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Real Estate

BIG DEAL

Is It Art, or Is It Just Real Estate?

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In the world of high-end real estate, the importance of art is surfacing in more ways than one as a theme in new condo developments.

And why shouldn't it? The wealthy often have an appreciation for art and instinctively bond with kindred spirits who appreciate such nuanced pursuits. Still, there is a fine line between the well-intentioned, and the well-conceived, marketing strategy.

In Miami Beach in December, the Related Group's chief, Jorge Pérez, an avid art collector and longtime trustee of the Miami Art Museum, leveraged his obsession into a memorable presentation at Art Basel in Miami Beach. Mr. Pérez introduced the art world to One Ocean — a 50-unit condominium the Related Group is set to break ground on in the South of Fifth neighborhood of South Beach — by trotting out the designers of the building's floors, gates and gardens as if he was opening an art exhibit.

In Manhattan last summer, the developer DDG paid homage to the new Whitney Museum going up in the meatpacking district by wrapping a condo building being converted at 345 West 14th Street in a giant 150-by-120-foot copy of the artist Yayoi Kusama's "Yellow Trees."

DDG is planning an exhibit next month in the building's ground-floor retail space of never-before-seen portraits of Andy Warhol by Steve Wood. It will coincide, not coincidentally, with the Frieze Art Fair in New York, from May 10 to 13, that is emerging as a counterpoint to Art Basel, said Joseph McMillan Jr., DDG's chief executive.

Mr. McMillan shrugs off suggestions that these moves were less about art appreciation than finding a way to generate buzz for his 37-unit development, which is 92 percent sold and is one of the few new residential buildings in the meatpacking district in the last decade, he said.

"It is always great to have a marketing hook," he said. "But our connection to the arts is not a pure marketing connection. The principals of DDG do have connections to the arts, whether it is a principal who owns an art gallery in Chelsea or ties to the Whitney. This was not just a one-off."

Still, Mr. McMillan said, the Kusama "wrap" lasted just 10 weeks, and now the developers are trying to figure out what to do with the giant yellow-and-black work.



The developer Roy Stillman created a sales center for a new NoHo building, the Schumacher, in which a painting by the Cuban-American artist José Parlá hangs.

It is easy to be a little cynical in this hypercompetitive world of real estate, where marketers copy the latest trend until it is bled dry, much as Hollywood can't seem to stop producing superhero movies.

"This smacks of the starchitect phenomenon during the last boom," said Jonathan J. Miller, the president of Miller Samuel, a property appraiser. "The acquisition cost of these projects is so high that it really forces the hand of the marketing folks to build value."

Still, I was intrigued this week by the story of the developer Roy Stillman, whose obsession with a battered old printing factory from the late 1800s — and equally obsessive appreciation of art — led him to dream up the loft conversion under way on Bleecker Street in NoHo.

Mr. Stillman and his team, among them his friend the SoHo art gallery owner Cristina Grajales, conceived a 20-unit development so well integrated with artistic choices as to seem almost benignly disinterested in the fact that they will be asking up to \$25 million for the penthouses.

It all started when Mr. Stillman, the president of Stillman Development International, bought the Schumacher, built between 1867 and 1883, from a family that had

been using it for document storage for three decades. The original cast-iron and wood facade on the ground floor had been covered with bronze-colored aluminum siding, and a Queen Anne pediment had been blown off by the wind at one point.

Mr. Stillman, who paid \$45 million for the building in December, methodically researched its history. He became inspired by certain design elements, like purple “bullet” glass he found in a door on the roof, the original barrel-vaulted ceilings and the nearly two-inch-thick marble floors, which had been covered over with concrete and other materials.

“As the DNA of the project started to congeal,” Mr. Stillman said, “we realized that this project was all about art, and the art was not limited to the exterior of the building. It was everywhere.”

Ms. Grajales and her team attended nearly every design meeting. Drawing on the inspiration from the bullet glass, she commissioned the French artist Christophe Côme to design a wall of two-sided glass rondels for the lobby as well as the doorman desk. A large painting by the Cuban-American artist José Parlá, who created a 70-foot mural at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, hangs in the sales center. (The developer has also commissioned another piece from the artist.)

“I see a Jackson-Pollock-meets-a-Basquiat graffiti sensibility,” Mr. Stillman said.

The developer used a former art gallery to create a somewhat unusual sales-center experience. There is no model apartment. Instead, renderings hang from the walls like paintings, with some leaning against a wall. Examples of gunmetal bathroom finishes are mounted like jewelry in a showroom.

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The developer also hired the landscape architect Ken Smith, known for his work on the gardens at the Museum of Modern Art, to convert a depressing-looking space in the middle of the U-shaped building into a modern version of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Vines will descend, the walls will be dressed with Boston ivy and there will be white marble boulders to create water elements. Residents will look on the garden from a library.

“We won’t allow people into the courtyard,” Mr. Stillman said. “It is for reflection and quietude.”

However unusual, the approach seems to be drawing interest. The Schumacher, which is still waiting for city planning to approve one of its penthouses, has received letters of intent for more than half its units, said John Gomes, a broker with Douglas Elliman who is selling the building with his partner, Fredrik Eklund.

It will feature two-, three- and four-bedroom lofts, including ground-floor triplex “mansions” with 15-foot ceilings, which will range from 2,500 to 4,400 square feet and

will sell for \$8 million to \$10 million. There will be three penthouses costing \$20 million to \$25 million, including the one Mr. Gomes considers the biggest prize: Penthouse A, with 4,500 square feet of indoor space, 2,200 square feet of outdoor space with a shower, and the reconstructed pediment facing Bleecker Street.

“This is not a gimmick created from a marketing team that said, ‘Let’s sell the building this way,’” Mr. Gomes said. “Here you had a developer who had a love affair with a building, who had a love affair with art, and friends in the art world that organically created something very special from the outside to the inside.”

Mr. Stillman, who said he was spending almost \$70 million to restore and convert the building, knows not all buyers are likely to share his passion.

“I think it is attractive to not be understood by everybody,” he said. “I think it is attractive to be understood by a few.

“For us, every step of the way was an artistic journey.”



The Schumacher’s sales center, in a former art gallery, was created to showcase the design of the condo and its finishes, as well as the artists whose work will hang there.



A model of the Schumacher.