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The Life Transparent

By MOTOKO RICH JAN. 13, 2005

LESS than three years ago, when Nicole Kidman and Calvin Klein bought apartments in the all-glass Richard Meier towers on Perry Street, the transparent jewel box buildings were still a kind of novelty in New York.

But it wasn't long before see-through exterior walls became the latest must-have amenity for home buyers prepared to spend seven figures or more on an apartment. Now that seemingly every luxury condo has a Sub-Zero, granite countertops and an oversize bathroom tub, style-conscious buyers are flocking to apartments with glass facades, undeterred by high prices, the prospect of baring all to the neighbors and headaches with window treatments.

Sleek, seamless glass facades are showing up everywhere, from residential skyscrapers in Midtown to a six-story town house in TriBeCa.

For Mark Alvino, 37, a managing director of a merchant bank, the glass wall was "the No. 1 reason" he bought a two-bedroom condo at 505 Greenwich Street for about \$1.3 million. Mr. Alvino also looked at the Meier towers on Perry Street and at Astor Place, a new 39-unit building covered in undulating glass designed by Charles Gwathmey.

"Glass curtain walls in the past few years have just been a phenomenon," said Shlomi Reuveni, a Corcoran Group broker who is helping to sell glass-fronted condos in Chelsea and the West Village. To some extent the trend is driven by architectural fashion. In an interview Mr. Meier said architects were eager to work with glass because it is a 21st-century material. Mr. Gwathmey said glass has qualities that make it "elusive and varying" and well suited for more sculptural work.

Developers, needless to say, also sometimes wax effusive on the subject of that hot commodity, glass. "One phrase keeps coming back to me: 'Let there be light' from the Old Testament," said Dan Cobleigh, a vice president at HoriZen Global. "Like the plants that die in the darkness, the human spirit tends to die as well, and the human spirit thrives in sunlight."

Another developer put the iPod spin on it. Now that products like Apple Computer's digital music player have popularized sleek industrial design, wealthy buyers want that same feeling at home. Glass walls evoke an image of a "clean, elegant, well-organized lifestyle and people want to be part of that," said Greg Bonsignore, the managing director of the Hudson Development Group, which is building a glass town house on Reade Street in TriBeCa.

Whatever the justification, developers are rushing to meet the demand. Due to the popularity of the transparent facade on the lower floors at Soma, a 10-unit condominium on West 22nd Street, Mr. Reuveni said HoriZen Global, the developer, decided to change the design for the front and rear facades of the \$2.7 million penthouse from brick and sheetrock to glass.

The Greenwich Street Project, next door to 505 Greenwich Street on a quiet stretch of old industrial brick buildings, is fronted by curving glass. In TriBeCa a wall of glass will sheath five luxury apartments at 116 Hudson Street. Six blocks away, the town house on Reade Street, which goes on the market for \$8 million later this week, has six floors of all-glass walls, front and back.

On a much larger scale, a glass wall will enclose the 250 apartments at a new condominium on Chambers Street. It was designed by Costas Kondylis, the architect responsible for Trump World Tower, a 72-story glass skyscraper. In Midtown a 551-unit condominium going up at 350 West 42nd Street will be cloaked in a sheer expanse of glass.

And Richard Meier himself has designed another all-glass tower at 165 Charles Street, just steps away from his original towers, where the wide-open rooms perched on the edge of the West Side Highway offered unparalleled views from the outside in.

Of course glass walls are not a new idea. Mies van der Rohe's glass towers on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, completed in 1951, are considered the progenitors of the genre. In New York, office buildings have been covered in glass skins for decades.

But although there have been exceptions, the predominant form of residential architecture in Manhattan has been either cement or brick frames with conventional windows. Even today some of the most coveted luxury apartments are in prewar co-ops with relatively small windows.

Developers have been encouraged to splurge on glass as luxury buyers have spent more for their homes. The average price of luxury real estate has increased nearly 45 percent over the past five years, according to Miller Samuel, a New York appraisal firm, from \$941 a square foot in the final quarter of 1999 to \$1,364 a square foot in the last three months of 2004. Prices at Astor Place are running from \$1,380 to \$2,600 a square foot.

David Wine, vice chairman of the Related Companies, which is developing Astor Place, said a glass facade was at least 25 percent more expensive than traditional masonry. Nancy Ruddy, a principal at Cetra/Ruddy, the architectural firm that is designing 350 West 42nd Street, said the average price of an exterior glass wall started at around \$70 a square foot, compared to \$50 or \$60 for a masonry and punched-window wall.

Glass-clad buildings do have drawbacks. In a see-and-be-seen city, glass is an invitation to gawk. And there is less wall space for that large John Currin painting, which might also get sun-damaged with all that light pouring in.

Interior decorators complain that it is difficult to mount fixtures for curtains or shades on a wall made entirely of glass. Finding a balance between privacy and the light and the views for which buyers paid top dollar can also be tricky.

Charles Pavarini III, an interior designer, is hanging chain-stitch string curtains in an apartment at 505 Greenwich for Phyllis Pollak Katz, the publisher of *Archaeology* magazine. At the new building on Charles Street designed by Mr. Meier, Izak Senbahar, the developer, said he was installing electric blinds in all the apartments. The developers of Astor Place selected aquamarine-tinted, highly reflective exterior glass with privacy in mind.

Denise DeBaun, a business consultant in Manhattan, has another solution: no curtains and a devil-may-care attitude. She intends to leave the glass bare when she moves into her second-floor apartment in the Soma. "I walk around naked when I feel like it," Ms. DeBaun, 49, said.

According to Dennis Mangone, a Corcoran broker who paid \$2.5 million for an eighth-floor apartment in Astor Place that has 72 linear feet of window space, those who live in glass houses have a design-forward aesthetic as well as "bodies that fit behind glass." Still, he isn't taking any chances. Mr. Mangone is ordering curtains, and his architect, Hal Goldstein, has proposed designing a sculpture of small glass shards to place in front of the translucent walls.

The lure of living behind glass can be short-lived. Last year Paul Sinclair, president of a retail investment group in Toronto, sold his second-floor condo in the north tower of the Meier buildings on Perry Street after spending a total of only six weeks there in the year and a half he owned the apartment. Besides rain leaks and construction problems at the building, the novelty of glass walls wears off, Mr. Sinclair said.

Yet like many others, he cannot resist fashion. Mr. Sinclair said he is buying another condo in a glass-sheathed building in Miami Beach. "But I will use it twice a year," Mr. Sinclair said. "I couldn't live in that full time."