

# Sleuths take the hell out of home buying



I SPY: A house detective on the lookout for hidden nasties.

Picture: SIMON ALEKNA

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PROPERTY WRITER

A PEST inspection will tell you if the dream home you have your eye on has a termite problem, but it won't reveal if it's actually the house from hell.

That's why an increasing number of house hunters are hiring private detectives to stake out houses.

Using covert techniques, house detectives uncover all kinds of intriguing information, such as neurotic neighbours or barking dogs.

They also quiz neighbours, examine development plans that may affect a property's value and assess security risks.

Drummoyne-based Lyonswood Investigations says it pioneered the \$500-\$1000 service it calls "real estate acquisition due diligence".

Managing director Warren Mallard said demand for the service had increased in line with Sydney's rising house prices.

Mr Mallard said the service was introduced for clients keen to find out more about their potential new neighbourhood. But the service had since expanded, with detectives employed to hunt for "hidden nasties that may affect the purchasers or the capital appreciation of the home".

Using high-tech surveillance equipment if necessary, operatives conduct drive-bys of the house at different times of the day. They make subtle inquiries about the house hunters' prospective neighbours. Any ongoing disputes or erratic behaviour that may affect potential buyers is recorded and passed on.

Mr Mallard said this was one of the most important aspects to look into before buying a house.

"Buying a house next to a neighbour from hell can be devastating for the new home owner," he said.

## BEWARE THY NEIGHBOUR

**Case 1:** Investigators found that a western suburbs man keen to sell his home paid to have seven dogs belonging to a neighbour taken away while the house was being marketed.

**Case 2:** Prospective buyers interested in a house in Coogee were unaware the property next door was an illegal backpackers' hostel. Mr Mallard said residents had been warned not to tell people it was being used for tourist accommodation.

Apart from the emotional turmoil and stress it can cause, buying a house without doing your research can mean losing money on your investment.

Housing developments erected after you move in may cast a nasty shadow over your sunny courtyard, decreasing the resale value of the property.

Detectives will research any development applications that have been lodged with the local council - even projects kilometres away could have a damaging effect on a house's value.

"New developments have the most potential to damage your investment," Mr Mallard said.

A security check on the house, street and suburb may also be conducted.

"We carry out surveillance in the area to see if there are gangs that roam the street or dogs that don't stop barking," Mr Mallard said.

Despite all his high-tech equipment, Mr Mallard uses a much less complicated technique to find the neighbour who knows everything.

"I drive into the street," he said, "toot my horn, and the person who peeks out from behind their curtain is the one who knows everything."