

What to look for when buying a

terraced house or apartment



So you're thinking of buying a

terraced house or apartment?

Moving to a terraced house or apartment has become an increasingly popular choice in recent years. Like buying any new home though, it's hard to find the perfect property that meets your every need. We all have to make trade-offs in terms of things like location, price, number of bedrooms, garden size, covered or uncovered parking and overall quality.

You need to decide what's important to you...



It pays to look around. Use this guide to ensure you ask the right questions and find a property that's right for you.

What's in this guide?

This guide is designed to help you seek out your next home or investment property. It takes you on a journey helping you to prepare and suggests what to look out for while you're on your way and once you arrive.

We've also included information on building quality, design and some useful tips for reducing noise in your home.

There's even a section dealing with a variety of legal and body corporate issues to help you get to grips with this important aspect of buying a terraced house or apartment.

At the back of the guide there's a fold-out section for you to record your thoughts about each property and to compare the houses or apartments you've seen.



Why are people choosing to live in terraced houses and apartments?

Terraced houses and apartments vary greatly in style, cost, design, location and quality, and in the types of people who choose to live in them. For most it's a lifestyle thing. They like the safety, security, convenience and low maintenance. Many enjoy the location, being close to shops and services, parks, cafés, work and public transport. For some it's the affordability of an area that would generally be out of their reach.

But what don't people like? What are they less happy about? Construction quality, landscaping, parking, traffic and noise levels can cause dissatisfaction. Systems for rubbish disposal and recycling, the quality of management, and the pace of repairs and maintenance also come into question.

So what's different about living in a terraced house or apartment?

- Good design and construction must be there at the outset as it's hard to change the structure later.
- Maintenance work will usually be looked after by a body corporate.
- Neighbouring houses or apartments are a lot closer together so noise and privacy issues become more important.
- Water and other services are often provided communally affecting how, when and who you pay.
- Shared spaces such as accessways, car parking and outdoor living areas are often provided and should be well designed.
- Gardens or outdoor areas are often much smaller, with apartments usually having balconies only.
- Decisions about how the development is maintained, how it can be altered and day-to-day management issues may be made by an owners' committee or at an annual meeting of the body corporate. There will also be rules about pets, parking and alterations.

1

You're on your way



You've read the advertisement or heard about a particular house or apartment and you're on your way.

One of the great advantages of living in a terraced house or apartment is that they are often located within easy walking distance of shops, parks, public transport, schools, libraries and other community facilities. Entertainment opportunities such as cinemas and clubs are often just a stone's throw away. Some terraced houses and apartments aren't so well located though. That's why you should take in your surroundings and the neighbourhood as you go.

Choosing the right location

If you buy into the area, how easy will it be to get to work? Is it near public transport and how frequent is the service? How close is the local dairy, supermarket, medical centre and sports ground? If you have kids, where is the nearest school? Are there safe places for them to play?

Remember your garden or outdoor living areas are likely to be smaller than in a traditional detached house and, as a result, you may want easy access to some of the facilities mentioned.

As you travel along think about how the area might change over time. While this might be difficult to predict, it's a good idea to take note of any undeveloped land to look into at a later date.



- Public transport
- Shops
- Parks
- Schools
- Community facilities

2

Now that you've arrived

You've arrived at the house or apartment and you're getting a feel for the area.

The character of the local neighbourhood can be as important as the overall design of the terraced house or apartment you're looking at. Try to get a good feel for the street and surrounding area.



Helpful hint

Areas are generally safer when they are easily visible from nearby houses, well lit at night and have a reasonable amount of passing traffic. Low front boundary fences enable good views of the street to provide an extra sense of security.

Feel the street appeal

Take a look around before going inside. How safe does the street feel? Does the neighbourhood have a good look and feel? Is there adequate visitor parking in the area? Are any neighbouring businesses likely to be a nuisance?

Have the local streets and accessways within the development been designed to reduce car speeds and prevent accidents? Is the street attractively landscaped? Do garages or high fences dominate the street?



- Sense of safety
- Neighbourhood character
- Car parking
- Neighbouring businesses

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Before you step inside

You're just about to step inside and you're looking at the exterior of the building.

Spend a few minutes checking out the external appearance of the building. Take a look at how the building is constructed to ensure it's both good quality and value for money.



Helpful hints

Many terraced houses and apartments have plastered or textured finishes on their exterior walls. These finishes are created using a range of construction methods that vary considerably in terms of building and maintenance costs and long-term durability. Where sheet cladding is used, heavily textured surfaces can help hide the joints between the sheets better than smooth finishes.

Detailed design features such as small overhangs provide shelter above doors and windows, and can help prevent leaks occurring. Wide eaves help to prevent staining and leaks caused by water running off the roof or overflowing from gutters.

Appearance

Has enough effort been made with the appearance? Look for some variety in the form and architectural detail of the building. Are there any elements such as wide eaves, pergolas, front porches and shutters that add character to the building? If you're looking at a terraced house, can you tell where one house stops and the next one starts? You'll find this will greatly improve the overall appearance of a row of terraced houses.

Construction Quality

How durable are the construction materials and their

finishes, and will they require a lot of maintenance? Are there any visible construction flaws or signs of leaks that make the building look scruffy or run-down? These may be symptoms of serious structural problems and fixing them can be difficult, especially if a decision needs to be agreed by the body corporate. Building consultants or inspection firms can carry out pre-purchase inspections – so, if in doubt, get it checked out by a professional.

If you want to find out more about different types of construction and their pros and cons, visit BRANZ website at www.branz.co.nz.

What to look out for

- Signs of leaks such as water staining, bubbling or peeling paint, mould or rot around doors, windows, eaves, gutters, balconies and at the base of walls. These are often the result of poor construction and insufficient care taken towards weatherproofing.
- Small gaps around doors, windows and balconies where water can leak into the wall cavity.
- Cracks and fine lines that occur when plastered finishes are used and incorrectly applied.
- Visible curves, lines and cracking in the wall cladding. These are a common problem with sheet cladding and become more visible over time as the timber framing moves with changes in moisture content.
- Large expanses of blank wall where sheet claddings are used which are more likely to show up minor imperfections and make the building look scruffy. Breaking the wall up with openings and other features will hide these and make it more attractive.



Variety in building form

Design features

Materials

Durability

Construction flaws

Signs of leaks

Pre-purchase inspection

4

Now you're inside

Your shoes are off and you've entered the house.



Helpful hint

When rooms are empty it can be difficult to judge how well you, your family and furniture will fit into a new home. Measure any large items of furniture before you leave home to see whether they will fit and consider the size of the rooms in comparison to your current home.

Living areas

Once you're inside, consider whether you'll be able to fit all your furniture in. Are the windows positioned to allow enough sunlight in? Is there an interesting view outside? And how easy will it be to cool your living areas in the hot summer months?

Given that your neighbours will be close by, consider how private your living areas are likely to be. It's a good idea to check with your local council what can be built on neighbouring properties as this can dramatically affect your views and privacy.

Bedrooms and bathrooms

If the bedrooms are upstairs will you be able to fit your beds and any other large furniture up the stairwell? Is there sufficient storage space for clothes, bed linen and towels? Are the bedrooms private enough or are they in clear view of your neighbours?

Does the bathroom have windows, and if not is there sufficient air extraction? Where is the plumbing located? Noise from your neighbours' shower or toilet may be a problem if the plumbing is in the shared wall.

Light and ventilation

How much sunlight will the kitchen and living areas get in the summer and winter? Terraced houses facing east or west get sunlight during the mornings and evenings, when it is needed most, whereas north-facing houses are more likely to get too hot in the summer.

Generally, terraced houses and apartments are warmer than older houses because of their shared walls. Having plenty of sunlight and air circulating through the house makes it a pleasant and healthy place to live. Letting sunlight in can help you to heat

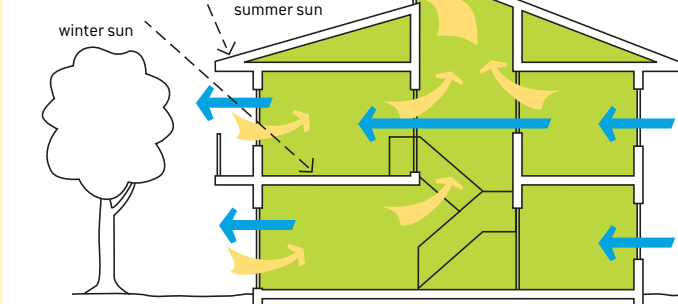
and cool your home, saving you money on your power bill.

How easy will it be to cool rooms during the summer? Which doors and windows can be opened and how widely to let air in? Can they be securely left open at night or when it's raining, and how much noise is likely to come through them? If noise is likely to be a problem you might be better served by an electric fan or air conditioning unit.

Are there any deciduous (leaf-shedding) trees, pergolas or shutters to provide shade during the summer but not in the winter?

Keeping the house cool

Shade from wide eaves, pergolas and shutters helps cool the house in summer but not in winter when the sun is lower in the sky.



Deciduous leafy trees provide summer shade.

Air circulates around the house through internal doors and windows.

Cool air is drawn into the house as hot air rises and escapes out of skylights and high windows.

- Room size
- Views and privacy
- Sunlight and orientation
- Shading
- Location of windows and doors
- Air circulation



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Stepping outside



You've had a good look through the house, now it's time to check outside.

Having a smaller garden or outdoor living area often goes hand in hand with moving to a terraced house or apartment. A well-designed private garden, courtyard or balcony can greatly improve the overall quality of the house or apartment.

Gardens, courtyards and balconies

Have a good look to see whether the garden, courtyard or deck meets your needs. Will it get enough sunlight, especially in winter when the sun is relatively low in the sky? Is it private enough, and if you have young children will they have enough space to play?

For balconies, will you be able to fit a table and enough chairs for a few guests, and is there a screen or partition between yours and your neighbour's balcony to give you greater privacy? If there is a garden or courtyard, is it next to the living room? If not, how likely is it that you will use it?

Helpful hint

Paving as much of the outdoor area as possible to cut down on gardening is becoming increasingly common. Pebbles, bark or shrubs are more environmentally friendly as they enable rainwater to soak into the ground rather than flowing into stormwater drains or flooding properties.

Communal gardens and facilities

As an alternative to private gardens and courtyards, some terraced houses and apartments offer a communal outdoor living area for the use of all residents. Often these areas include a swimming pool, tennis court or barbeque. Each property should still have a reasonable-sized balcony, and

the communal area should be designed to a high standard. While a pool or tennis court might seem like a great idea at the time,

think about how much use you'll make of them, remembering you will pay for them whether you use them or not. Make sure you're happy with the balance of private and shared outdoor living space, and that any communal areas are large and sunny enough.

Parking, storage and housekeeping

If you have a car is there a garage or off-street parking? How easy is it to drive in and out of? Ask to test it out if you're unsure. Is there sufficient storage space for gardening, sports or other leisure equipment?

Find out what the arrangements are for rubbish collection and recycling as it's quite common for all of the bags or bins to be stored outside one house or apartment before collection. If it's the property you're looking at, will this pose a problem for you?

Will you be able to fit all of your appliances into the laundry area and is its location ideal given the noise that washing machines and dryers can make? We'll give you some tips on noise later in the booklet. Also, is there a clothes-line outside to dry your clothes on? Hanging your clothes outside to dry saves power and money.

- Garden, courtyard or balcony
- Size, location, privacy and sunlight
- Communal gardens and facilities
- Garage size and location
- Rubbish collection and recycling
- Laundry and storage areas



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Controlling noise

Noise can be an issue when living in a terraced house or apartment.

Many things affect the way sound travels and how it is perceived. This includes size, location and furnishings of different rooms, the amount of noise from outside, and the type and quality of the construction materials used. Good design and construction can help reduce the amount of noise heard from outside your home or from your next door neighbours.



Helpful hints

Neighbouring windows and balconies should be a reasonable distance away, offset and not directly opposite so noise doesn't travel out of their windows and directly in through yours. Screens between balconies can provide privacy and act as noise barriers. When built as a solid panel, with no air gaps at the top or base of the panel, they help to prevent noise from next door travelling through your open windows.

Noise from outside

Noise from people and activities outside is often more noticeable than noise from your neighbours coming through a shared wall. Some people find they easily adjust to an increase in noise while others find it a problem.

Check out whether there are any local bars, roads,

schools or on-site facilities such as swimming pools and tennis courts that might be too noisy for you. Would living here differ from where you currently live? Are the bedrooms at the front or back? The further away from main roads or communal areas the quieter they will be. Remember noise is more noticeable at night when things quieten down.

Acoustic glazing helps reduce noise from outside but it will still come in if doors and windows are open.

Noise from your neighbours

The layout and plumbing of your neighbours' homes can affect the amount of noise you hear through shared walls and floors. Floor plans should be mirrored so bedrooms are next to, above or below neighbouring bedrooms, not your neighbours' living rooms or bathrooms which can be noisier. Wardrobes, storage spaces, and hallways can act as sound buffers between properties.

If you have neighbours above you, noise from footsteps can be an issue when hard surfaced floors such as tiles and timber are used. Carpets create less noise than hard surfaces which need an acoustic underlay and struggle to meet the minimum Building Code requirements known as IIC (Impact Insulation Class) ratings. It's worth keeping this in mind when viewing apartments in particular.

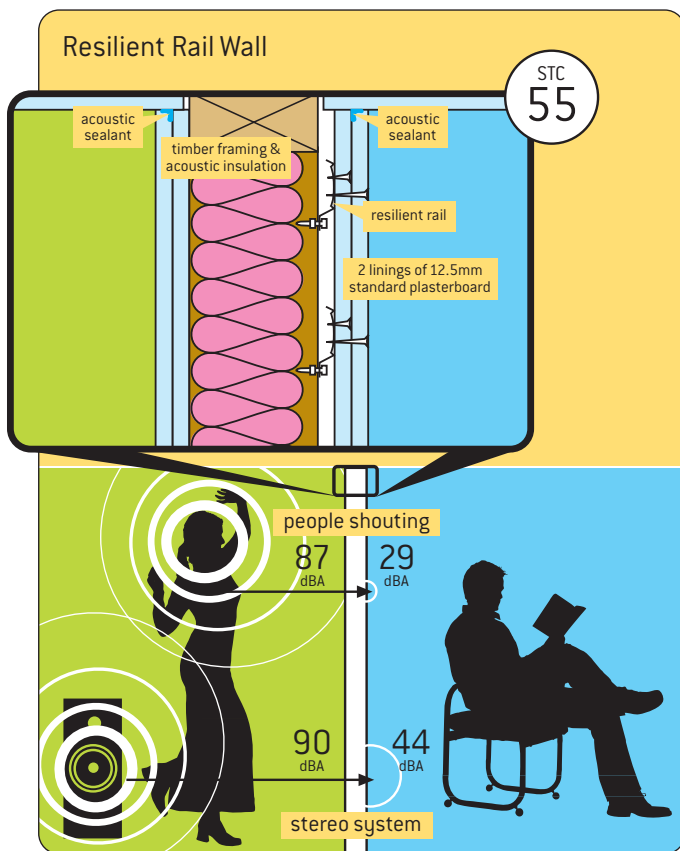
- Noisy activities in the area
- Location of communal areas
- Location of rooms and balconies
- Mirrored floor plans
- Noise from footsteps



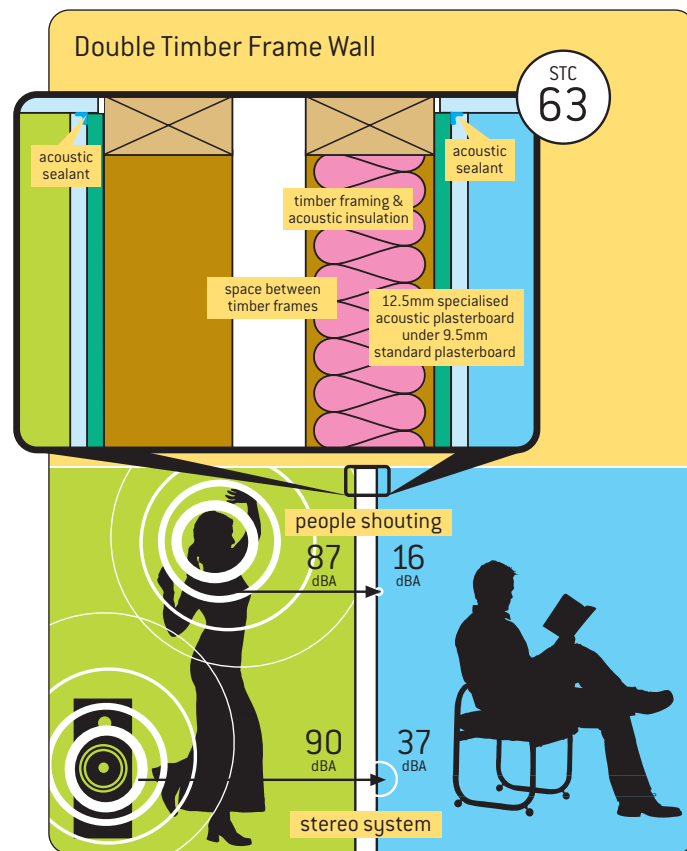
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Controlling noise

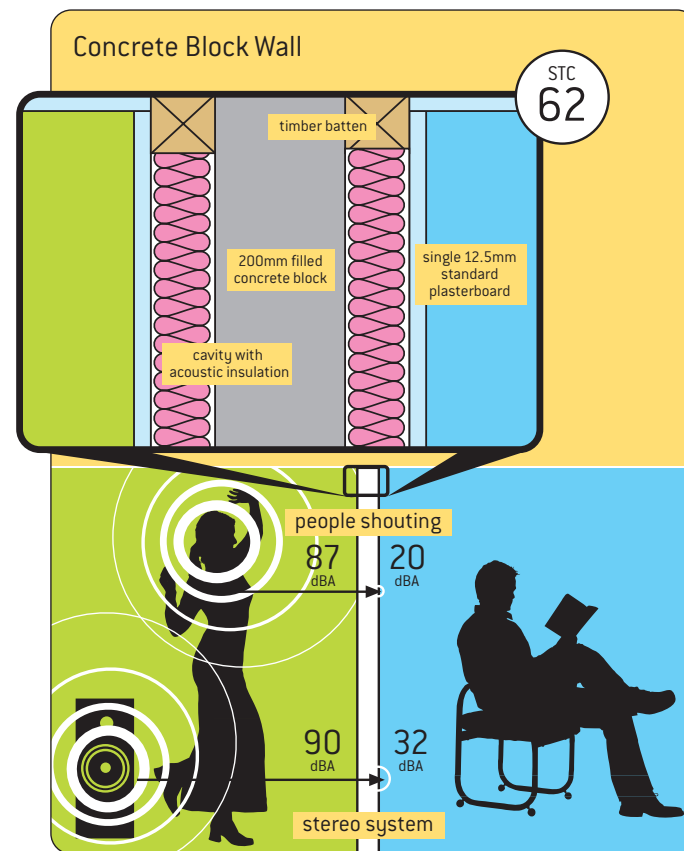
Common types of wall construction and their ability to screen sound.



A resilient rail on one side of this wall enables the plasterboard lining to vibrate independently of the framing. This reduces noise transferring through the structure of the wall but can be compromised by adding shelves, appliances or anything that might attach the plasterboard lining to the timber studs.



This wall ranges from STC 58 to 68 depending on the type and density of plasterboard lining used. Adding extra layers can improve its ability to screen noise. The cavity between the two timber frames prevents sound from transferring through the structure of the wall.



Concrete walls and floors are better at screening low frequency noise such as music. A cavity of at least 50mm on either side of the concrete, with insulation, is needed to help reduce noise from human voices.

The Building Code and STC ratings

The Building Code uses a STC (Sound Transmission Class) rating to measure how effective walls and floors are at screening noise. The higher the STC number, the better the soundproofing. Shared walls and floors must be built to a minimum standard of STC 55. Tests are not often carried out to ensure new buildings comply, and construction can be compromised by poor work and changes made after completion.

You'll need to consider the price of the property and your sensitivity to noise to determine whether the minimum standard will suit your needs. It's a good idea to employ an acoustic consultant to carry out an on-site test to check that walls and floors meet STC and IIC Building Code standards.

Finding out how shared walls and floors are constructed and their STC ratings can help you decide whether noise is likely to be a problem. Your local council will have copies of the building consent plans and specifications that include this information.

Helpful hint

While some walls and floors may have the same STC rating their ability to screen noise can be different. This is because STC ratings are based on high frequency sounds like the human voice and do not reflect a building's ability to screen noise from televisions and stereos that can produce high volumes at a low frequency.

- ? STC and IIC ratings
- Shared walls and floors
- On-site acoustic test



NB: Increasing or decreasing noise by 10 dBA (decibels) doubles or halves the amount of noise that is heard. A 5 dBA difference is easily picked up by the human ear while a 3 dBA difference can only just be noticed. The above calculations are based on typical dimensions for open plan living rooms or bedrooms in many terraced houses and apartments. A wall's ability to screen noise varies depending on the brand of product used.

Before and after you view

You've had a good look around but there are still a few things you need to know about the property.



Ask the real estate agent if the property is freehold, leasehold or other? If leasehold, how long is the term? What is included in the sale price?

Find out who manages the development. Are there any joint bills for services such as water, electricity and rubbish/recyclables removal? What are the owners' responsibilities and is there a joint insurance policy?

Talk to your local council to find out what type of zoning the property and neighbouring properties have, and what this means. What development rights do neighbouring properties have? Can they block out existing views, cut down trees, increase traffic or create undesirable levels of noise? Are there any large new residential or commercial developments or roads planned in the area? And what is the council's long-term vision for the area?

Management and maintenance

Check if there is a body corporate or other property management and maintenance fee, and if there is a sinking fund or savings plan to pay for large maintenance work such as painting and re-cladding, refurbishment of lifts and entrance foyers, re-roofing, landscape gardening or paving. If you are

buying into a new development the maintenance costs are likely to increase after the first year or so when manufacturers' and contractors' guarantees run out.

If there is a body corporate, find out what, if any, the current issues are by asking for recent body corporate meeting minutes and getting copies of the latest accounts. It is also important that you or

your lawyer get a Section 36 report under the Unit Titles Act. This will identify any outstanding levies (including sinking fund contributions) and any pending legal issues. Check that there is a long-term maintenance plan. Make sure you know how much it costs to run the body corporate, fund any maintenance work, what your annual contribution will be and get a copy of the body corporate rules.

Ask if there is a building manager on-site to liaise with residents and owners over operational and daily issues. The building manager may also carry out general cleaning and maintenance of communal areas and facilities, and deal with daily matters such as rubbish, gardening, post, security, as well as tenancy issues. If not, is there an owners' committee which deals with these issues?

- Freehold, leasehold, unit title or cross lease
- Joint bills
- Management and maintenance fees
- Sinking fund
- Body corporate rules
- Section 36 report
- Zoning



Getting the right information

Buying off the plans

If you are buying off the plans find out from the developer or real estate agent whether you can make changes to the layout or specifications of the property to better suit your needs.

Find out whether the developer, architect and building contractor have been involved in similar projects, so you can check them out. And are there any warranties or guarantees for the building?

Make sure you are happy with the electrical fittings, wiring, cabling and plumbing because it can be expensive to alter after completion.

It is difficult to visualise the actual size of a room from the plans. Make sure you have the measurements and pace these out in your existing home or garden to ensure they will be an adequate size. Showroom apartments can sometimes be misleading.

Different types of ownership

Freehold means you own both the house and the land.

Leasehold means you own the house but lease the land and pay rent to the landowner. You can sell the lease when you want to move but must inform the landowner.

Unit title means you own the house or apartment but common areas such as car parks and gardens belong to all owners and are managed by a body corporate. All units in the development are bound by rules in the Unit Titles Act.

Cross lease means all owners own the land and each owner leases their home from the others.

Different types of management

You need to understand your responsibilities in terms of the management set up. There are several types of management but the most common is the body corporate. If you are unsure, check with your lawyer.

A **body corporate** is a legal entity made up of all property owners within a development and is controlled by an elected committee. When a development is complete, the developer draws up a list of rules and hands administration and maintenance over to the body corporate once the properties have been sold.

A **cross lease syndicate** is made up of all owners and is governed by a Memorandum of Lease which sets out the rules and is prepared by the developer. Cross lease syndicates are common in small developments and in some cases costs for services and maintenance are shared.

See overleaf for a checklist of things to consider when viewing terraced houses and apartments.

further notes:

Good luck

We hope this booklet has been helpful to you in your search for a property. If you'd like more information, please contact BRANZ, the Consumer Institute or your local council. Remember, if you're not sure about anything, it pays to get professional advice.

Property 1

Property 2

Property 3

Property 4



You're on your way

Public transport • Shops • Parks • Schools • Community facilities



Now that you've arrived

Sense of safety • Neighbourhood character • Car parking • Neighbouring businesses



Before you step inside

Variety in building form • Design features • Materials • Durability • Construction flaws
• Signs of leaks • Pre-purchase inspection



Now you're inside

Room size • Views and privacy • Sunlight and orientation • Shading
• Location of windows and doors • Air circulation



Stepping outside

Garden, courtyard or balcony • Size, location, privacy and sunlight • Communal gardens and facilities
• Garage size and location • Rubbish collection and recycling • Laundry and storage areas



Controlling noise

Noisy activities in the area • Location of communal areas • Location of rooms and balconies
• Mirrored floor plans • Noise from footsteps • STC and IIC ratings • Shared walls and floors
• On-site acoustic test



Before and after you view

Freehold, leasehold, unit title or cross lease • Joint bills • Management and maintenance fees
• Sinking fund • Body corporate rules • Section 36 report • Zoning

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