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Real Estate

Using Artists to Sell Condos in Miami and New York

By JULIE SATOW

With cities like New York and Miami in the midst of another luxury condominium boom, developers seem to be tripping over one another in the scramble to announce their latest projects, and to stand out from the pack, they are locked in an escalating game of one-upmanship.

In a market where amenities like golf simulators and children's playrooms barely raise a well-manicured eyebrow, the stakes are high. Add to this the fact that developers are asking buyers to shell out upward of \$10 million for apartments that are, in many cases, still just a dirt pile on the ground, and they have no choice but to bring the razzle-dazzle.

Increasingly, the trick they are most often pulling out of their collective hat is art, with a capital A.

In Miami, for example, the developer of a beachfront condominium on Collins Avenue has commissioned a sculptor, whose pieces have sold for more than \$500,000, to create original works for every buyer in the building. Another Miami developer has hired the painter and Academy Award-nominated director Julian Schnabel to design a sales center for its condominium, with rose-colored stucco and sawtooth lamps. In Midtown Manhattan, a developer is making a pointed effort to stand out by placing a permanent 40-story LED light installation on the building's facade, while others have taken to hiring art consultants just as they would architects and construction companies.

The lighting designer Thierry Dreyfus was hired by the developers of a condo conversion at 135 West 52nd Street to create a light installation on the facade of the building. Credit Williams New York

"There is a very strong art market right now, with a much more diverse and large collector base than at any other time I can remember," said Yvonne Force Villareal, a founder of the nonprofit Art Production Fund. She and a business partner, Doreen Remen, recently started Culture Corps, a for-profit art consulting business that advises real estate developers. The expanded art collector base has resulted in more buyers of high-end condos wanting artwork to be part of the experience of shopping for a new home.

"Those who invest in high-end luxury homes also tend



to have a strong knowledge of art," said Helidon Xhixha, an Albanian-born artist who has shown his work at Art Basel Miami Beach, and who recently sold a piece titled "The Wall" to a private art collector for more than \$540,000. The developers Property Markets Group and S2 Development hired Mr. Xhixha to create sculptures tailored to each buyer at Muse, a 68-unit condominium in the Sunny Isles neighborhood of Miami.

While some may consider it selling out for artists to create pieces as part of a condominium marketing effort, Mr. Xhixha said, “I do not see this as over-commercializing my art. On the contrary, I see a collaboration between buyer and artist.” Mr. Xhixha added that an apartment tower filled with his pieces “will be like having my very own private museum.”

For the Chetrit Group and Clipper Equity, the developers converting the former Flatotel at 135 West 52nd Street into 109 condo units, “we wanted to create something that gave the building an identity, that gave us some notoriety,” said Raphael De Niro, a broker at Douglas Elliman Development Marketing, who is representing the building. “People like to be able to talk about their building and have others know it, for people to feel they live somewhere unique.” The developers hired Thierry Dreyfus, the lighting designer who lit up the Grand Palais in Paris and the Château de Versailles, to create the 423-foot installation that will be placed inside a casing attached to the front of the building.

In Miami, the sales center for the Brickell Flatiron condo, rendering above, is being designed by the painter and director Julian Schnabel. The artist’s 2008 polaroid, bottom, of his condo project in the West Village, Palazzo Chupi, serves as inspiration Credit Top: Imagery NYC; Bottom: Julian Schnabel Continue reading the main story

Farther downtown, Culture Corps is consulting on the sales center for 30 Park Place, the condominium designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects that will also feature a Four Seasons hotel. Culture Corps has chosen 11 pieces of art for the space, including works by established artists like Richard Serra and Sam Gordon, as well as by newcomers like Field Kallop. The developer, Silverstein Properties, bought a few of the works, while the others are on loan. “It is not the normal kind of art you would see in a model apartment,” said Ms. Villareal, who is married to the artist Leo Villareal. All abstract, the paintings “are very tasteful, but simultaneously they have an edge to them,” she said.

The commingling of art and real estate has a long, established history, beginning with the cathedrals of Europe, which commissioned religious art. The Medici family in Italy hired artists to create works for their many estates, while in modern times, art has played a role in places like the Seagram Building, with its famed tapestry by Pablo Picasso. Perhaps it isn’t so surprising that in this era, which some have termed the new Gilded Age, the worlds of art and real estate have once again begun to merge.

Mr. Schnabel, who created the interiors of the Gramercy Park Hotel and built Palazzo Chupi, a pink condominium in the West Village, is no stranger to this connection. “The idea of living with art is a good thing, not necessarily a scam,” he told me recently. “Obviously, when something is popular they can turn that into something trendy, but it has a historical precedent.”

Mr. Schnabel is designing the sales center — “a terrible

term, can’t we say building?” — for the Brickell Flatiron, a 710-foot triangular-shaped skyscraper underway in Miami. The center — the developers prefer the word “gallery” — will have Mr. Schnabel’s paintings and furniture, as well as a fireplace. It will “look like a living room,” Mr. Schnabel said. “It will be very different than other sales offices, where they look like you are walking into a bank, with cold marble, a lot of glass, very corporate.”

The artist Helidon Xhixha has been hired to create sculpture tailored to each buyer at Muse, a 68-unit condominium in Miami, as shown, center, in the rendering above. Credit Top: Rendering by ARX Solutions; Bottom: Courtesy of Helidon Xhixha

There are clear benefits to collaborating with artists, but the artists can also be unpredictable. Mr. Schnabel, for instance, repeatedly declined to be interviewed about the project, despite cajoling from the developers who are paying his wages. And when he and I did finally connect, he was far less interested in talking about the condominium than about his new exhibit opening in October at the NSU Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale, “Café Dolly: Picabia, Schnabel, Willumsen.”

While art is playing a critical role in the marketing of ultraluxury real estate, it is by no means the only strategy developers are employing. At One Riverside Park, the developer, the Extell Development Company, has partnered with the company Musion, which created the hologram of Tupac Shakur that appeared onstage at the 2012 Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival. Musion created a hologram of One Riverside Park, with images of the floor plans and the surrounding neighborhood.

But some developers, like Francis Greenburger, the chairman of Time Equities, is skeptical of marketing gimmicks. “Like those mood movies — why would you make a movie that has nothing to do with the building?” he said, referring to the \$1 million film commissioned by the developer Harry Macklowe to market his skyscraper 432 Park Avenue. “Maybe it has worked, but for me, it is a distraction. It isn’t what selling an apartment is all about.”

Still, Mr. Greenburger has plenty of marketing strategies of his own. At the sales office for 50 West Street, his new condominium in the financial district, a curved projection wall features 180-degree images, taken by drones, of different elevations from the building, allowing buyers to see their potential views. And there is a piece of a curved glass curtain wall that will wrap around the building.

While the efforts may be gimmicky, they may also work. At 135 West 52nd Street, the building will not only be draped in an enormous light installation, but will also have a sales office featuring purple mohair walls and a V.I.P. room for prospective buyers of the penthouses. “Once you step into the V.I.P. room, you are entering a different strata,” said Mr. De Niro, the son of the actor Robert De Niro and himself no stranger to V.I.P. treatment.