

An MCS oasis in Dallas



by Andrew Eriksen

Located in an older neighborhood with sidewalk cafés, just north of downtown Dallas, is a peaceful oasis for people with MCS.

Tucked away on a quiet side street, Earl and Vickie Remmel have created a haven with 18 condos that are near the environmental clinics of Dr. Rea and Dr. Johnson.

The official name is Regina Caeli Environmental Condominiums, but everybody simply calls it “Earl’s Place”.

The building was originally constructed in 1982 as conventional condominiums. The original owners did very little upkeep so it was all in disrepair when Earl purchased it in 2001. The lack of maintenance did mean that the owners rarely sprayed pesticides, if at all, which was a great plus.

The building has a small greenspace, a shared laundry and a community room with a large sauna.

The condos are all one-bedroom units of about 500 square ft (52 m²).

Each apartment has direct access to the outside, which is important as interior hallways easily become polluted by outside visitors and delivery people.

Renovating the Condos

Three condos were renovated at a time and then rented out. Each new batch of condos were renovated based on the experiences gained. The guests were helpful to provide feedback and to help sniff out problems with those being worked on. Earl does not have MCS himself, so he could not always tell when a condo was good enough.

The renovations were done very thoroughly, starting with completely gutting the insides. The walls were stripped down to the studs, with the old drywall and insulation discarded.

The wall cavities contained a lot of bugs and dead rodents, which was probably because the owners didn’t use pesticides.

New drywall was installed on walls and ceilings. Regular sheetrock was used, of no particular brand. In some units, the walls were tiled either half way up, or fully. The ceilings were not tiled. In other condos, the walls were sealed and then painted.

The drywall was sealed with Benjamin Moore Ecco Spec Primer sealer before the painting. Sealers still allow the walls to breathe a little (unlike foiled walls) and may be better suited for more humid climates, but they also need offgassing.

Paints are usually the most difficult issue in safer house building. There are many available which are made of non-toxic components, but they tend to smell for a

long time and still not be tolerable to many people with MCS. There is no paint that everybody likes.

The Benjamin Moore Ecco Spec low-VOC paint was used in most of the condos. AFM's paint was tried in one condo, but was not found as tolerable.

Earl has recently started remodeling some of the condos, which are starting to show wear and tear. He is now using the new Benjamin Moore Natura no-VOC paint, which he has found to be the most tolerable paint yet. He has had the experience that a tenant moved in only three days after the condo was painted. Of course, that was a remodeled condo where the drywall, sealers, etc. already had offgassed. Don't expect to move in that fast in a fully renovated condo.

The walls and ceiling in most bathrooms were covered with the Hardie Backer cement board and then tiled. A few bathrooms have mold-resistant drywall and paint instead of tile.

All floors are covered with porcelain tile. A polymer-free grout was used, which was difficult to obtain. Earl basically had to beg a wholesaler to get it for him. However, it is relatively easy to make such a grout from scratch, see the article about Desert Moon House for details.

The kitchen cabinets are another common difficulty. In the first four condos they were custom made of maple by a local carpenter. Maple is expensive but was chosen because it is a low-aromatic wood that is more tolerable. Despite that they were also sealed (AFM sealer) the cabinets were still a problem for some people the first years.

The rest of the units got steel wire-shelving instead of regular cabinets. Wire-shelving can be found in powder-coated versions that are a baked-on epoxy, which is very inert. Many brands of wire-shelving use a vinyl covering, which is not as tolerable. The brand used here is Elfa. Another well-tolerated brand is made by Rubbermaid. Some chrome-coated shelves are also available.

The countertops in all the condos are radon-free/arsenic-free granite. The plate is so thick it simply rests by its own weight without any glues or fasteners, and with no supporting board under it. It is simply held up by a strip of poplar wood that goes around the perimeter of the granite plate.

There are two countertops in these small kitchens. One is on top of the dishwasher, while the other has a steel cabinet underneath.

The entry doors are regular steel doors, which were painted on the outside only. The inside remains the factory-applied primer. The interior doors are regular wooden doors with a sealer on it (Benjamin Moore Primer). The wooden doors were a problem for several years until they offgassed. In some cases, Earl had to remove them and keep them in storage until a tenant moved out again.

Offgassing the renovated condos

The paint and sealers took a lot of time offgassing. He had to ozone and bake each condo for up to a month. The condos' electric heating coil was able to keep the temperature above 95°F (34°C) for a few hours at a time. Then it was aired out and sometimes ozoned, before some of the residents were invited to sniff it out. If it didn't pass the sniff test, it was subjected to another round of heat and sometimes an hour of ozone.

Mechanical

The existing water and sewage lines were left intact during the renovations. The fresh-water lines are copper, while sewage lines are PVC.

All sinks, tubs and faucets were replaced. Teflon tape was used to connect the pipes, with no use of pipe dope, which contains biocides.

The heating and cooling is by forced air. Such systems can be problematic with mold, fried dust and buildup of deposits in the air ducts. In these small condos, ductwork is virtually eliminated as the conditioned air comes from a small closet located in the center of the condo. It connects directly to the bedroom and living room, while a three-foot (1 meter) duct is enough to reach the bathroom in most condos.

The air duct used is a commercial type that is round and made of aluminum, which is easier to clean. The duct was left exposed, just as it is in many stores and restaurants, which is where these are typically used. The building had standard air ducts when it was purchased, but they were totally removed and discarded.

The central air handling closet in each condo has a coil that cools the air, using a dedicated A/C unit on the roof. The heating is electric, with a separate heating coil in the air handler. The two coils are cleaned once a month by the maid service, which also changes the filter. The short air duct very rarely needs cleaning.

The box that takes the conditioned air and distributes it was custom built of stainless steel, as the commercially available models all impart a smell to the air from exposed insulation and other materials.



Exterior renovations

A cement board type siding is used on the street sides of the building. The type used is from James Hardie and comes pre-painted. The façade facing the interior courtyard is the original stucco, and is also without need of painting.

The walkways are concrete, with steel railings.

Contractors

A set of contractors were hired to do all the work. They initially did not know about MCS housing, but were willing to learn the care and practices needed. And none of them smoked.

Most of them are still used for maintenance, and other people with MCS in Dallas hire them for work in their own homes.

Furniture

The furniture is mostly glass and steel, with some pieces custom made of poplar wood in the early condo renovations.

The mattresses are the challenge here. He originally bought some organic mattresses, but it took two years for them to offgas. Organic cotton has cotton seed oils in it, which go rancid and is a problem for most people with MCS.

He now uses cotton futons that are made with regular non-organic cotton, and no flame retardants.

Common facilities

The building has a shared laundry room with three washers and four dryers available for the renters. The use of the laundry is free. Space is reserved via a sign-up sheet on the wall.

The renters are given a brochure upon move-in, that lists acceptable laundry products, to avoid contamination of the equipment and toxic dryer fumes.

The house rules do not allow washers in the apartments, to prevent moisture problems that can lead to mold growth.

One of the original apartments was converted to a recreation room, with a large Heavenly Heat sauna and a treadmill. There is also a computer, a fax machine and a television.

The room also stores Mountain Valley water in glass bottles, which can be purchased at cost through a sign-up sheet.



The recreation room

House rules

A place of this kind must have a set of specific house rules to protect the residents from each other, and the condos from becoming contaminated.

The building has its own homeowner's association, which is required by local ordinance. When Earl bought the building, he changed the association rules so the house rules are legally enforceable.

The maid is a part of the enforcement. She reports any use of cleaners, dish soap or personal care products that may contaminate the apartment.

Each new tenant is given a laundry brochure, which lists acceptable products that may be used.

The house rules may seem unnecessary, but the sensitivities can vary greatly among people with MCS. People who are new to the illness very often still use toxic products, as they frequently feel so bad all the time they cannot tell the difference.

There haven't been any real problems at Earl's place, but this author knows of three cases where rental units became so contaminated that a serious cleaning effort was required and they were unusable for many months, or even well over a year.

Services provided

The place operates like an extended-stay hotel. The guests are provided with linen and towels, but are responsible for washing them themselves. There is no laundry product that is tolerable to everybody with MCS, so it would be complicated to provide weekly linen service. (Some other places of this kind do provide linen service, with those guests unable to tolerate the laundry detergent having to opt out.)

Once a week, a maid visits each condo, and cleans the bathroom and mops and vacuums the floor. Once a month she also cleans the heating coil and changes the filter pad in the heating/cooling system. A few guests request the use of specific cleaning products or prefer to have no maid service at all.

The complex has a vehicle, which is driven by Earl to transport guests to the airport, doctor's appointments and shopping. There is no regular schedule, the service operates on an as-needed basis, and as Earl can fit in among his many other duties. There are no fees for the service, it is a part of the rent.

The auto service allows people to avoid renting a car, which is always a dicey issue.



Each room has its own corded telephone, as well as hookups for internet and cable TV. Long distance telephone service is provided at no extra charge.

Experiences

The project has been a complete success, with basically full occupancy throughout the eight years. There are many repeat customers who come back again and again. A few people live there permanently, with one tenant staying for nearly eight years.

Some people do better in one room than in another, so people may move around a bit initially. Some of the repeat customers request a specific room.

It is interesting to note that even though all rooms were totally gutted, some people do better in certain rooms. And it is not the same rooms all people do best in. Even Earl himself, who does not have MCS, can smell a difference between some rooms, even though the same materials were used in them. Perhaps odors left by previous occupants or different batches of materials used in the renovations?

During the financial crisis of 2009, the number of guests started to dry up. Earl got concerned about finances and sold three of the condos to the people living in them. The slump turned out to be short, so no more condos were sold off. Today (2010), two of those sold-off condos are now sublet, while one owner still lives there. With the strong homeowner association rules in place, there is no real concern about those condos being sold off or inherited by people who do not adhere to the non-toxic lifestyle.

Asked what he would do differently, if having to start over, Earl mainly offered two things: first, he would not convert a building, but build a new one from the ground up. And he would make it as low-EMF as he could. EMF wasn't as big an issue back when he started as it is today, so there are no special low-EMF features.

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