

# Trouble in Paradise

## When Water Damage Creeps into Unoccupied Timeshares

by Peter Sierck

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**M**anaging a timeshare building provides a great opportunity to live in places where others spend their vacations. To live on the bluff of the Southern California coast, in an area that is unaffordable for most people, is a delight in itself, but to be paid to live there is paradise.

A couple in charge of the janitorial and management service of a two-story, eight-unit timeshare complex had lived at the Southern California timeshare for three months and still found themselves astonished by the beauty of their surroundings. Their office window offered a view of the ocean.

Work at the timeshare left both husband and wife exhausted at the end of the day, although it did not appear to be that much work. They felt that they had worked much harder at their former home in the Midwest. They blamed the climate change for their exhaustion.

One morning in the shower the wife discovered a red itchy rash on her leg and scheduled an appointment

with a dermatologist. The dermatologist asked her a lot of questions and concluded that the rash might be the result of exposure to an irritant. She recalled that the day before she had thoroughly cleaned two units and other common areas within the complex. The dermatologist concluded that it was possible that she had suffered from an allergic reaction to something in the building in which she lived and worked.

The yellow pages guided the woman to an industrial hygiene company. She scheduled an inspection for two days later, although her husband maintained that she was overreacting, as it was just a rash that could be cured with an ointment.

*"They were astonished that such a minimal moisture/mold problem could create such a strong odor."*

### From Such a Small Problem

The next morning, the couple went to work at a unit that had been unoccupied for a week and needed to be prepared for the new guests. Cancellations rarely occurred as timeshares are usually continuously occupied. The couple opened the door and was hit by a strong musty and chemical odor. They continued inside, opening the doors and windows, and started to search for the source of the odor.

The husband found a small leak under the sink and a little mold growth on the cabinetry. They were aston-



ished that such a minimal moisture/mold problem could create such a strong odor. He fixed the small leak and wiped the minimal mold growth off the bottom surface of the cabinet before repainting it. She started to clean the unit, but was unable to continue as she felt progressively worse. She decided to continue cleaning the next day. However, her rash continued to get much worse during the night.

The next day the industrial hygienist entered the same unit. The odor was still very strong, and now mixed with a slight paint odor. Moisture measurements showed that the building materials tested dry except for slightly elevated levels in all of the bottom shelves of the kitchen cabinetry. No visible mold growth was detected in the unit. Spore trap air samples were collected. The inspection of the adjacent areas in the complex revealed no signs of moisture intrusions. Out of the crawl space vents came the same strong odor.

Protected by a full face respirator and coveralls, with hood and booties, the industrial hygienist went into the crawl space. The inspection revealed abundant visible mold growth on the building paper and on all the subfloor materials of the complex. The water source appeared to be a hot water pipe emitting a constant fine mist in several areas.

### Inspection Findings

The spore trap air sampling results showed the presence of *Stachybotrys* spores and elevated *Penicillium/Aspergillus* spore levels in all the indoor locations sampled. The surface samples collected in the crawl space indicated active fungal growth of *Stachybotrys*, *Penicillium* and *Aspergillus*. The report concluded that remediation should be conducted to include removal and replacement of all subfloor materials, as well as all affected materials in the kitchen cabinetry of all ground level units.

A claim was filed and the report was forwarded to the insurance adjuster. The adjuster did not believe that such an extensive remediation was necessary. He requested a site meeting with all parties involved. The meeting was conducted at the poolside, where the industrial hygienist explained the possible health effects of the molds detected in the air and surface samples.

At that very moment, a rat made its way out of the crawl space, bleeding from its mouth, and died right in front of the group. The building manager stated that rat poison had not been applied on the property for several months. The adjuster immediately approved all costs



A small amount of mold visible to building occupants can very likely be the sign of bigger problems.



Buildings that aren't occupied regularly may have small problems such as slowly leaking pipes that go undetected for years.

involved in the remediation effort.

How could such a moisture problem stay undetected for an extended period of time creating such extensive damage? Due to frequent changes in occupancy, odors and other damage may go undetected. So what can a building owner or manager do to prevent this dilemma? The implementation of regular crawl space inspections is not the answer. A better solution is to be aware that all buildings that are not occupied continuously are especially vulnerable to slowly progressing problems that will create great damage in the long run. A higher level of maintenance with regular inspections of all areas in the building, and the immediate response to suspected problems could prevent a big headache in paradise. m

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