

REAL ESTATE

Upping the Ante: Dog Parks and Outdoor Showers

By NADINE BROZAN NOV. 6, 2005

WHILE there seems to be uncertainty about the trajectory of residential real estate prices in the city, there is no question where the level of luxury in amenities is headed: up, up, up.

"We have never seen this level of competition before," said Leonard Steinberg, an executive vice president of Prudential Douglas Elliman. "Developers are outdoing one another in the fabulousness of amenities."

Ten years ago, a concierge, a roof garden and storage space were enough to attract buyers, said Shaun Osher, chief executive of Core Group Marketing, which works with developers.

Now buildings are offering lavish fitness centers, swimming pools, basketball courts, bowling alleys and driving ranges. Mimicking the suburbs, they're putting in outdoor showers and barbecues.

To appeal to very social people, and to compensate for the small kitchens and dining rooms that characterize city apartments, developers are building party rooms with catering kitchens and offering a panoply of personal services provided by concierges. At 50 Gramercy Park North, a renovation being done by Ian Schrager, they will be known as "lifestyle managers."

Amenities, at least the communal ones, are rarely found in co-ops because the buildings cannot accommodate them. "The best they can do is take a library sort of room and convert it to a gym," said Paul Purcell, a partner in Braddock & Purcell, a real estate consulting firm. "They can't throw in a pool or create an outdoor terrace."

But condos and rentals offer all manner of extras, sometimes fashioning themselves as what Kathleen Scott, director of leasing for the Rockrose Development Corporation, described as "vertical communities," places where it is not necessary to venture outside for groceries, exercise or a social life.

Louise Sunshine, chairwoman emeritus of the Sunshine Group, was one of few industry insiders willing to guess how much amenities add to the price of a property. Describing a building being designed by Peter Marino at 170 East End Avenue, which will have an interactive family center, a golf simulator and statues of five sheep outside, she said, "If you combine the amenities with the Marino name, it could add as much as \$1,000 a foot or about a third to the price."

To Jonathan J. Miller, president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel, amenities constitute a powerful sales tool, but they may not add much to the value over time. "When you are looking for a resale, the question is how much maintenance that amenity will require," he said, adding that "finishes and design have more impact on value than external amenities with limited use."

Mr. Steinberg of Elliman, who edits *Luxury Letter*, a newsletter about the downtown market, agreed. "At the end of the day, people figure out which ones they really use as opposed to ones that sound amazing in theory," he said. "They love a fabulous health club and a swimming pool, but I am not so sure they are using pet spas."

He is also dubious about the attraction of roof decks. "It is a classic amenity, but only a minority of residents use them," he said. "Either they are in their weekend houses or just working so hard they have no time."

But many developers disagree. They are concentrating on outdoor space and enhancing it with manicured lawns, artificial hills and recreational facilities like cabanas, driving ranges and showers.

A 200-unit condo called Element, which will go up on a site bounded by Amsterdam and West End Avenues, 59th and 60th Streets, will have 12,000 square feet of exterior landscaping with a lawn, a meditation garden, an interior party space that will extend outdoors and private gardens. (It will also have an indoor children's playroom furnished by F. A. Schwarz and will offer programs in science, art and gym.)

"There will be the type of amenities many people think they would have if they moved to the suburbs, but we will offer them in an urban sophisticated design," said Shlomi Reuveni, senior vice president of Corcoran Group Marketing.

It may not be suburban, but the 27-story condo at 205 East 59th Street, former site of the Baronet and Coronet movie theaters, has a dog park by its mosaic garden designed by the landscape architect Thomas Balsey. Half of the apartments have been sold, at prices of \$1.36 million to \$10 million for the penthouse.

In addition, "every apartment has outdoor space and two-thirds of them have two balconies," said Laurie Zucker, who developed the building with her father, Donald Zucker. "We wanted to feel that even though you are in Midtown Manhattan, you can have everything you get in the suburbs."

Nancy Tamosaitis and her husband, Ron Thompson, who are partners in a marketing communications agency, were contemplating leaving the city when they stumbled on the Horizon, a condo at 415 East 37th Street, and they decided to buy there instead.

"The amenities figured in a very crucial way," Ms. Tamosaitis said. "We were starting a new business and wanted to work at home. We were dazzled by the business conference room, which is more glamorous than anything I could rent, by the full-floor fitness center, with steam rooms and saunas, by the very large children's playroom and even by the dry cleaner in the building."

The unusually large playroom was a draw because she has an energetic 5-year-old son. "It is very large with lots of toys and equipment and has become a destination playroom," she said.

Nancy J. Ruddy, president of Cetra/Ruddy, an architecture and interior design firm, is now planning communal dining rooms for two buildings on the drawing boards. "This is a way of extending your own living room," she said. "If you want, you can have Thanksgiving dinner for 25 people or a fabulous cocktail party for 100."

Interior finishes and appliances remain paramount. Some features that were once considered frills are now basic, like stone countertops, stainless steel appliances, deep tubs and spacious showers.

"Designers are always looking for new and exciting materials," Ms. Ruddy said. "Granite is probably the most durable countertop, but we've all been using them for so long that we have now turned to terrazzo; a conglomerate of stone, marble and shell; or glass or stainless steel. In wood, there was cherry and oak, and now we are doing rosewood and makore, ebony and macassar."

In the view of Jacquelyn Sonenberg, executive vice president and managing director of Stribling Marketing Associates, no exterior frill can compensate for pedestrian interiors. "The bottom line is the apartment itself," she said. "If you have great communal amenities and not enough closets, second-rate appliances, cheap bathroom marble, it won't sell, no matter what the amenities. The most important consideration is how livable is the space, how will it accommodate my family in comfort. The rest is icing on the cake."