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## A club where you might not pull, but could find somewhere to live

Huma Qureshi explores 'speed-flatmating', the latest phenomenon of the property crunch, where landlords and tenants meet on the dance floor

**Huma Qureshi**

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They're young, professional and on the prowl on the dance floor - welcome to the 'speed-flatmating' craze hitting the London rental market. With the credit crunch piling on the financial pressure, many homeowners struggling with rising monthly mortgage repayments are throwing open their spare rooms to lodgers to help make ends meet, while renters who might have once hoped to have made it on to the property ladder are still helplessly on the rental shelf.

Put the two together (the hunters and the gatherers) in a central London nightclub and you have speed-flatmating - a twist on speed-dating - and a way to potentially meet the housemate of your dreams.

Rental website Spareroom.co.uk, which hosts speed-flatmating events across London, says it has seen a 'massive increase' in the number of people turning to their events in the hope of finding potential flatmates. The website, which enables people to advertise flat-shares and find potential housemates online, has seen the number of registered users double from 400,000 to more than 800,000 in the past year, with 1,000 new users signing on every day.

Similarly, classifieds website Gumtree.com reports a 20 per cent rise in activity on its rental section over the past six months.

In particular, Spareroom cites a significant increase in the number of homeowners advertising rooms for rent in their own properties. Live-in-landlords account for around 55 per cent of the adverts on Spareroom, compared with 33 per cent 18 months ago. Its fortnightly speed-flatmating events have been selling out. Gemma Allen-Muncey, operations manager at Spareroom, dreamt up the concept of speed-flatmating after a friend went speed dating four years ago. Even though she had the idea some time ago, it's only just taking off now.

'The market for speed-flatmating has suddenly really grown,' she says. 'There's a huge increase in people renting now, not just because people still can't afford to buy, but also because the cost of living has gone up so much that people need to share. Young professionals who would have normally rented a one-bed place on their own can't really afford to do that either, so they want to go into houseshares too.'

Despite similar-sounding names, speed-flatmating is not really the same as speed-dating - there's no time limit that you have to talk to people for, you aren't rotated around tables and technically you aren't really there to find a date either (though Allen-Muncey says this has happened, and judging by the levels of flirtation Cash witnessed at the event we attended, it could happen again).

Essentially, speed-flatmating is a gaggle of go-getters thrown together with a mate in mind; those seeking a room sport a shocking pink sticker across their chest saying 'I need a room' while those with rooms on offer wear white ones saying 'I have a room'.

Attendees must register beforehand and pay a £5 fee, and on arrival, they are given a 'Who's Who' list detailing all room-seekers and all room-offerers, the idea being that you can work your way through the list or specifically hunt out someone who sounds like they're the right housemate on paper. It's quite simple, but can it really work?

'If you can meet potential flatmates in a social setting, it's more informal and gives you more of a chance to judge people's personalities,' says Tamara Smith, who works for rental site Easyroommate.com, which also holds weekly events to find flatmates, called Flat Night Fever, in London's Leicester Square. Events usually open with some form of entertainment or an informal

introductory talk - last week, a lifestyle coach opened up the night.

'It's just a fun way of doing it,' says Smith. 'I've interviewed for flatmates in a houseshare before, and it can take up a lot of time. You tidy up the house, get everything just right then sometimes they don't even turn up or call to say they're not coming. But this way, everyone's in the same boat and that's an icebreaker in itself. People can just mill around.'

For some though, it can be a little awkward. Mel Pagonis, a Greek postgraduate student currently living in Surrey is looking to move to central London with friends. 'This feels a bit weird - actually, it feels really weird, he says. 'It's like I'm searching for a girlfriend. I don't even know if it will work, but it's worth a try.'

Nursing a drink in the corner, David Fowler, a 47-year-old manager who rents a two-bed in Maida Vale and needs someone to move in, says 'I'm not that optimistic about tonight, but I need to find a flatmate so I have to give it a shot.'

Who would be his nightmare flatmate? 'Someone who labels all the food in the fridge and writes their names on things. I want to live with someone I can get to know and be mates with - but I don't know if we'd be able to really talk in that much depth tonight.'

He is standing on the left-hand side of the dance floor, significant because the room is theoretically split by price (left-hand side for over £650 monthly rent, right-hand side for up to £650). Suffice to say, there aren't that many people on his side of the room to talk to, let alone to talk in depth to.

On the right-hand side of the dance floor (the cheap side), things are taking off. Room-hunter Clara has just met room-offerer Liz, and they are happily chatting away. 'I just want to find someone who's chilled out and easygoing,' says Clara, but it turns out that Liz lives in the wrong end of London.

Liz, an accountant, appears a little weary of the rental game: 'This time last year, I was closer to buying a property, but now I'd need a 20 per cent deposit and I'm back to square one. Also, I really need to find someone soon to move in and if I don't, I'll be the one wearing a pink sticker next time.' She's fairly clear about what she's looking for. 'I don't want us to be joined at the hip - we might occasionally have dinner together in the kitchen, but we'd still have our own individual space. Most importantly though, I really don't want a male flatmate. Men seem to think you're part of the package, which is just not going to happen.'

While most people appear to be having a degree of fun - and at least getting along, if not actually finding flatmates - there are a few stragglers watching from the sidelines who don't appear to be making much progress. Rita from Hammersmith says she is not sure what she's looking for and seems as though she may be regretting her decision to come, while Nathan and Chris, who live together and are looking for one more housemate to share their place in Islington, spend more time poring over their Who's Who list than actually speaking to anyone.

Meanwhile, cheeky 23-year-old Sampreet Boyal asks if he can move in with me and is disappointed that I don't have a room on offer. A graduate about to join the brigades of Canary Wharf bankers, Sampreet is looking for a place in east London and, like many others, has dragged a friend to the event 'for moral support'. Despite this, he says he's not fazed by the prospect of living with strangers.

'I've just finished university, I've lived with people I didn't know in halls, it doesn't bother me at all,' he says. Optimistic Sampreet has a plan though: 'I want to rent somewhere really really cheap, I don't care what it's like, or how small it is or how bad it is, but if it's cheap then I can save up some money and get a house next year. This time next year, I'll be on the property ladder - you watch.'

At least there is some optimism in the property market; let's hope it's justified.

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#### Stood up by Michael

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Conversation with strangers is not my idea of a good time, so rushing to a club after work in the hope that such conversation might lead to an offer of cohabitation seems not just optimistic but stupid. However, I was reassured by the promise of a free drink.

After arriving unfashionably close to the 7pm start, I was relieved to see potential flatmates spread thinly over the dance floor. Smiling attendees greeted me and, after confirmation of my place on the list, I was awarded a bright pink badge. Stuck to my chest my name was inscribed above a plaintive truth: I NEED A ROOM.

The badges clarified proceedings, with pink room-searchers clearly visible to white badge-wearing room-holders, but they also made introductions awkward. There are better ways of making first impressions than staring at a potential roommate's breasts, even if she understands you are trying to

read her name in dim lighting.

It was also impossible to ignore the financial gulf. Those on the right could consider a larger budget; those on the left were not. As we gazed across the floor at those discussing the size of the swimming pool, I had less than hospitable feelings. My own segregation became painfully clear when, having balked at £840 a month, the elegant woman I'd met in the middle of the floor asked if I realised I was on the right?

Back safely on the left there was something very comfortable about chatting face-to-face that beat the normal flat-hunting conversation by email via internet searches. Questions about room size and distance from the Tube seemed a lot easier without the glare of a computer screen, yet as the evening wore on and the room filled, it dawned on me that there was a palpable air of competition between my fellow room-seekers. We had all been given a sheet along with our badges listing the names of room holders and the accommodation on offer.

Like many others I had marked potential properties and now, seeing similar marks on other lists, I realised the race was on. I had to scan badges, find the right names and bag a viewing before anyone else sealed the deal.

This push made the difference for several timid house-hunters, and was, I think, the night's main selling point. Trance music pumped as people frantically bounced from badge to badge searching for the names on their list. I was hunting for Michael, whose flat in Angel was only £500 a month.

After an hour's disappointment I went back to the smilers at the door, who confirmed my worst fears. Michael was a no-show. I may not have been speed dating, but I'd still been stood up.

**Richard Rogers**

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