

The Slums of Waterloo

By Antonio D'souza

It's a well-known pattern: students move away to attend university, spend their first year in residence, then move out and live with friends until they graduate. Of course, since students tend to be birds of passage and live on shoestring budgets, they have developed a reputation for happily moving into bad housing and moving out of worse housing in a few months. Naturally, landlords who rent to students see little reason to bother renovating their property only to see it wrecked by months of slovenly living and drunken vandalism.

These issues beset all university towns. There is, however, one key difference in the student housing market for Waterloo and it's the same one that sets the University of Waterloo apart from every other university on the planet: co-op. The four-month co-op term dominates every aspect of life at UW, affecting even those students not pursuing a co-op degree.

Obviously, it has a major impact upon the housing situation in Waterloo. Thousands of students living a life of alternating work and study terms means that, unlike most other university towns that are populated by the same students from September to April and then abandoned en masse for the summer, the area around the UW campus is perennially overrun by students, although most of their faces change every four months, as Simon the local troll has observed. Consequently the turnover rate for housing is about three times higher than at other university towns, which accelerates the havoc-wreaking process by a factor of three.

As if the straits were not sufficiently dire already, Adam Smith is about to teach a posthumous lesson on supply and demand to the poor wretches that must inhabit Waterloo for the next few years. A harsh residential zoning by-law combined with a massive influx of fresh meat will turn the Waterloo housing market into a seller's market the likes of which haven't been seen since the legendary student shanty-town of the 1970s. The worst holes that landlords have been able to rent out until now will start to look like the the Taj Mahal once the appetite for student housing begins to outstrip the city's ability to accommodate this burgeoning need.

In the meantime, however the slums of Waterloo are here to be enjoyed. Indeed, a casual survey of students basking in the fetid squalor of their dilapidated architectural blemishes will reveal the extent of Waterloo's ghastly housing situation. Sarah, third-year Applied Studies co-op student, recalls the horrors of the basement apartment she rented a year ago.

"The carpet was disgusting. My roommate Jen found a dead frog in it once! And partway through the term, the landlord's AC started leaking into my bedroom, completely soaking the mattress and causing it to become infested by bugs. The worst part was when we could hear the landlord having sex with his girlfriend upstairs. She used to laugh like a hyena. It's impossible to get any studying done in an environment like that."

Of course, living in a house full of students isn't much better, especially if they're all strangers. Suddenly there's no one to convince the obnoxious guy next door that his attempts at serenading the neighbourhood may be going unappreciated and no cleaning staff to ensure the bathroom doesn't decide to make up for the species lost in the Brazilian rain-forest massacre by spawning a few of its own.

Even the few who manage to find relatively clean houses within a reasonable walk from campus and co-sign a lease with their friends can end up paying a premium, only to find that all is not as it seems once they start living there. Slumlords are a shifty lot, taking great pains to espouse the virtues of their property while neglecting to mention the little gotchas that can make life hell. Aaron, a third-year Chemical Engineering co-op student, explains how he ended up in a place about which he had second thoughts.

"Well, it seemed nice enough at first, until I realized the doors didn't close properly, the smoke detector didn't work and the staircase was a death-trap. Some of us have managed to fall down those stairs. It's amazing nobody had to visit the hospital. Sometimes I feel the best way to fix this place would be to knock it down."

His house-mate Alex, a fourth-year Computer Science co-op student, weighs in with his criticism of the house, recalling the painful experience in late fall when the hot water system stopped working.

"I'll never forget having to face an icy shower first thing in the morning. Some of the guys ended up going to the PAC to shower. And the dishes just piled up 'cuz nobody wanted to wash them in the cold water. It was a whole week before the landlord got it fixed too."

A Student Guide To Slumming it in the 'loo

These horror stories notwithstanding, there will always be students slumming it in Waterloo, especially since proximity to campus often outweighs all other factors when shopping for a place to park a bed in for the term. Here are a few tips on surviving the undergrad experience that they don't tell you at Student Life 101.

The kind of housing you can find does depend upon how much you can afford and how much effort you are willing to put into it. For those with high standards, shelling out the big bucks generally makes for a more comfortable experience than living in a rancid hovel in order to afford hitting the local bars and clubs several times a week. Of course, the handful of people to whom that applies didn't need this article to tell them that.

For the typical starving student, the game is all about finding the cheapest possible digs while still being able to convince yourself to visit the kitchen every so often. Finding a place is

something of a black art with a heavy luck factor. Starting early is often a good idea, although waiting until it's too late can pay off too; it all depends upon the term. Fall is by far the most crowded term so it pays to start as early as March. If you haven't found a suitable place by the end of June, it's time to lower your expectations.

By contrast, summer tends to be more of a buyer's market so waiting until a few days after classes have actually started is the best way to squeeze rock bottom prices out of desperate students. After all, a hundred bucks a month is better than nothing. Just remember that the rooms still available by then are the ones that everybody else turned down so don't be shocked when you discover you have a few six-legged pets or that the plumbing and electrical fixtures were something of an artistic interpretation by the landlord.

Things get a bit trickier when looking for an entire house to lease for the year so you and your new best friends from residence can experience the real student lifestyle. Unlike you, the landlords know what they are doing so they make sure you sign the lease for a year even if you'll probably be on a co-op work placement in another city for the winter term.

Fortunately, subletting isn't too hard if you know enough people off-stream from yourself. Just make sure you trust them to pay you for the bills, since you probably won't want to change everything over to them and then back again for the summer.

There's also that case of needing to lease the house for a year but only being in school for the fall and winter. That means you will have to be one of those poor sods looking under rocks for a gullible subletter for the summer. The odds are stacked against you so heavily that's it's almost worth failing something in your last term so you have an excuse to stick around in the summer and go to class.

When Push Comes to Shove

Sometimes bad things happen to the structure and facilities in student houses. While the temptation to ignore them until the end of term can be very strong, the correct thing to do is inform the landlord - in writing, not by dropping subtle hints when he comes around to collect the rent cheque - of the problem. They tend to take notice of things given to them in writing, as most other people do. Jen, a third-year Enviro-civil Engineering student, will never forget the awful experience she had when her basement apartment got flooded a couple of years ago.

"I'd been living there for about two month when it happened. The basement flooded after it rained and a lot of my stuff was destroyed. The landlord took his own sweet time fixing it so I had to live at a friend's place for over a week. And the cheap a**hole never even gave me a refund on the rent for that week."

Of course, sometimes the the situation is reversed and landlords harass their student tenants, whom they know will be busy with school and hard pressed to spend the time required to put up much of a fight. One of the common reasons for such harassment is the ubiquitous "no pets" clause in leases. While it is not hard to understand this issue from the landlord's point of view - pets can often damage the property if they haven't been trained well - it is not far-fetched for students to miss the pets they've had for years and want to bring them to Waterloo while in school.

Fortunately, the law comes down on the side of the tenant in this respect. Landlords are not allowed to forbid their tenants from keeping pets unless the pet is causing problems for the other tenants. However, it also makes it clear that tenants will be on the hook for any damage caused by their pets.

It may also be helpful to know that the Federation of Students offer free legal advice on matters pertaining to landlord/tenant disputes. If the situation should ever reach this point, it is comforting to know that there are people with substantial experience in this matter there to help. For more information, feel free to visit the Legal Resource Office web page:
<http://feds.ca/services/legalresourceoffice.html>

Sharing Living Space With the Landlord

There is one surefire way for students to ensure that they don't end up living in a slum. Rent out a room in a place where living space is shared with the landlord. This essentially guarantees that the place will not be a slum because the landlord will have a lot of incentive to make sure to prevent that from happening.

This means that you have to sacrifice constant student companionship (unless there's another student also renting out a room at the place). This also means that you will need to be respectful of the landlord's property, so throwing a large party is probably out of the question. However, for students capable of living in a civilized manner, this is a truly excellent option.