

THE ARCHITECT'S NEWSPAPER

13 08.01.2007

FEATURE
34

THE ARCHITECT'S NEWSPAPER AUGUST 1, 2007



TODAY'S SALES CENTERS AND MODEL APARTMENTS CAN BE SWANKIER THAN THE LUXURY CONDOS THEY'RE MEANT TO SELL.

The bedroom (left) and study (above) of the sprawling model apartment that opened in May at The Plaza were decorated in high-luxe mode by Gal Nauer Architects and have already been used for fashion shoots.

It was literally raining gold the day I stepped into The Plaza's Central Park South entrance. Workers on scaffolding were regilding ceiling details in the exquisite lobby that will greet owners of new residences there, and gold leaf was floating down onto the workmen buffing the mosaic floors below. It wasn't a sales tactic per se, but it conveyed more solid information than many other condos I'd seen.

Setting the right mood in the high-stakes condo world is everything. When prices for the meanest studio start in the multimillions, developers and marketers must go to great lengths to convey desirability—often with no more than a sales office or an off-site model apartment to initiate the seduction. How far each project goes is a matter of strategy, practicality, and, of course, dollars.

The Gramercy has a sales center on 3rd Avenue in the 20s and no intention of opening a model apartment. "We're not believers in fully staged spaces," said Arthur Gallego of SHVO, the marketing firm for the project. That sales center has the draw of having interiors by Philippe Starck (who has also designed the condominiums it represents) making a model almost beside the point. In any case, more than half of the 207 units, which run from \$545,000 to \$3.5 million, have sold since early May. A visit there is like a trip to one of Starck's haute-cool hotel lobbies—backlit white curtains, the play of scale, and a baroque-of-the-future vibe. Tours begin with the media lounge, a cozy faux-library where everything—including windows, mirror, and coffee table—comes alive during a multimedia show featuring Le Starck waxing philosophical as he talks up "tribes," i.e. groups of like-minded individuals. In a second room, you tap icons on a screen to find your tribe, which is then translated into a package of finishes for your interiors. Gallego demurs when asked what it costs to put on this lifestyle Rorschach test.

A second SHVO property, the Beaux Arts 650 6th Avenue, has its sales office decked out as a contemporary gallery with artwork curated by Jack Shainman Gallery mixed with renderings

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS JUST FOR SHOW

THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

13 08.01.2007

FEATURE 35



The model apartment at 141 5th was fully staged right down to the breakfast cereal on the dining table, with living room interiors (top) by Cetra/Ruddy architects. The sales center "library" (above) at The Gramercy, on 3rd Avenue bears the surreal signature of the French designer Philippe Starck. On Vesey Street, the Riverhouse sales office has a full-scale kitchen (right).



and models by Perkins Eastman, all in the service of selling 67 residences.

Fully staged model apartments can be worth it. At 141 5th Avenue, a turn-of-the-19th-century restoration, the project opened with one model plus a sales office across the hall, and sold 65 percent of its 38 units, ranging from \$1.6 to \$5 million, in five weeks with no advertising save that on the scaffolding. The interiors, lavish but comfortable, were designed by Nancy Ruddy, president of Cetra/Ruddy. "This model really sold the building. Nancy is the queen," says Harriet Weintraub, whose firm is handling PR for 141. It has the requisite Wolf/SubZero appliances installed, but otherwise doesn't feel like showpiece; rather, it feels like a really nice place to live. Mission accomplished. The "hundred of thousands of dollars" it took to kit out the place is more a case of money up front, rather than an investment per se. The unit will be sold and the built-ins, at least, will be included in the price. For those who were really impressed, even the model furnishings and the services of Ms. Ruddy are available at a price.

Down by the marina at the end of Vesey Street, the Riverhouse sales office uses a maritime theme—a nautical kitchen, pale greenish-blue wavy cut-out accents—to get its point across. There is an interactive wall, a model, and lots of information about the greenness of the building, plus a fully kitted-out kitchen, bathroom, and small living room that have been used as event space for premiere parties, a P.S.1 lecture series, and a gala for OpenHouseNewYork. In spite of the heavy exposure, there are still plans for a model apartment. Since September, about 45 percent of the 264 units have sold, including an \$8 million unit.

Back at The Plaza, the showroom is housed in the spectacular Edwardian Room but offers no real bells and whistles save an impressive detailed model of the building. None appear to have been needed. Ninety percent of the 181 units, which range in price from \$2.5 million to "well north of" \$45 million, according to sales staff, have sold since November 2005, 75 percent before there was even a model apartment.

Now, though, visitors can view unit 1201 (opened in May), a two-bedroom with giddy views of Central Park and European-mode interiors by Gal Nauer Architects, borrowing a veritable warehouse of Versace furniture and accessories to reinforce the pure luxury message. And word has traveled: *House & Garden* magazine photographed Donatella Versace making herself "at home" there, and *Town & Country* booked it for a fashion shoot. There are elaborate gold-trimmed place settings, huge Asian-themed paintings, vases of white flowers, and when I was there, a loop of Pavarotti on the sound system. A second model apartment down the hall, a 750-square-foot one-bedroom is in the works.

So why go to the expense of building a model when sales are so brisk without one? It appears that, believe it or not, the most expensive units sell out first, leaving behind the lower-priced ones. Perhaps no one wants to look like they are signing on as the riffraff.

STEPHEN TREFFINGER LAST WROTE ABOUT PHILIP JOHNSON'S GLASS HOUSE ("THROUGH A GLASS LESS DARKLY," AN_11 06.20.2007) AND IS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO THE NEW YORK TIMES.