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The Stratospherians

By Robin Finn
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No sooner do acquisitive urbanites negotiate their peace with the manic pulse of New York City than some escape it without actually leaving. The strategy is an aggressively vertical lifestyle, and prescient developers are enabling it.

Buyers who can afford the tariff appended to sky-high apartments tend to clamor for space at the very top of the heap. From this heightened perspective, the city is endlessly picturesque. There are views to swoon for, and an amenity that doesn't exist at street level: silence. Clouds are such quiet neighbors.

But penthouse pursuit is a costly contagion.

Premiums for height are often paid in floor-to-floor increments of 1 to 2 percent, with prices leapfrogging as much as 10 to 30 percent for views that clear the treetops of Central Park or crest above the brick-and-mortar horizon of neighboring buildings, a price point known as a view-break. According to Michael Vargas, the chief executive of Vanderbilt Appraisal, it is customary to add a premium of 10 percent, "if a special view amenity exists as you rise in the building."

What do New Yorkers most value in a dream apartment? Height, light and unobstructed views.

"Views, together with peace and quiet, never go out of style," said Chandra Tyler, an associate broker at Bellmarc Realty, "and for folks who can afford the better things in life, that's the sort of apartment on their bucket list."

Ms. Tyler has a client, Dr. Ezra Sharon, who impulsively listed his two-bedroom penthouse with an intoxicating 1,000-square-foot roof terrace at 220 East 89th Street for \$2.25 million.

But the minute a reasonable offer came in, he raised the asking price to \$2.49 million.

"I believe he is truly addicted to the height and views," she said.

Her intuition seems accurate. The penthouse has been withdrawn from the market.

"On a nice day I can see five bridges, Central Park and the East River," said Dr. Sharon, an arthritis and rheumatism specialist. "And on a foggy day it's all gone and you feel like you're in a jet in the sky. Living here has been a dream come true. The main thing is it's very romantic: I'm single and my dates get very excited about sharing with me this fantastic view with Hollywood-style sunrises and sunsets. Of course, it's expensive, but it's worth it."



According to data compiled by Mr. Vargas, of the top 25 sales in 2012 in New York, 7 were classified as penthouses. Of the 107 sales of apartments on the 50th floor or higher, all were condos; the average price per square foot was \$2,400, as opposed to the \$1,400-per-square-foot overall sales average for condos.

Naturally the penthouse commands top dollar per square foot. Make that plural: with 21st-century towers, there tend to be multiple penthouse floors toward a building's apex. (Why offer a single penthouse when, by sleight of design and description, developers can market half a dozen?)

Though the Woolworth Building's storybook cupola has yet to be renovated, a fortune is what some billionaire will pay for its five-level penthouse. The reimagined building is to have 40 luxury apartments.

"At Woolworth, the first residential floor is above and beyond the height of 90 percent of the penthouses in New York City," said Kenneth S. Horn of Alchemy Properties, the developer of the landmark skyscraper at 233 Broadway and the leader of an investment group that last summer paid \$68 million for the top 30 of its 58 floors. "Buyers are seeing light, air and views as more important than outdoor space: the higher you are, the better the perspective."

Only those with vertigo need not apply: "Everyone in the market is a potential buyer where a new skyscraper offering spectacular views is concerned," said Mr. Vargas, the appraiser, "except for people who are afraid of heights."

As the plan for Woolworth attests, skyscrapers aren't just statement-makers for corporate offices anymore.

"Airplane views are the wave of the residential future," said Daria Salusbury, a senior vice president for luxury leasing of Related Companies, whose One MiMa Tower at 460 West 42nd Street caters to "vertical lifestyle" fans.

Andrew Vogel, a landscape designer, and Donald Savitz, a dermatologist, own a home in Bedford, N.Y., which they visit on weekends with their twins, now 10. Two years ago they rented a two-bedroom weekend pied-à-terre at Silver Towers in Midtown because the kids were starting to show an interest in dance classes here.

The apartment, on the 47th floor, had startling views that made them hanker for more, and once they decided the twins would attend school full time in Manhattan, the quest began for a place that felt high but homey. The building that most captivated them was One MiMa Tower.

"The higher we got there, the more we liked it," Mr. Vogel said. When they saw the views from the 54th floor, they decided to buy and combine two units for around \$3.2 million.

"We walked in," he said, "and the views to the east, south and west were just literally breathtaking. I think we fell in love with all the blues: the sky and the rivers."

The snag came when MiMa Tower changed course from a condo to a rental. The couple asked if they could combine rental units. The answer, initially, was no, so they rented a two-bedroom there and bided their time.

It worked.

"The management knew we needed something larger," Mr. Vogel said, "and when they closed the sales office on the 55th floor, they helped us turn it into a three-bedroom four-and-a-half-bath apartment. We see the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Hudson, and even a sliver of Central Park. We watch the storms roll in from New Jersey. It's an amazing apartment, and I miss it when we're not here."

They pay \$23,000 a month, and are anticipating a more permanent move. "The big problem," he added, "is that when we do go to buy, I don't know that we could ever go down any lower. For us, the height is worth the premium we pay. The reason? It makes us all happy."

Residential towers are stabbing at the sky in Midtown, where the unfinished One57, on West 57th Street, and 432 Park Avenue are jostling for supremacy, and downtown, where 8 Spruce Street, a rental building a k a New York by Gehry, is presently Manhattan's tallest occupied residential tower at 76 stories.

With eight penthouses on offer, 56 Leonard Street will become TriBeCa's tallest luxury condo at 60 stories. Photographs taken from drones and helicopters show prospective buyers the views they will see from their as-yet-unbuilt apartments.

At 8 Spruce, monthly rental fees for the three penthouses start at \$25,000, according to Susi Yu, a senior vice president for commercial/residential development of Forest City Ratner Companies. Premiums increase by floor height and are adjusted, she added, for views and layout. "Our experience has been that the people who want these views don't want to live in a cookie-cutter building with a typical layout," she said. "They're seeking out unique spaces with views."

That's what Andy and Sara Damrow, natives of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, were looking for when Mr. Damrow took a job with A.I.G. He loved 8 Spruce Street's Web site and was ready to sign up sight unseen: "I was 99 percent sure I wanted to live in that building, and if they'd told me there was only one unit left, I would have taken it."

A terrace was high on his wish list, and a two-bedroom apartment on the 52nd floor offered precisely that, so upon arriving in New York, the Damrows toured it as well as an available two-bedroom on the 74th floor that was terraceless but brimming with views. Mr. Damrow was smitten, but his wife was uneasy about the \$10,000 monthly rent. They looked at a dozen other places, mainly lofts, but couldn't forget the unit on the 74th floor.

"No other building had views anywhere where near as amazing as 8 Spruce," Mr. Damrow said. "We watch the colors of the Empire State Building change, and the clouds being below us sometimes is crazy. Helicopters fly underneath our eye level. Cell reception is bad, and the \$10,000 hurts a bit every month, but I wouldn't trade this experience for anything."

The Damrows took a two-bedroom to accommodate houseguests: "We love the reaction of our guests when they first walk in," he said. "One of our friends told us she'd taken the best shower of her life here and I foolishly asked if it was the great water pressure. Of course, she meant the views from the bathroom."

The eight floor-through penthouses planned for 56 Leonard begin on the 53rd floor and range in price from \$28.5 million to \$40 million. According to Kelly Mack, the president of Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, "every penthouse balcony is positioned so that the residents will see the unobstructed sky when they look up.

Views are the No. 1 driver of price, and people are willing to pay for scarcity," she continued. "There seems to be an endless appetite for this type of luxury living, especially downtown, where it hasn't existed until recently."

Ross Nodell, the president of Spire Development Corporation, and his wife, Janice Chang, a managing director of Douglas Elliman, live on the 42nd floor of an Upper West Side high-rise. "When it comes to views, we're already spoiled," he said. But downtown beckoned, **and they are in contract to buy a \$13 million condo at 56 Leonard**, a four-bedroom four-and-a-half-bath residence on the 43rd floor with three terraces, 12-foot ceilings, and city and river views.

"I think the building is designated to become a landmark," Mr. Nodell said. All he has to do is wait a few years until his unit is ready. "Even the railings on the terraces are glass, so they don't obstruct the views."

Noble Black, a senior vice president of the Corcoran Group, was enlisted two years ago by Mitch Draizin and Philippe Brugère-Trélat, both in finance, to find an East Side aerie on as high a floor as possible. They wanted major views, and their south-facing 27th-floor apartment had ceased to impress.

And there was another problem: Mr. Brugère-Trélat discovered early on that venturing onto their terrace made him terrifically nervous, so they felt they were spending money on a wasted amenity.

“But we are both view guys,” he said. “Too many apartments in New York City face a brick wall within 30 feet or so, which I absolutely dislike; you feel like you’re in prison.”

They were hesitant when Mr. Noble, after showing them several options, suggested they inspect a two-bedroom condo with no outdoor space on the 63rd floor of Trump World Tower at 845 United Nations Plaza. Trump glitz, Mr. Brugère-Trélat said, had never appealed. But then the elevator whisked them upstairs and it was love at first sight.

“All I can say is that it had a definite wow factor,” Mr. Brugère-Trélat said. “You get this unique sense of space and scale, but it’s not scary. Instead of feeling enclosed, you feel the opposite.”

They bought the 2,100-square-foot unit for around \$2,000 per square foot 18 months ago, knocked out the second bedroom, and created a living area dominated by a 40-foot-long wall of windows with views of the George Washington Bridge and the Palisades to the north and Brooklyn to the east. A year ago they moved in, and they continue to be wowed.

“It’s like being in a plane, almost,” Mr. Brugère-Trélat said, “and you see plenty of birds and boats and the traffic on the F.D.R. Drive, so we know whether it’s a good time to head out to our weekend house in Southampton or not. My only fear is that a power outage knocks out the elevators.”

Dmitri Siegel, who lives on the 60th floor at 8 Spruce, does not share that worry: climbing stairs is his idea of a fitness amenity.

Mr. Siegel moved to New York from California in 2009 and found a rental for \$2,400 a month in Murray Hill that, he said, “came with the kind of free pets you don’t want to have.”

As for views, they were scant. The apartment’s saving grace was that it didn’t complicate his daily to commute to Connecticut. He recalls first seeing the Gehry building in 2010 while strolling in Brooklyn Bridge Park: the deconstructionist architecture captivated him, but he assumed the prices were out of his league. Then kismet intervened.

“In 2012 I got a job in Manhattan,” said Mr. Siegel, who handles corporate affairs for a biotech firm, “and I also got priced out of Murray Hill, because the rent was going up to more than \$4,000 a month.” After a Bloody Mary brunch, he called 8 Spruce to inquire about available apartments and made an appointment to check them out. The scrutiny did not take long. He looked at four units in ascending order; as soon as he walked into the last, a one-bedroom on the 60th floor, he was sold.

“The views were unending, and I knew I’d do whatever it took to live there,” he said. “I could go without cable, go without travel, go without eating out — maybe I could go without eating altogether.” The rent was \$5,200 a month. He moved in, along with his beloved betta fish, Nina, on April 15, 2012. They are, from the sound of it, in seventh heaven (Nina has water views from her bowl).

“The peace and quiet is remarkable,” he said. “Space in New York City is limited, but up in my place I have a huge amount of space — not the square footage of my moderate one-bedroom, but the space all around me. It’s rare air.”

Besides views of the harbor, rivers, bridges and cityscape, Mr. Siegel discovered a bonus: the interior stairway of the 76-story building. He climbs it for exercise five times a week, often joined by other fitness freaks who reside in the building.

“It’s a euphoria like no other when you reach the top,” he said of his urban Kilimanjaro.

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