

URBAN LIVING: San Francisco, Oakland move up in style. Inside

San Francisco Business Times

Vol. 29, No. 5
\$2.00

SAN FRANCISCO • OAKLAND • EAST BAY • PENINSULA • NORTH BAY



HOME, WITH CONCIERGE

Looking for luxury in all the right places

From hotels to co-ops, life of ease is a snap

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As a top producer with Sotheby's International Realty, Betty Brachman knew exactly where to look for her own luxury home in San Francisco. She also had a list of "must have" amenities for it, among them 24-hour security for peace of mind when she was out of town, plus someone on site to accept packages or wait for PG&E or the cable company to show up.

So when the Four Seasons opened its condominiums above the hotel in 2001 — offering 24-hour security and housekeeping, plus valet service, a swimming pool, spa, concierge and room service, among other amenities — she added her name to the list.

"It's very, very comfortable to live here," said Diana Nelson, sales manager and director of services for the Four Seasons Residences. "Everything's taken care of. When they're coming in to San Francisco, with one call to the concierge, they can have the apartment cleaned, their refrigerator stocked and a pair of theater tickets waiting for them when they arrive."

As life spins ever faster for busy top executives, full-service living becomes increasingly attractive, luring them to the luxury life of 1940s film stars. This is a home where everything is provided, including a private entrance to the fitness center, pool and spa, and direct lines to housekeeping.

There are valets to park the car. Bellmen to help with the baby stroller. Dog-walkers and errand-runners. On-staff catering for anything from a book club to a formal party. A fully stocked kitchen with a world-class chef, in case you're short an egg or truffle for a midnight cooking spree.

But when it came time to buy her condo, Brachman didn't end up there.

"There was no neighborhood, for me, downtown," she said, in contrast to her current home on Russian Hill. "(Here) you have North Beach and neighborhood restaurants. You know the people in the area."

Cooperative spirit

Like many of San Francisco's condominium elite, Brachman gravitated instead toward the full-service cooperatives and highrises nestled north or northwest of downtown, offering many of the amenities of hotel life. For many, it comes down to a choice between the 24-hour catering of hotel life or a good cup of coffee from an undiscovered café.

"If you want to live in a hotel, that's one thing," Brachman said. "But if you want to be part of a community, there are alternatives that are doorman-buildings that go back to the Art Deco era in San Francisco."

Among those is Royal Towers, at 1750 Taylor St., which hosts a swimming pool, fitness center, 24-hour doorman and valet service, among other services. Best known as the building where Billy Getty sold his penthouse suite for \$15 million in cash, Royal Towers is among a number of cooperatives that were built in the 1960s with the goal of protecting San Francisco's elite.

At the time, cooperatives were able to not only limit their members to the approved few, but also provided residents with a much-wanted anonymity by having purchases be structured as leases from the cooperative corporation. As a result, the names of prominent owners never appeared in public real estate records, protecting them from unwanted mail, solicitations and visitors. And until recently, when a few banks started offering mortgages in co-ops, they were all paid for in cash.

Today, the social limitations are illegal, but the anonymity and security remain.

"A lot of the buyers I see are looking for their second or third or fourth home," said Brachman, who retreats to Glen Ellen on weekends. She said most of the co-



IN THE HOUSE: Many high-end buyers are looking for a city pied-à-terre, says agent Brachman.

op owners are local, with other homes in Napa, the Peninsula or East Bay. "For the multiple-home owner, usually they want something that's turnkey — lock and leave — that they won't have to worry about" when they're gone.

That's an equally big lure at both luxury highrises and the Four Seasons. In the latter, Nelson estimated that 80 percent of the homeowners live in the Bay Area, but only about half of those use the Four Seasons as their primary home. The rest use it as a city pied-à-terre — either a city escape from Orinda or the South Bay on the weekends, or a weekday home within walking distance to work, with a weekends in Napa.

Not only do they not want to have to worry about missing the phone bill in one of their homes, but they also don't want the hassle of making sure their homes are safe while they're gone.

Another group seeking these homes is empty nesters — parents who no longer need the big family house in Pacific Heights. These are people who are looking toward the next 30 years and want to live within a neighborhood, with the quality of life that

includes. They're also looking for a place where the doorman will know them by name, and will help them change lightbulbs or simply watch out for them. Brachman said about a half dozen of the homeowners in her co-op are over 90 and some are the original residents.

"They have someone there to help them," she said. "Often, they have live-in care, so they don't have to go to a nursing home at the end of their lives."

Her previous building, at 999 Green St., even had agreements with hospitals to send a doctor through the condo floors to check on elderly homeowners. Most of the co-ops, she said, receive regular visits from local cleaners to pick up or deliver, and some have pools, fitness centers or restaurants on the first floor.

In the end, though, buying a home in San Francisco is a series of trade-offs, even for the elite. I'll give up the deck for a good view. Or, in this case, I'd give up a four-star chef downstairs for a hole-in-the-wall café.

Kristen Bole is a contributor to the San Francisco Business Times. ■

September 9-15, 2005