

THE REAL DEAL

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Inside the open houses of Midtown West

Renters choose between sleek new towers and prewar mainstays



The living space of a unit at Chatham 44, a newly built condo of glass and aluminum.

By Abby Luby

Brokers like to call it the Hell's Kitchen Renaissance, conjuring up words like

"vintage" and "quaint." The gentrification of the area, which is also known as Clinton and Midtown West, started in the 1990s and capitalized on its proximity to the Theater District. Now, the area, which runs from 34th Street to 59th Street between Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River, is sporting sleek new towers next to lower-slung prewar buildings and brownstones; a tour last month of several open houses yielded a variety of buyers and apartment types.

At Chatham 44 at 464 West 44th Street at 10th Avenue, for example, a newly built condo anchors a tree-lined block. The shiny glass-and-aluminum corner building, designed by architect Stephen B. Jacobs, is nine stories, the top two of which are devoted to duplex penthouses.

The luxury building has sold all but two of its 58 units, according to Suzette Meshulam, senior vice president and associate broker at Halstead Properties.

"We just closed on 23 apartments at the end of January," Meshulam said at a Saturday afternoon open house, where she was showing the remaining one-bedroom and duplex penthouse.

While there were only a few visitors on this particular day, one single lawyer in his 30s, who declined to give his name, checked out the one-bedroom unit on the sixth floor.

"I'm renting a condo now in the East 30s, but am interested in the Midtown West neighborhood because I could walk to my office in the West 50s," he said.

The 641-square-foot apartment he was looking at had an asking price of \$799,990. Common charges were \$603, and the monthly taxes started at \$69.

"I really don't like living in the Murray Hill neighborhood," the lawyer said of his current apartment. "It just doesn't have that neighborhood feel to it. Besides, the East Side is more expensive."

Walking through the one-bedroom, which faced out onto 48th Street and had a sliver balcony off the living room, he said he was impressed by the high-tech kitchen and Miele appliances. "Kitchens are important," he said. "I like to cook."

Meanwhile, a few floors up, the duplex penthouse was being offered for \$2.49 million. Common charges on that 1,576-square-foot unit are \$1,486, and real estate taxes are \$170 a month for the first year and \$340 a month starting the second year.

The lower level of the unit occupies 979 square feet, and includes the living room and kitchen along with a bathroom and small bedroom. The 597-square-foot upper level is home to the east-facing master bedroom, a den and the master bathroom. "We envision this for parents with an older child because there is

privacy. They can come in downstairs while the parents are upstairs," said Meshulam.

Both units at the West 44th Street building share perks including high-speed fiber-optic Internet access in each unit, white oak floors and a sleek lobby with a mailroom that includes a high-tech video screen alerting residents when packages arrive.

The building also has a social networking Web site called LifeAt, where condo owners can connect, and a large outdoor common area off the second floor. But, perhaps, the most lavish perk is the private roof cabanas that are available for separate purchase.

Around the corner, at 505 West 47th Street, a new condo building was under construction. Several house hunters stopped in to check out the model kitchen and living room. The condo, scheduled to open in the spring of 2009, is actually two buildings connected by a wide courtyard designed by the architectural firm H. Thomas O'Hara.

"We went on the market in the last week of October and have sold 85 units out of 109," said Vince Rocco, senior sales manager for Halstead Property.

Rocco was showing floor plans for one-bedroom units with asking prices of \$710,000 and penthouse units ranging from \$1.39 to \$1.58 million.

Noriko Ono, who lives in Tokyo, was there with her daughter. "We want a second home here in New York City, a place to stay instead of a hotel when visiting the city." Ono explained that the purchase would be a good investment.

She said she liked Midtown West and was especially attracted to the building's private rooftops, which were advertised as landscaped terraces.

Kathie Sirkin and her husband, Joe Pasquino, who currently live on Park Avenue and 36th Street, were looking at the penthouse units. They said they were itching for a change.

"We love this neighborhood," said Sirkin. "I rollerblade and bike and have a dog — which you can do here along the river." Sirkin said she had a hard time convincing her husband that it was no longer a rundown area.

"I'm still undecided," said Pasquino. "I mean, I like the penthouse and the access to the rooftops where you can barbecue, but it's hard to imagine what the apartment is actually like with model rooms and not the real thing." The couple was on their way to another Hell's Kitchen property.

The building's amenities include a fitness center, full-time concierge, a common

roof garden, and rooftop terraces available for purchase. And, like the building on West 44th Street, the units come with washer-dryers and high-end kitchen appliances by Miele and other name brands.

If those amenities aren't enough, residents there have easy access to neighborhood places like the Sullivan Street Bakery, which makes fresh breads and pizzas, Amy's Bread, Kyotofu Dessert Bar, Bisco Latte and Cold Stone Creamery, which makes its own ice cream.

Heading north

Ten blocks north, condos and co-ops in prewar buildings are also on the market. Waiting in a top floor, one-bedroom apartment at 314 West 56th Street between Eighth and Ninth avenues was George Penny with the Atco Residential Group.

"I've been showing this on-and-off since the fall," said Penny. "Today we've had a few people. I'd say two at least are real buyers."

The six-story co-op was shaded outside by scaffolding because the building just had a new roof installed and had its brickwork re-pointed. Even though the building was dwarfed by the zigzagging Hearst tower and by Sheffield 57, both across the street, the apartment had good light.

The top-floor unit, which was approximately 550 square feet, had an asking price of \$479,000 with maintenance of \$1,007 a month. Inside, a brick wall ran lengthwise in the living room. A pass-through kitchen had a small skylight.

The kitchen fixtures were clearly from the 1970s, but Penny noted, "These fixtures pull out easily and can be replaced with newer stuff."

One prospective buyer was Tamar Kamen, 30, who now rents on 30th Street and Park. She said she wants to own rather than rent.

"The rent keeps going up," said Kamen, a product developer for Estée Lauder, which is a quick walk from the unit. Her questions for Penny were about the board and how it handles renovation requests.

Just around the corner at 345 West 55th Street, another one-bedroom prewar co-op had an asking price of \$459,000, with monthly maintenance of \$881.

The seventh-floor, 450-square-foot unit was being shown by Nina Rothman of Halstead Property, who said it was put on the market just two weeks earlier. Rothman said the apartment had been on the market for about two weeks, and that while only eight people had showed up on this day, there were more a week earlier.

Beth Temple, who rents her current apartment on the Upper West Side, was one of those scoping it out.

"I'm interested in buying rather than renting," said Temple, 45, who runs her own consulting business from home. And, she said, she'd rather live on the West Side of Manhattan than the East Side.

The apartment had high, beamed ceilings, oak parquet floors and a renovated bathroom with a new pedestal sink, marble floors and an old cast-iron tub that provided some character. The Pullman-style kitchen was at the end of the large living room, and the well-lit bedroom had extra-large windows.

But, like many of the nearby apartments, one of the unit's main attractions was outside — proximity to Central Park, the theater district and the Time Warner Center with gourmet grocery Whole Foods.