

How private is your private life?



If A, B and C find out different personal details about you, and then all three combine their discoveries, they can really know a lot about your private life.

They can know your weight, height, color, personal successes and failures, income, debts, mental health, character strengths and weaknesses, family background. And on and on. You can be flattered by this—or embarrassed.

It's not dream stuff. Already, some people are gathering information on others from public records, personnel files, credit interviews, news clippings and elsewhere. They have computers to store the information and put it together at the flick of a switch.

Frightening? You bet it is! But what's to stop this invasion of privacy once the nation's sense of right and wrong disappears? Before that happens, find out what's going on. Then speak up, loud and clear!

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Gain checks wall cavities for cleanliness while real estate agent B. Smith looks on. The British 10-year warranty policy against building defects costs from \$35 to \$60.

HOUSE REPAIRS CONTINUED

into the postwar market to squeeze what quick profits they could out of England's housing boom. One of them went so far as to use chewing gum to tile a jerry-built bathroom.

"Something had to be done to protect the consumer," bustling, button-down Andrew Tait recalls. "With a new house the largest single investment most families ever make, we wanted to be sure they received full value for their money."

A plan is born

Early in 1965 the flicker of an answer evolved. The more Tait considered it, the better he liked it. If the British couldn't arrange for cheap effective coverage for their new homes anywhere else, the Registration Council would have to develop a warranty policy with its member building firms. They couldn't. It did.

Despite the obvious merits of the plan, thousands of builders refused to join up. "It took a bit of doing," Tait modestly recalls.

What it took was Tait shrewdly whistling up some major reinforcements in the form of Parliamentary figures who made threatening noises about possible government intervention and mortgage societies who announced money henceforth would be loaned only for warranty-backed houses. All of a sudden builders couldn't apply for membership fast enough.

Since its inception the program has been regularly refined and improved. Today the Registration Council runs workshop sessions to demonstrate new materials and techniques, mails newsletters, bulletins and government reports to its 18,000 member builders, expels those guilty of consistently inferior work. One recent month 10 contractors were struck from the rolls.

But far and away the most effective preventive control is the field inspection program completed before owners move into their new homes. Three hundred full-time construction-trained inspectors spot-check the 200,000 homes

built in England every year an average of six times before they're finished—and, take it from me, these spot-checks aren't cursory.

On the wet day I accompanied a former building foreman named Malcolm Ford on his rounds he stooped under beams, hopped onto scaffolds, climbed ladders looking for any work that failed to measure up to minimum standards codified in a 300-page directory the industry lives by.

At one building site he beamed a flashlight down a wall cavity to see whether loose mortar he'd warned the foreman about on his previous visit had been cleaned out. It hadn't. Ford promptly noted the infraction in his record book. Elsewhere that day he uncovered defective brickwork, a wobbly staircase and a perilously narrow outer wall.

Mutual benefit

While contractors occasionally still grumble, mostly out of sheer habit, these field inspections benefit them as well as the families who eventually move into the house. On a development near Manchester last year an inspector saved a builder the expense of pulling down five new homes by spotting bad brickwork early in construction.

Now that England's warranty program is such a booming success, builders and home buyers alike, bankers and mortgage societies, government officials and even members of the Royal Family regularly applaud Tait and his housing vigilantes. Registration Council file drawers bulge with thankful personal correspondence from families who've been treated to free repairs without costly legal battles.

Tait and his colleagues are naturally warmed by all these tributes. But the one they especially relish is a simple note in which an auto worker in Coventry enclosed a World War II decoration.

"You people deserve this," he wrote after \$2000 worth of repairs on his new house. "If it wasn't for the policy we'd have had to move back in with my mother-in-law."