

Buying a new flat? Check the reception!

Bill Wright uncovers the lazy property developers who might stop you enjoying Sky+ or HD

For some years now the big growth area in UK housing has been 'luxury apartments' as the developers call them – which implies at least a modicum of comfort and modern conveniences.

In 2007 you'd suppose that these would include a full set of facilities for the reception of TV and radio. Since satellite TV from Sky is now firmly established, the new flat-dweller could reasonably expect to move in and have his Sky equipment up and running in minutes. But alas, due to the building trade's stick-in-the-mud attitudes and penny-pinching this is often not the case.

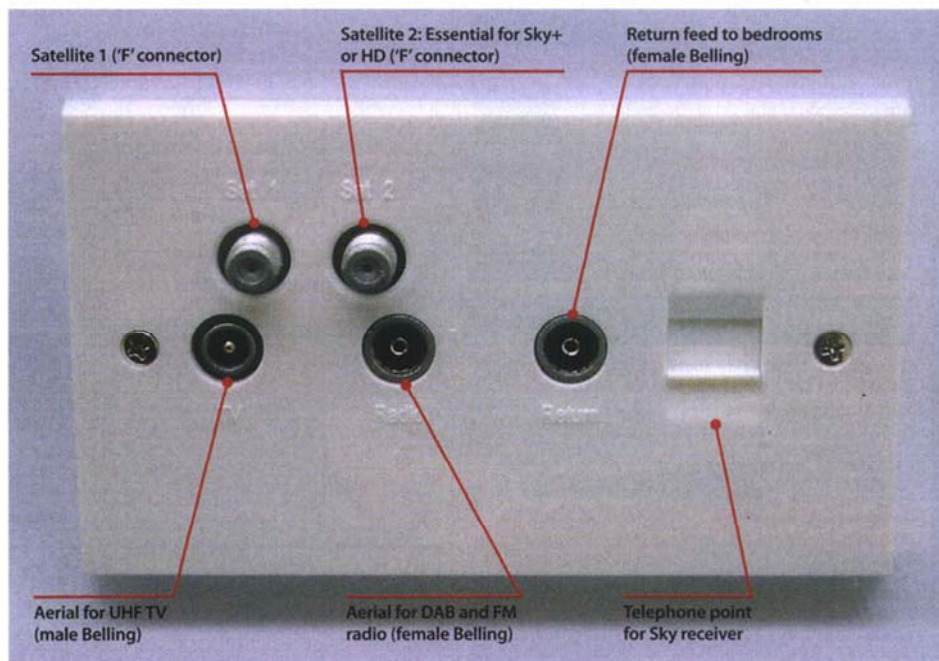
The thing is, your Sky+ box needs two separate cables from your dish or, if you live in a block of flats, two separate cables from the distribution system. Now, it's no problem to provide two cables to each living room when the place is being built. The extra cost is about £10 per dwelling, but to save that small sum many builders have omitted the second satellite cable, even from properties they intend to sell for half a million. This is an absurd false economy – once the place is built, decorated, furnished, and lived in it isn't easy to run extra cables to every flat. The prospect of such a job fills an installer and a management agent with horror. Chipping the plaster off people's living room walls to bury conduit? A nightmare!

It became obvious some time ago to those in the installation trade that things would go pear-shaped so, given the litigation possibilities, many of us got the shivers.

A little forethought

But invitations to tender kept coming, and of the ones that asked for satellite provision of any kind (amazingly some still don't!) many asked for basic systems with one feed per dwelling. We queried this. Timescales on new building projects are long, and everyone could see that Sky+ was on the up. We offered Sky+ as an alternative specification, and when the builder turned it down on cost grounds we ensured that we had their decision in writing. Often I rang up to say: 'You realise that when the residents move in some of them will expect Sky+ to work, and when it doesn't they'll be pretty annoyed?', only to be rebutted or just ignored.

Many young professionals own a succession of city-centre flats and have the expectations of their age group and type, which includes Sky+. Many of them – as the builders are now finding out to their cost – are very sharp and are in the legal profession. Sometimes my trade has managed to persuade



the builders to pay for the second cable, even if they wouldn't cough up for the extra multiswitch capability that provides the signal. In such cases the outcome isn't so bad. Sometimes the residents will club together and pay for an additional multiswitch; sometimes the builder will see the error of his ways and pay up. But if the cables aren't in the walls it can be a disaster. Some really upmarket places have been built in the last few years without Sky+ capability, and the cost of getting second feeds to each living room without making a mess of the place can be horrendous.

So we now have a legacy of five years of breakneck-speed apartment building, with many of the properties erected in that time having no reasonably cheap and tidy way of installing Sky+ or Sky HD. People look for a solution, and some find the 'stacker' fitted. At some cost this device overcomes the need for two physical cables but it still needs an extra multiswitch port. Because one set of channels is shifted to higher frequencies than the cable is designed for the results are variable. Further developments are in the pipeline, but nothing will ever beat the convenience and lack of cost of moving in, plugging in, and watching TV.

If you're buying a new flat, take a close look first at the outlet plate in the living room. Make sure that it has two satellite connectors, marked 'Sat 1'

and 'Sat 2'. Get confirmation that both connectors will provide an independent satellite dish feed. It isn't enough to just check that the outlet plate is the correct type because some builders will fit a double plate but not the cable or the multiswitch! Check that this outlet plate has a socket marked 'return'. This takes the output from your Sky box and feeds it to the bedrooms, often via a little amplifier next to the electricity consumer unit. This lets you view satellite and control the Sky box from the bedroom without a wireless device. Ask if this 'mini distribution system' has been installed, and look in the bedrooms to see how many have aerial wallplates (these only need be ordinary single sockets). Finally, ensure that the telephone socket on the living room TV wallplate is connected.

If reception is poor when you move in, complain immediately. Although the defects liability period runs for a year, the builder is in a better position to pursue the matter with the contractor while he still owes him a big lump of cash. Check the reception quality of terrestrial analogue and digital TV as soon as possible. Analogue ghosting or digital freezing is not acceptable. Satellite reception should be rock-solid on both sockets, and the signal quality reading (press Services, 4, 6) should not be less than 50 per cent. Ignore the signal strength reading, though – it's meaningless ■