

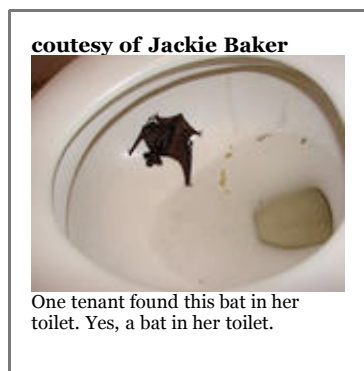


Florence Court near U of M: World's worst apartments?

Tenants put up with black water, falling debris, and rodents

By Andy Mannix

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The incessant hammering had been going on all morning. By now Teddy Thompson was so accustomed to the noise that it had receded into a familiar drone that didn't stop him from squeezing in a few minutes of studying before he left for class.

Then the banging turned into a loud crash.

The University of Minnesota student hurried up the stairs. He was greeted by a thick cloud of black fog.

"You could barely breathe, there was so much dust," he says.

Thompson soon realized what had happened: A portion of the roof collapsed, spilling long wooden planks and the rotted innards of the 124-year-old apartment building onto his roommate's bed.

"It was all over right where Paul sleeps," says Thompson. "Thank God Paul wasn't in his bed."

A construction worker could be seen through the hole in the roof, still hammering away.

No wonder Thompson and other tenants of the Florence Court apartment complex are frustrated.

The historically preserved complex sits a couple of blocks from the U of M campus, overlooking the 35W bridge. It appears fit for the setting of a Charles Dickens novel: a small village of 19th-century houses in a half-circle around a lush courtyard.

But the apartment's owner, Clark Gassen, is in the process of transforming Florence Court into "Flo/Co Fusion," a hip new complex that will compete with the high-rises popping up in the area.



Rent is skyrocketing, so most of the current tenants are moving out. What's more disconcerting, tenants say, is that no one told them about the full-scale renovations when they signed leases last fall, so they're stuck living in the construction site for several more months.

"It's getting to really feeling like a sinking ship," says Sergio Hernandez, who moved into an apartment there three years ago.

Complaints from tenants include black chunks in water pouring out of kitchen faucets, basketball-size holes in bathrooms, sheetrock dust accumulating in thick layers in the hallways, flooding in bathrooms, and debris carelessly thrown from the roof. A piece of plywood with the words "Hard Hat Area" written in orange spray paint sits in the courtyard. Construction workers are desperately trying to get the building ready by September 1, less than a week after some tenants' leases end.

The beef between Florence Court's tenants and management began about two years ago.

Becky Dombrowske, who has lived in Florence Court since 1995, heard about early plans for a renovation at a Marcy Holmes Neighborhood Association meeting.

"I remember my ears ringing," says Dombrowske. "My blood pressure shot up so bad I got tinnitus."

Tenants tried to stop the project by appealing to the city and neighborhood association, arguing that it would destroy a historic landmark. But it was no use.

Last September, Jackie Baker and her boyfriend moved into Florence Court. When they signed the yearlong lease, no one made mention of the impending renovations. "Absolutely not," says Baker. "They said nothing."

In October, Baker started to hear whispers about the impending construction. The crews showed up about a month later.

"It was literally seven days a week...of sawing and drilling and banging," she says. "It was just unbearable."

Before long, the construction moved inside her apartment. Sometimes the workers would break holes in her walls to access the pipes. Twice they flooded her bathroom. Once she came home to find a bat nesting in her toilet. For a while her kitchen faucet spewed a black, metallic liquid.

Baker finally moved out in March, about six months shy of the end of her lease. Management refunded her deposit and pet fee and offered \$300 in moving expenses on the condition that she doesn't file a lawsuit, she says.

Brad Roberts, the property manager, admits that the renovations are inconvenient to tenants. "We're doing the best we can," he says. "It's a pretty major renovation."

Roberts says that management didn't tell incoming tenants about the construction because at that time they weren't sure when the renovations would begin. "We've been trying to do it for a few

years," he says. "We didn't know when it was exactly going to happen."

He knows there have been some complaints, and management has tried to find resolutions with tenants. "Every time they come up, we try to meet with them and work out the issue."

One brisk day in late April, two weeks after the ceiling collapse, plastic wrap covers the patched hole in Thompson's apartment.

Thompson lumbers around the bedroom wearing a zip-up hoodie and basketball shorts, morosely pointing to fresh piles of black dust that have seeped through the roof's many cracks. A large family of small brown spiders that once lived in the ceiling has since found a home in his apartment.

"We're leaving at the end of May," says Thompson. "We can't take this anymore."