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SMALL WONDERS

Dazzlingly detailed models are a mini-splendored way to spur sales



PHOTOS BY BRYAN SMITH

These miniature homes look so good you might want to live in them.

Developers are paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for heavily souped-up scale models for uber-expensive new condo projects, pushing traditional model makers to get creative in the name of profits.

"We have barely any limitations," said longtime mini-architect Richard Tenguerian. "We can do almost anything to give a model an edge."

The scale model for the Cast Iron House at 67 Franklin St., an old loft-style Tribeca building with a modern penthouse addition designed by Shigeru Ban, has a detailed historic cast-iron façade that can be removed to reveal the interior units. It also has lighting inside each apartment that can be controlled with an iPad.

Would-be buyers can pull open a secret drawer to get a bird's eye view of the basement spa and gym, complete with tiny people, dumbbells and exercise bikes.

"Buyers love this model," said

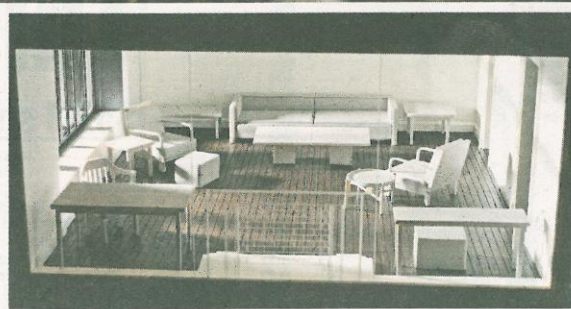
Danika Dorsey of Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, the sales representative for the project. "I pull out the drawer and they say, 'Ooh, that's really cool,' and when I take off the facade, they say, 'Whoa.' It really does have that wow factor."

At the Greenwich Lane, a new condo project comprising five separate buildings and five townhouses in Greenwich Village, the developer invested in four architectural models that incorporate meticulous levels of detail.

Interior architect Thomas O'Brien even designed a special range of miniature furniture from scratch to give buyers a look at how they might configure their homes, all of which have real wooden floors and finishes. There are moldings, Miele ovens and concierge desks — all fit for a Lilliput.

Each building's model has a different lobby design, too — so O'Brien made sure that each of the lobbies had different flooring, millwork and color schemes.

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Model specialist Richard Tenguerian, top, looks over a model for a project on Kent St. in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Exquisitely detailed model furniture helps convey the space for the Greenwich Lane, at left and above.

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This level of intricacy has its price: from \$15,000 for basic concepts to \$150,000 for the most sophisticated creations.

Developers more often opt for the most expensive models on new projects, especially since the majority of new condos coming to market are geared toward ultra-high-net-worth individuals.

A prospective buyer who's going to drop tens of millions of dollars on a penthouse apartment expects the best of the best – and needs to understand exactly what the money will buy.

“The more you can offer a buyer when you're asking them to put down 20% for something that's not built yet, the better,” Dorsey said. “Buyers need to feel very secure in their understanding of the project.”

The prospective buyer's ability to understand a project before construction is more important than ever as an increasing number of units are being sold off of floor plans alone. Approximately 45% of the contracts signed on luxury apartments since Sept. 1 involved buyers who only saw floor plans, not a finished apartment, according to data from brokerage Olshan Realty.

As such, the miniature product has to be as good as the real thing.



Richard Tenguerian and a Hudson Yards model, above. Corcoran's Danika Dorsey, below, says models are vital in reassuring buyers.

“I can't tell you how many conversations we had about the style of the furniture and whether or not it looked comfortable,” Dorsey said. “Do we want to change it up and make it a little bit more modern or a little bit more traditional? With these kinds of models, we can send a message about the esthetic as well as showing the scale of the building. It helps people picture themselves in the space.”

Technology is driving the evolution of scale models into a new era at breakneck speed. Most models now have up-to-the-minute LED lighting. At some of the more expensive projects, buyers can enter their preferences into an iPad, choosing their view and their layout as well as the size and eleva-

tion of the apartment they want, and the model will light up any available units that meet that criteria.

Handcrafting still plays a role, but most models are now primarily built using 3-D printers and laser cutters.

Sales agents such as Dorsey are swearing by these elaborate models. But the turn toward tricked-out miniature towers has some architects mourning the “golden age” of model making, before 3-D printers and laser cutters took over from pen drawings and drawers upon drawers of sketches.

“You used to spend days and nights penning those drawings,” said architect and developer Cary Tamarkin, who has opted for more traditional models for his recent projects. “Now, the same drawing just spits out of a computer. It all becomes a bit too dollhouse for me.”



RICHARD HARBUS

PHOTOS BY BRYAN SMITH