

Design Stars

Residential developments rely on prominent interior designers to help condo projects stand out amid increasing competition

BY ERIC KALIS

Steven Gurowitz insists he doesn't chase South Florida developers for business.

But the CEO of Interiors by Steven G. understands if it might seem that way. The company is involved in more than a dozen residential developments in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties and is in talks about taking on at least five more projects. That's a 50 percent increase in residential projects from the last real estate cycle, and reflects a major trend in the current boom.

"We're always busy," said Gurowitz, a 40-year veteran of the design industry. "There are many developers that push design and many that don't. Many present a proposed design and deliver something different."

South Florida condo buyers have myriad options, from oceanfront penthouses in Sunny Isles Beach to New York-style apartments in downtown Miami.

With that in mind, South Florida developers are not simply hiring brand-name interior designers. They are positioning those

designers as the face of their projects for added marketing heft.

Examples include Yves Béhar, who recently got a late night TV shout-out from Kanye West for helping the musician with his nascent fashion line. Béhar is making his first foray into condo design with Newgard Development Group's loft-style Centro project in downtown Miami.

Meanwhile, Rilea Group brought in Mexico City-based Loguer Design, an industry fixture for more than 70 years, for the company's the Bond at Brickell development.

Getting extra promotional clout from a famous designer is especially important for builders who are venturing into markets outside of Miami's urban core and high-end beachfront areas.

In Little Havana, the Astor Cos. hired Interiors by Steven G. to design the sales gallery and certain fully-furnished units at its planned InTown project. While InTown condos are not being offered at high-end prices (units range from \$190,000 to more than \$300,000), Astor is attempting to brand the two-tower development a luxury option in a non-luxury market.

"Our idea behind InTown was to bring luxury residences, upscale amenities and contemporary designs abundantly found in high-rise towers all over Brickell and downtown Miami to the Little Havana neighborhood," said Astor vice president Peter Torres.



A completed room featured on the website of design veteran Steven Gurowitz, above.

"We wanted someone who could envision that luxurious lifestyle set against the backdrop of Little Havana's culturally-rich and colorful lifestyle, authentic cuisines and pulsating nightlife," he added.

In the region's most active development markets, like Miami's Edgewater area, a notable designer can potentially set a project apart.

Eastview Development and GTIS Partners hired Thom Filicia, best known for his stint as a "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" cast member, to design the common areas and private beach club at the 51-story Biscayne Beach, one of nearly 10 condo developments proposed or under construction in the 20-block Edgewater neighborhood. Biscayne Beach is by far the largest Miami project taken on by the New York-based Filicia, who grew up traveling to the area frequently to visit family in Bal Harbour.

The Miami of Filicia's childhood was dramatically different from today's bustling city. That is reflected in the development community's approach to the current cycle.

"Miami has reinvented itself quite recently, which is exciting," Filicia said. "It is not just a beach town; it is an interesting cultural hub. That's what really influenced a lot of people who are bringing in designers to raise the bar on what they are doing."



Thom Filicia is on board to design Biscayne Beach in Edgewater.

Filicia also had a hand in naming the project Biscayne Beach. Edgewater sits between downtown Miami and evolving areas like Wynwood and the Design District. It is also Miami's only urban neighborhood with numerous developable properties fronting Biscayne Bay.

"The common areas and sales center have a nice sophisticated beach-meets-city-meets-Miami feel," he said. "To me, it felt like we could really play up the idea that you could be on a paddleboard behind your apartment and sitting by the pool with your feet in the sand or ride your bicycle to the Design District. That's a pretty cool mix, and not something people have played up."

POWERFUL PARTNERS

The Related Group, one of South Florida's most prolific builders, is also signing on notable interior designers.

Related recently completed construction of the colorful MyBrickell, the first condo building in Miami's financial district to reach the finish line since the recession.

When planning MyBrickell three years ago, Related decided the building's interiors and common areas needed the design vision of a big industry name who could also serve as the public face of the project. Condo chief Carlos Rosso and CEO Jorge Perez were soon on the phone with New York-based Karim Rashid.

"We made a deal to brand the building after my name and started immediately," said Rashid, whose roots are in product and industrial design but is now involved in real estate projects in 10 countries.

The company since applied the formula to other projects, including Brickell Heights. For the twin-tower, 690-unit development, Related brought in designer David Rockwell, who most recently was at the helm of the green room for last month's Academy Awards.

And with its planned Doral View rental apartment project, Related put tennis legend and V Star Interiors owner Venus Williams front and center during promotional events and in marketing materials.

While the role of designers has undoubtedly increased during the latest boom, one of the industry's busiest in South Florida is the first to question the true impact a design star has on a project's viability.

"It might sound a little bizarre, but 95 percent of the buyers don't know who the architects or designers are when they hear the names," Gurowitz said.

"Developers use it as a marketing tool regardless, which is not a bad thing at all," he continued. "At the end of the day, people are purchasing a location and price that fits their pocketbook. That's why sales are off the charts."

Like everything else in the current market, part of the trend is being fueled by foreign investors, who are becoming much more discerning about what proj-

ects they buy into, said real estate attorney Daniel Novela, whose clients include Brazil's high-end kitchen and closet manufacturer and retailer ORNARE, which is having a record year in Miami, and furniture specialist Adriana Hoyos.

Prominent architect and designer Rene Gonzalez has incorporated ORNARE products into the Glass luxury condo project in Miami Beach.

"The market is adjusting to the influx of foreign buyers," Novela said. "And what I'm hearing from my high-end clients in Miami Beach is that only [a few] existing buildings are currently meeting the level of sophistication that's expected."

"Developers really need to up their game," he added. **TRD**