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Elevated ceilings get farther from the floor

Buyers pay a premium for soaring heights as builders aim higher

By Vanessa Weiman

High ceilings, long a selling point for New York apartments, are getting even higher, with the tallest being out of reach for all but upper-end buyers who don't have to stretch their dollars.

"A high ceiling in New York used to be a nine-foot ceiling in the mid-'80s, and the average height then was 8 or 8 1/2 feet. Now 10 feet is very good, 11 feet is spectacular, and 12 feet is a dream," says Michele Conte, a senior vice president and managing director at Brown Harris Stevens.

As developers get savvier about what sells an apartment, consumers -- especially in the luxury market -- are equally savvy. They're also willing to pay more for features that add to both the value and beauty of a property.

"Ceiling height is one of the primary focuses of layouts in new developments over the past five years," says Jonathan Miller, president and CEO of appraisal firm Miller Samuel. "Developers have tried to emulate the prewar style of larger room size and higher ceiling heights because buyers will pay a premium for that."

Tricia Cole, COO of the Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, which markets new developments, says that more of her clients are seeking out apartment layouts with high ceilings than have in the past.

"The market has become much more sophisticated from a buyer's point of view, and they come in with a different set of expectations than they did a few years ago," she said. "Our clients are aiming for a 10-foot minimum ceiling height in new construction."

Developers may also be better equipped to meet those needs: "Construction technology has allowed builders to raise ceiling heights; they're willing to do it and they didn't used to do it," says Cole.

Those soaring ceilings usually command higher prices. According to Cole, Corcoran Sunshine's Loft 124, in Harlem, has a sixth-floor unit with 25-foot ceilings for \$1.85 million (other units in the building have 12- to 14-foot ceilings), which can be priced on a level with apartments on higher floors because of the ceilings.

At 15 Madison Square North on the northern edge of Madison Square Park, another Corcoran development, units with 14-foot ceilings command a 10 percent premium compared to apartments with 12-foot ceilings.

"If you take a place with above-average ceiling heights and compare it to comparable apartments, prices are 10 to 20 percent higher than market averages, though this takes into account the whole building," Cole says.

The height trend is alive and well in Brooklyn, too, and slightly less pricey. Aptsandlofts.com, which markets new developments, is offering a 1,231-square-foot apartment with 15-foot ceilings in Williamsburg for \$575,000. David Maundrell, president of the company, says that a series of tall-ceilinged projects are going up in South Park Slope and Clinton Hill. In East Williamsburg, ceiling heights at the Space 42 condo reach 14 feet and in Downtown Brooklyn, the four-story 42-44 Duffield Place will have apartments with 17-foot ceilings.

Some older buildings in neighborhoods without much loft space can offer just as much height and space as newly built developments, and sell at a premium.

The landmark Apple Bank Building on 73rd and Broadway, whose upper floors have been converted to condominiums, has units that range from \$4 to \$7 million, with ceilings that average 12 feet.

According to Conte, who is the sales agent for the condo conversion, "Loft living is about high ceilings and big windows and cubic feet. You can't get that Uptown. The most important factors of this building are the enormously



Loft 124 in Harlem has a unit with 25-foot ceilings.

high ceilings and the space. People love dramatic space." The units went on sale in October, and sales are already going fairly briskly, Conte says.

By contrast, another recently converted building, the Stanhope, formerly a luxury hotel on Fifth Avenue at 81st Street, is not having as much success. While a number of factors might be contributing to a lack of interest in the apartments (some of which are as large as 4,400 square feet), there has been speculation that the building's relatively low ceiling heights are part of the problem. The ceilings were lowered to 8 feet to accommodate air conditioning in the building's incarnation as a hotel, but they are currently being built out to 9 feet.

"Units are not selling very well, that is correct," said Gary Barnett, president of Extell Development Company, which is converting the building. "But that's not so much because of the ceiling heights but because there's no sales office, which we didn't think we'd need." Extell set up an off-site sales office about a year ago but found that there was not as much interest in the floor plans as they had anticipated. An on-site sales office, which will allow people to see model apartments, will open in February.

Obviously, not every new construction and conversion project incorporates high ceilings; sometimes very down-to-earth concerns, such as financing, hinder developers from including them. Often, depending on how much a buyer has paid for a lot, they must build a certain number of apartments into a structure in order to recoup their investment.

"The developer is under pressure to make a certain amount from the building to justify the cost," says Miller. "If they made higher ceilings they might get more of a premium but would lose a whole floor."

Evan Haymes of Bronfman Haymes Real Estate Partners, the developer behind the Onyx Chelsea apartments at 28th Street and 8th Avenue, said a boxier style with lower ceilings can also be practical:

"If the apartments are back to back, it's a lot cheaper to build because the plumbing lines are aligned. Plus, taller ceilings and larger rooms are harder to heat and air condition; in postwar rental buildings you tend to find 8- or 8-1/2-foot ceilings, which are easier for the owner to manage."

The Onyx, however, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and units with 10-foot ceilings, fits squarely into the new building trend.

"What buyers are looking for is a lofty feel," says Haymes. "They want light and air."

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