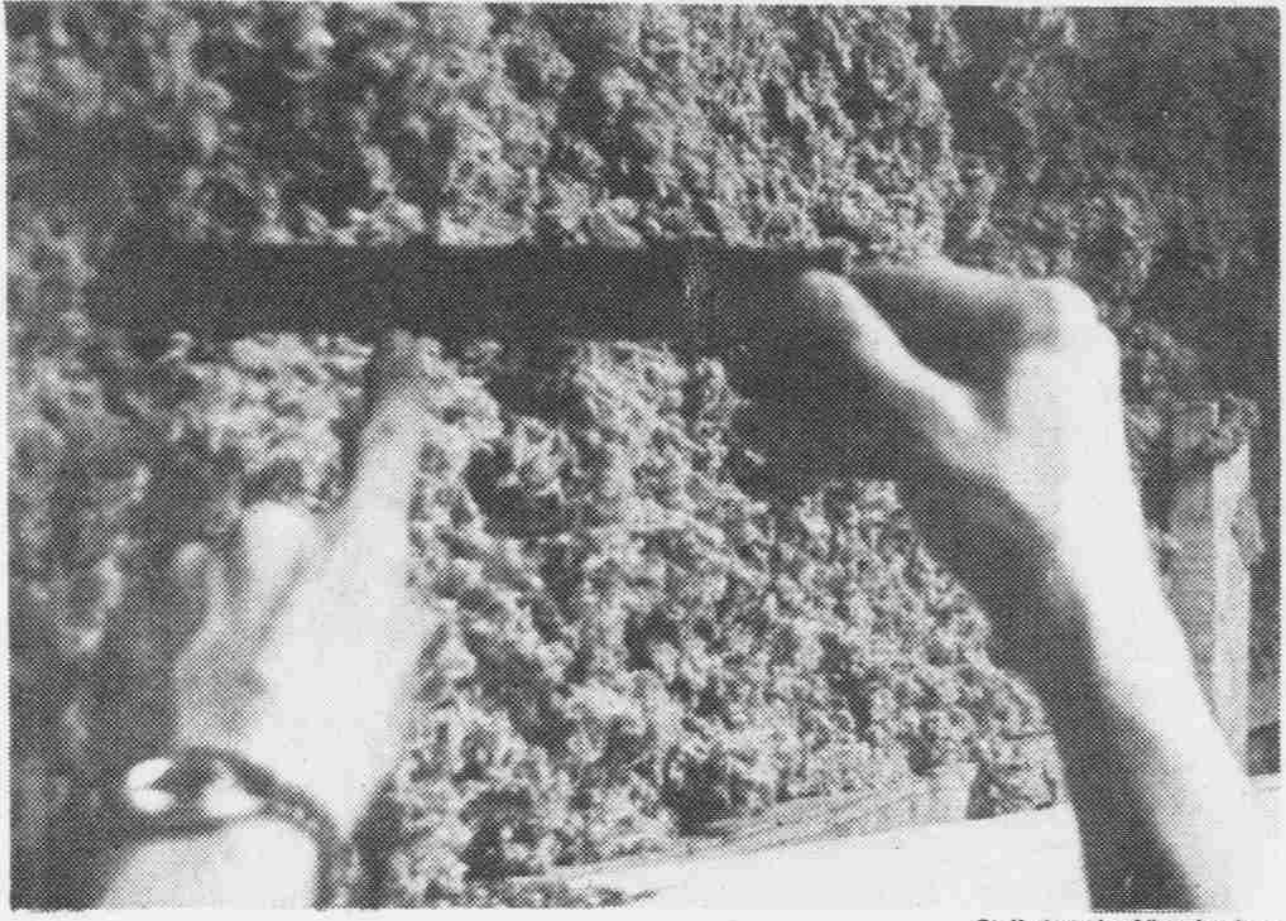
But remember that not all the state codes were made 20 years ago, when the apartment

might have been built. If there are any questions, the building inspector can help.

"We wish more people would call when they see these things. If there is a problem, we will contact the builder and let him know what we've done about it," Davis said.

Even if you check the construction thoroughly (as Rayvon Williams did), it might pay to ask the owner about calamities such as floods or caved-in floors.

"You might be the only one with a written guarantee against a bathroom falling in your bedroom, but if that ever happens you'll also be the only one who's protected against it," Williams said.



Staff photo by Allen Jernigan

Area apartment has only two inches of ceiling insulation, not the six inches required by the state building code.

But defects in construction are not the only casualties of a time-loss due to a carpenter's mistakes. If the price of the project is increased, this may be passed on to the apartment dweller in the form of rent.

"There have been projects that have gone up over a million dollars due to mistakes and in most cases, that will be passed on as an increase in rent," Brooks said.

While he feels many of these points are major reasons for the lack of quality in apartment construction, Brooks also feels builders have a different philosophy in constructing homes and apartments.

"Apartments are supposed to be built better than homes because they receive more wear. But builders still use more substandard materials in apartments than they ever would with homes," Brooks said.

Others, however, feel that the faults are a result of inefficient inspection. According to city law, each apartment must go through five different inspections: one for its foundation, a second for its framing, a third for its plumbing, a fourth for its electrical and heating work and a final inspection once the apartment is finished.

It is this final inspection that some builders feel is inefficient. "On the whole they do a pretty good job, but I could call in an inspector for my wall and after he left, take out all the studs and

the previous tenants to enforce the quality of construction.

"I think it's the fault of whoever is living there not to get the mistake corrected," Billy Williams said.

But even if the apartment is built poorly,

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