

Looking for a Home, Falling for a Model



Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

The building at 165 Charles Street, where many buyers are serious art collectors, has not only a designer but also a curator for its models.

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Correction Appended

EVEN in the most torrid of real estate markets, there are people who need a nudge to propel them into buying or renting an apartment. Often, the nudge is provided by the model unit - they fall for the furnishings, and take the place.



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When all the apartments like the models at the Avalon Chrystie Place complex were rented, the furnishings were moved to other apartments.

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"It used to be that models were done just to show how the furniture would lay out and indicate the size of the room," said Nancy J. Ruddy, president of Cetra/Ruddy, an architectural and interior design firm, who does models in 65 percent of the buildings she designs. "Purchasers today are much more concerned about lifestyle and being in a particular building because of its image than they are about location, location, location. The model reinforces the branding of the building and the lifestyle being marketed."

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Putting furniture and art onto the premises means that an apartment will be snapped up much faster, according to Elaine Lewis, a designer who has done more than 3,000 models in Manhattan. "Through the years, I have seen the apartments in which we had models go in half the time it takes for ones without models," she said.

In some cases, the developers tell buyers that they can take not only the apartment but also buy some or all of the furniture.

At 110 Central Park South, the former InterContinental Hotel, where Anbau Enterprises is doing a gut renovation to create 63 luxury condos, buyers will be offered the chance to buy the entire package of model apartment furnishings, to be delivered 12 to 14 weeks after closing. Furnishings for the one-bedroom unit will be \$245,000, for the two-bedrooms \$385,000 and for the three-bedrooms \$445,000. Prices for the apartments themselves will range from \$1.4 million to \$13.3 million.

Because the building will retain its Art Deco ambiance, "we wanted to create an Art Deco lifestyle with elegant furniture," said Barbara van Beuren, an architect and developer, who is a partner in Anbau with her husband, Stephen Glascock. "This is for people who may not live here full time but who entertain a lot."

The model is just as important in rental buildings. At the Avalon Chrystie Place complex that AvalonBay Communities is building on the Lower East Side, the line of three apartments that were modeled - a studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom - were snapped up so fast that the furnishings were moved to apartments in lines that are still available. "The feeling is that a line that is modeled will rent more quickly than one that is not," said Fred Harris, senior vice president of AvalonBay.

Developers often decide to decorate the apartments that are inherently less desirable, to minimize their flaws and help move them.

"When we have a few difficult layouts, we take the most difficult, and sales move faster than they do for the less difficult," said Shame Shah, an architect and head of his own design firm.

Mr. Shah did a model earlier this year for a rental building at 25 Broad Street that succeeded in persuading a developer to buy the entire building. The sale is now in contract. A well-designed model can draw attention away from an apartment's deficits. "It is critical if you have a unit with a slightly challenged view or what might be perceived as a challenged layout," said Kamala Muhammed-Redd, director of on-site services for Halstead Projects Marketing. "Not every unit in a condo will have a southern exposure or skyline view. Some look at walls or are dark, and the model can give a sense of how to live in a space even with aspects that are not wonderful."

Wonderful or not, the chief purpose is to help people envision themselves in the setting.

As Jessica Rohm, director of sales for Westchester and Connecticut of the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, put it, "They must be able to see themselves having their daughter's sweet-16 party in the dining room, see themselves relaxing in the whirlpool bath, cooking their favorite lasagna in the Wolf oven, taking the Häagen-Dazs out of the SubZero."

Decorating a sample apartment is especially important if a building isn't finished. "We want people to understand the environment, feel it, touch it, sense it," said Raizy Haas, senior vice president for project management and development of the Extell Development Company.

Extell's most recent venture is the Orion, a 550-unit, 60-story tower at 350 West 42nd Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. Its sales center is two blocks away, on West 44th Street. "We put up an eight-foot model of the building where you can light up specific apartments so you can tell what it will be like on that floor," Ms. Haas said.

Adrienne Albert, president of the Marketing Directors, uses what she calls "the 60-month dream" to choose what will go into a model.

"That means, how will a residence look when the tenants are living in it five years from now," she said. "Their incomes will be higher. Their aspirations will be higher and they will have finished furnishing. So the models tend to be more finished than most people's homes when they first move in."

To do that, marketing strategists develop profiles of their target renters or buyers. "We come up with vignettes for designers to use to describe who might rent," said David J. Wine, vice president of the Related Companies. At TriBeCa Green, at 325 North End Avenue, where the first renters moved in in June, he said, "We had one model geared to families with young children, another for the divorced Wall Street executive whose kids visit on weekends but also wants a place where he can entertain."

No detail is too trivial to be overlooked. "We reinforce the branding with the kind of artworks and authors shown," Ms. Ruddy said. "In a downtown apartment, we might put magazines like Details or Wallpaper. Uptown it would be Town and Country and books by Tom Wolfe. Items that someone just left there reinforce the fantasy that, 'This could be me, even if I can't afford it.' "

Art is not just an accessory in the model at 165 Charles Street, the new 16-story, glass tower by Richard Meier on the Hudson River, where many of the 20 people who have already bought in the 31-unit building are serious art collectors.

"These are people with many homes who appreciate the finest things in life," said Louise M. Sunshine, former chairwoman of the Sunshine Group. "But they need help because there are so many windows. They need to understand how sun and glass affect where the art is to go."

As a result, the condo had not only an interior designer, Thomas Juul-Hanson, but also a curator, the Lehman Maupin Gallery, which installed art on the one living room wall that is not glass.

Though producing a model can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, Ms. Lewis keeps the cost down to \$40,000 or \$45,000 in buildings like the Helena, a 38-story, 600-unit structure put up by the Durst Organization at 57th Street and 11th Avenue, where rents range from \$1,900 to \$4,150.

Because the Helena is a green building, she could only use environmentally sensitive furnishings, and found items like chairs made from recycled seat belts and carpeting tinted with vegetable dyes. Ms. Lewis is accustomed to making furniture fit into small spaces. "The majority of New York apartments built in the last 25 years have standard layouts and have decreased in square footage," she said. "Every five years, they go down 10 percent."

Size was not an issue at the Highgrove, an 83-unit condo designed by Robert A. M. Stern in Stamford, Conn., due to open next year.

"The emphasis is different in the suburbs," Ms. Rohm said. "In Manhattan, you try to make the space look larger. Here our smallest apartment is 2,400 square feet, so we don't do that."

A full-scale model apartment costing \$1 million to produce is due to open in a free-standing sales office there next week.

"We are attracting people who are selling big houses in Greenwich for \$6 million to \$10 million and downsizing to \$3 million, so we are not decorating for young professionals," she said. "This is for people who want exactly what they just sold, but smaller and without the aggravation."

Though many model apartments are dismantled when a building is leased or sold, some, in rental buildings, go on in perpetuity.

Mr. Wine of the Related Companies explained: "We maintain them even after buildings are 100 percent occupied, forgoing the rent. In a large building where there is turnover, we don't want to rely on the housekeeping habits or decorating skills of our residents."

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