

GREATER NEW YORK



Big Guns in Sales Wars

Developers Bring in Designers to Spruce Up Properties

PROPERTY A22

Designers Enlisted in Sales Wars

By SHELLY BANJO

Filmmakers Chandra and Pierson Silver spent a year looking to buy their first apartment in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. They took their time in what they felt was a buyer's market, until they walked into a designer model apartment at the Solis on Clermont Avenue.

"Buying your first apartment is emotional, so when we saw the way the apartment was set up and it was perfect, we decided to buy it," Ms. Silver says. "We loved the layout so much we even took most of the furniture."

As the real-estate market in New York City slowly rebounds, developers are getting even more aggressive in pushing sales, particularly of new developments that were stalled during the slowdown and are just now coming online.

To that end, developers at such buildings as the Aldyn and Setai Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and the Solis and be@schermhorn apartments in Brooklyn are spending millions of dollars for interior decorators and fashion designers to turn otherwise plain-vanilla model apartments into fashionable residences. They hope using opulent furniture and high fashion will help potential buyers envision the spaces as their own, and ultimately boost sales.

Tuesday night, nearly 600 po-



Rita Konig's design for master bedroom in a model apartment at the Manhattan House on East 66th Street.

tential buyers came to the Manhattan House on the Upper East Side as the building unveiled a set of model apartments by interior designers James "Ford" Huniford, Celerie Kemble and Rita Konig called the Modern Collection, a portfolio of residences designed in response to growing consumer demand for larger spaces.

The designers were given three months and hundreds of thousands of dollars to design and build out each apartment, which range from one- to four-bedroom units. The work was to have a bent toward creating more space for eventual residents. But other than that and their spending budget, the de-

signers say they were free to search antique shops and paint stores for the makings of distinctive looks for the apartments.

"In this market it's all about market differentiation and connecting people with the space," says Ms. Kemble, who designed a 1,861-square-foot, three-bedroom apartment with glazed black lacquer walls, using vintage textiles. "It's not just about looking at the floor plan, it's whether or not I can see myself living here."

An added bonus, she says, is the droves of new clients who call her after the model showings.

Designed in 1950 by architect Gordon Bunshaft and now holding landmark status, the Man-

hattan House was converted into luxury condominiums in 2008. As part of the \$1.1 billion conversion, one of the most expensive in the city's history, developer O'Connor Capital Partners added amenities such as a rooftop spa and fitness club. Even so, "the apartments barely moved until the spring of 2009," says partner Brian Fallon.

In 2009, O'Connor switched marketing firms to Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group and plowed more than \$2 million into a set of designer model apartments.

Since then, 12 model units have been sold, as well as 20 others that are of similar layouts to the model apartments, representing more than \$85 million in sales. Currently, O'Connor has sold about 40% of the available units in Manhattan House.

"Most buyers don't have the skill set to envision what their apartments could look like so if we can do it for them, it removes the doubt and suddenly they say, 'I could see myself in that space,'" says Mr. Fallon, who employed a similar approach at the InterContinental Boston hotel. "For a small investment, this has been a remarkable sales tool."



Above, the master bedroom of James "Ford" Huniford's three-bedroom space, with seating area in foreground. Below, the living room of a model apartment designed by Celerie Kemble at the Manhattan House.

WSJ.com

ONLINE TODAY: See more photos at WSJ.com/NY



Daniela Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal ©