

MANSSION GLOBAL

Star Designers Leave Lasting Imprint on Luxury Real Estate

Abu Dhabi, Dubai top list of livable cities, survey finds, Australian townhouses fly off the shelf and more news from around the world
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Like star architects (or “starchitects” as they’ve been dubbed), many top interior designers have achieved broad name recognition in recent years. Their brand can go a long way in today’s luxury market, experts say, where there’s a lot of product out there and more competition than ever before.

“A big name gives credibility and a sense that there’s going to be some quality control,” said David Martin, the president and co-founder of Terra Group, a Miami-based real estate development firm. This is especially important in new developments, where buyers often can’t see a finished product, or international purchases, where real estate investors might not be familiar with the market.

“People realize that the most talented designers have the choice to take only the jobs that they believe in,” said Justin D’Adamo, Compass’s senior managing director of new development. “The fact that a top designer is attached to a project gives validation to it and buyers incredible comfort to move forward.”

But at times, a name alone is not enough. Most buyers need to connect with a designer’s portfolio of work or—in the case of re-sale townhouses, condos and mansions—a finished product, before they’ll consider living in one of their spaces, experts say.

In order to create that connection, the best designers— whether they have a big name or not—must develop a deep understanding of the neighborhood in which a property is located and the potential homeowner that might live there. They then use this knowledge to inform their work and tell a story through their interior design, and in the best-case scenario, come up with better ways for people to live in their homes and experience their space. For this reason, a great designer is an invaluable resource on luxury residential projects, experts

say, and one that's likely to become increasingly important in coming years, even in so-called second-tier cities.

“The design team is one of the very first things we consider when we're putting together a new development,” said Lauren Witkoff, the executive vice president of Witkoff, a Manhattan-based real estate and development firm. This was certainly the case for its 54-story glass skyscraper at [111 Murray Street](#) in Tribeca, for which the company hired four distinct designers to separately handle the architecture, amenities, landscape and interiors.

“A few years ago, we wouldn't have taken it to the level that we do now,” Ms. Witkoff said. “But today, buyers don't want to have to put in new finishes. They want a beautiful home that's already designed and ready for them.”

In order to create a design concept that fits with a neighborhood and appeals to the potential buyer, Los Angeles-based designer [Martyn Lawrence Bullard](#), who's known for designing the comfortable and chic Kardashian family homes, as well as properties for Cher and Tommy Hilfiger, said he spends a lot of time researching the place and its history.

For the [Kimpton residences](#) that he's currently designing on Grand Cayman Island, he incorporated basket weaved lampshades to provide a sense of place. While in Los Angeles' [Four Seasons Residences](#), he plans on including interior finishes and fixtures that highlight the mid-century modern architecture for which Los Angeles is known, while also bringing in the Hollywood glamour and style that Middle East and Far East buyers associate with the California dream.

Another new development that's enlisted a big-name designer, who's also the project's architect, is the Terra Group's [Grove at Grand Bay](#), located in Miami's Coconut Grove neighborhood. Because the target market is empty nesters, many of whom have pets, the development team along with designer Bjarke Ingels will include a pet spa with dog walking services among its amenities. To create a sense of place in the neighborhood, known for its dense tree canopy and eco-friendly vibes, Mr. Ingels left some exposed columns inside the residences and native materials in the lobbies and common areas, which give it a very natural feel, Mr. Martin said.

For other luxury projects in Miami, interiors that evoke an on-the-water feel are in demand, said David Kurz, the owner of Miami's Kurz Real Estate. But just because the feel is aquatic, doesn't mean it has the bright colors and “Miami Vice” style of years' past. Instead, many designers working in Miami

are creating a more refined product. [One River Point](#) is an example, in which [Remi Tessier](#), who's known for designing mega mansions and yachts, used wood and wave-like curves to give units a yacht-like feel, Mr. Kurz said.

On the total opposite end of the spectrum, a new 49-story San Francisco Bay building called [The Harrison](#), which is meant to appeal to tech-rich millennials and international buyers, features shared spaces to be lingered in and enjoyed as an extension of the building's 298 individual units. Maximus Real Estate Partners hired famed local designer [Ken Fulk](#) to create a sense of intrigue and interest.

“When you cross the building's threshold, you're intended to slow down and leave the day behind,” said Curt Alexander, a partner at Maximus, who noted that The Harrison's lobby is called the Grand Salon. “You can sit and have some coffee or water, read a book, and then look around at the art and other interesting details that are meant to inspire.”

The top floor, known as Uncle Harry's, has a similar intriguing aesthetic that's divided into sections in which owners can sit and play chess with their children, host a dinner party or business meeting, or share a nightcap and conversation with a fellow resident. “This building and its design are about a life well lived, as opposed to an apartment with great views,” Mr. Alexander said.

In addition to understanding the location and the potential buyer, the best designers are also visionaries, Mr. D'Adamo said. “These designers are our tastemakers,” he added. “They're social influencers.”

Douglas Elliman's Fredrik Eklund and John Gomes, who work on new developments in Manhattan, agree. “Designers are trying to establish new trends and innovate all the time,” Mr. Gomes said.

One way that the two have brought the sense of new to residential buildings is to promote up-and-comers, like designer [Paris Forino](#), who's working on [50 Clinton Street](#) and the [Steiner East Village](#) building, and to also bring well-known designers from the hotel and restaurant space, as they've done with Martin Brudnizki, who's making his residential debut, and designing the interiors at [Madison Park Tower](#).

Through these designers, as well as Russell Groves, an Architectural Digest 100 awardee, who's working on the [1 Seaport Residences](#), Mr. Eklund and Mr. Gomes have seen a shift toward less wasted space in units, meaning larger

common areas and smaller bedrooms; offering closed kitchens again, as well as open ones; and layering in different types of stone, wood and metal..

“Gone are the days when you can make a vanilla box,” Mr. Gomes said. “Or if you do that white box,” Mr. Eklund added, “you’re going to get a much, much lower price.”

And experts say it’s common for buyers who really connect with a building’s look and feel to enlist the project’s designer or design group to finish off their unit with furniture and a more personalized touch.

Knowing the appeal of this soup-to-nuts design approach, Barth Partners, a Los Angeles-based development team, had [Estee Stanley](#), known for designing Justin Timberlake and Jessica Biel’s home, decorate an almost complete 9,000-square-foot Bel Air home from top to bottom, rather than hiring someone to stage it. All of the furniture will be included in the expected \$20 million price tag, said The Agency’s Jon Hamner, who’s selling the property.

“It’s a huge bonus for the buyer if they can buy a home that’s been designed by a top talent,” Mr. Hamner said. “We’re taking this concept to the next level,” he continued, “which justifies the price before the house is even finished.”