

REAL ESTATE

Dusting Off the Maid's Room

By VIVIAN S. TOY APRIL 28, 2011

THE idea of a maid's room in New York City may conjure "Upstairs, Downstairs" images of cell-like spaces tucked away behind the kitchen, but spaces for the help are leaving behind the claustrophobic feel of the early 20th century and making a comeback. Several new developments have incorporated maid's rooms into their larger apartments, and while the rooms are separate from family sleeping areas, they are generously sized and have standard en-suite bathrooms. The apartments recall the Classic 6s, 7s and 8s of prewar buildings along Park and Fifth Avenues, but this latest iteration of servant quarters has a distinctly 21st-century feel.

The Laureate, a new 20-story building at the corner of Broadway and 76th Street, has four such apartments — each has four or more bedrooms and is priced at about \$11 million. The maid's room is listed simply as another bedroom, but it is away from the others, closer to the front door and living areas. Two of the building's penthouse units even have separate entrances that lead directly to the servant's rooms.

"When we designed this building," said Shlomi Reuveni, a broker at Brown Harris Stevens Select, which is handling sales, "we felt that the traditional layout with a full dining room, an entry gallery and separate quarters for live-in help was missing from the market. Combining that in a building with modern amenities was even harder to find."

Other new developments with maid's rooms in some of their units include condominium conversions of prewar buildings at 845 West End Avenue and 905 West End Avenue, as well as the Sheffield, a postwar tower at 322 West 57th Street.

Demand for family-sized apartments with separate quarters for live-in help has been so marked at the Laureate that the Stahl Organization, the developer, has decided to combine some smaller apartments to create more units that fit the bill, Mr. Reuveni said. Many of the interested buyers are coming from abroad, but others, he said, already live on the Upper West Side and are looking for homes that mirror the classic apartments in nearby prewar buildings. While the rooms could also be used as guest rooms or offices, most prospective buyers have said they will use theirs either for a live-in nanny or a housekeeper.

The Sheffield has four large apartments that come with a dining room, a playroom/family room, a library, and a fourth bedroom that has been labeled a maid's room. "We were trying to play off the vernacular of the Classic 7," said Jacqueline Urgo, the president of the Marketing Directors, which is handling sales at the Sheffield.

The apartments, listed for about \$7.5 million each, are designed to feel like "a single-family home in the sky," Ms. Urgo said. "More and more parents are choosing to raise their children in Manhattan, and we have seen a need for these very large spaces." Many potential buyers have live-in nannies, "because people have full lifestyles and maybe you have two working parents," she added. "This type of apartment does fit a need."

Maid's rooms built in the 1910s and 1920s tended to be barely six to seven feet wide. Apartments that came equipped with them have three or more family bedrooms and might originally have had more than one maid's room. At 905 West End, the developer Samson Management took a Classic 8 — which had three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen and two maid's rooms off of the kitchen — and shifted and expanded the bathroom that had been shared by the maid's rooms, combining the remaining space to create one larger room.

"This way, for people who can have live-in help, they don't need to fit them in a tiny box; they can have a proper bedroom," said Louise Phillips Forbes, an executive vice president at Halstead Property who is heading up sales for the building. Listed as four-bedroom apartments, they range from \$2.74 million to \$2.925 million.

"People like it for the long-term play," she said. "They can use it for an au pair or live-in nanny while their kids are young, and when a child gets old enough, he or she can have that space, or it can become an office."

Traditional maid's rooms get no light, said Iva Spitzer, an executive vice president the Corcoran Group, who has helped convert many prewar buildings and is helping to sell 845 West End. "They have a closet that you could fit a pair of sneakers and jacket in, and they have a sliver of a bathroom that is so small they couldn't fit the sink in the space, so the sink is in the bedroom."

Instead of standard bathtubs, baths would have three-foot-wide tubs not big enough to sit down in, she said. In most of the conversions she has been involved in, the tub has been turned into a stall shower and the space was reconfigured to move the sink back into the bathroom.

When redesigning the space, Ms. Spitzer said, "the question is: How are modern families going to apply themselves to these rooms that were built in 1910?" In some conversions, the maid's room is eliminated and the space is used to create a big eat-in kitchen, but at 845 West End, the maid's room has been expanded wherever possible and is being marketed as a study.

"I think in modern times," she said, "people die to have an office in their apartment where they can go and be left alone, and they can even put a daybed in it, so it can easily convert into a guest room." Some potential buyers have said, however, that they plan to use the space for a nanny.

Even in the current economy, there is still strong demand for live-in help, said Brian Taylor, the owner of New York Domestics, which places hundreds of nannies and housekeepers annually in the New York area. From the suburbs, the majority of requests fielded by his agency are for live-in help, but in Manhattan only about 40 to 50 percent of clients want someone to live in. "Space is obviously more of an issue in the city," he said. In most cases, city families are looking for a live-in nanny rather than a housekeeper.

Michael Kovner, a vice president of Brown Harris Stevens who teaches a class on real estate history for the Real Estate Board of New York, said that perceptions about live-in help and their housing had changed greatly over the last century.

In the early 20th century, waves of immigration brought thousands of unskilled laborers to New York City, making it possible even for middle-class families to hire live-in servants. "People didn't feel the same way about servants then as they do now," Mr. Kovner said, "because help was cheap and plentiful. And people thought they were pretty fancy to even give their help a roof over their heads."

A version of this article appears in print on May 1, 2011, on Page RE1 of the New York edition with the headline: Dusting Off The Maid's Room.

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