

# Dummy walls: dumb idea!

IN THE CURRENT CLIMATE, LOFT CONVERSIONS MAKE ECONOMIC SENSE, BUT FOR SOME BUILDERS THIS MEANS SKIRTING THE FIRE SAFETY REGULATIONS WITH AN ILLEGAL, MAKESHIFT CONSTRUCTION: THE DUMMY WALL. WILLIAM MAKANT FROM PLUMIS ARGUES THAT IT'S TIME THIS STOPPED.

In a second floor loft conversion, building regulations propose a protected escape route, containing lounge/kitchen fires where they start, and buying time for escape from the new floor. Consumers want light, open plan spaces, however – even if they accept a walled-off staircase, they are likely to prop open the fire door that was supposed to protect it<sup>1</sup>.

UK regulations allow the use of fire suppression to compensate for poor compartmentation, but many homeowners instead opt for the cheap solution: create a protected corridor, have Building Control sign it off, and remove this “dummy wall” shortly afterwards. This leaves everyone uncomfortable:

- Homeowners pay for pointless and illegal changes to their home;
- Loft converters risk their reputation;
- And those responsible for fire safety have unknowingly failed to meet their goals.

BRE's work<sup>2</sup> on television fires in loft converted houses showed that this is no

small matter: removal of compartmentation – even a propped fire door – can kill occupants elsewhere in the house within 20 minutes. Adding fire suppression in the room of origin, however, restored survivable conditions everywhere else. A study by the NHBC Foundation<sup>1</sup> agrees that with propped doors, the compartmentation model is not realistic and confirms that interlinked alarms and active fire suppression in an open plan layout are just as safe as an equivalent unsuppressed closed plan layout.

So if fire suppression offers consumers layout flexibility, and with sprinkler systems often claimed to cost as little as £1500, why aren't loft conversions using them more? In short, uncertainty over extra costs from pumps, tanks, and supply upgrades make sprinklers less attractive than the simple but deadly dummy wall.

The situation is changing as more convenient and cost-effective alternatives to sprinklers emerge; these innovative solutions can meet building regulations as long as they are “designed and tested for use in domestic



buildings and ... fit for their intended purpose”<sup>3</sup>. An example is Automist, a high-pressure mist device which mounts around the kitchen sink or on a wall. In the event of a fire, a heat alarm activates at 57°C and a high pressure pump powers just 5lpm of fine water mist throughout the volume to be protected. This allows fire suppression coverage to be retrofitted to a targeted area, for example an open plan lounge.

In an open plan loft conversion, a retrofittable suppression device offers not only comparable costs to dummy walls: it solves the regulatory problem permanently and also provides permanent fire safety to occupants. It's time to replace the dumb idea with a no-brainer!

Plumis

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1 - The NHBC Foundation Report NF19 finds that hallway doors are open 80% of the time by day and 60% of the time by night:

<http://www.nhbcfoundation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=AHMmJKML8Hc%3d&tabid=394&language=en-GB>

2 - <http://www.bre.co.uk/page.jsp?id=422>

3 - ADB Dwellinghouses 0.18