

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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The top floor of the new San Francisco Bay development "The Harrison" is known as Uncle Harry's.
DOUGLAS FRIEDMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

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 58-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 Square 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."

Here's a look at other news from around the world compiled by Mansion Global:

Rising Mortgage Rates May Bring a Rush of Buyers to the Market

As interest rates continue to rise in the wake of the U.S. presidential election, new homebuyers may come out of the woodwork in hopes of locking down a loan before rates climb any higher. The latest monthly existing-sales report from the National Association of Realtors shows that sales rose by their fastest rate in a decade in October, a trend economists attribute to a strong job market as well as the release of pent-up demand due to low inventory. While rates are still at historic lows—a national average of 3.95%, up from 3.5% on Election Day—the buying boom will likely continue, and NAR **chief economist Lawrence Yun said, "In the short-term, some prospective buyers may rush to lock in their rate and buy now, while others — especially those in higher-priced markets — may be forced to delay as a larger monthly payment outstretches their budget."** ([The Real Deal Miami](#))

Dubai and Abu Dhabi Rank Highest Among MENA's Livable Cities

A new [bayt.com](#) survey of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) residents has found **that the majority of residents in the region's cities feel positive about their area's standard of living, with respondents ranking Dubai and Abu Dhabi as the region's top two cities based on a variety of social and economic factors. Next on the list of top cities were Muscat, Eastern Province, Doha, Riyadh, Marrakech, Rabat, Jeddah and Kuwait City. A researcher at YouGov said of the study, "This is one of most comprehensive surveys conducted in the MENA which provides deeper understanding of standards of living across major cities using social and cultural yardsticks instead of focusing merely on physical infrastructure."** ([Khaleej Times](#))

Post-Housing Crash, Spanish Millennials Prefer Renting To Owning

Young Spaniards who lived through the housing crisis are increasingly interested in renting instead of buying, having seen home prices jump 71% pre-recession, then plunge **31% after the 2008 crash. "The concept of owning a home in Spain was almost religious, but that's changed for an entire generation of young people who have seen people losing their homes, prices dropping and losing access to credit,"** said Idealista SA co-founder **Fernando Encinar. "That has made renting a more attractive option, especially in big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona."** While owning is still more common in Spain than in other parts of the European Union, the percentage of Spaniards who rent has risen to 22%—up from 19% in 2007—and the proportion of rentals in the market has jumped from 9% in 2000 to around 25% in 2015. ([Bloomberg](#))

China's Richest Man Says the Nation's Property Bubble Won't Lead to Collapse

Fears about a collapse in China's property bubble are overblown, according to Wang Jialin, the chairman of Dalia Wanda Group, and the country's richest man. "Yes, there's a bubble in China," he said at a recent Forbes conference. "Particularly in the last few years it's quite big, but (the sector) will not collapse." There's still a potential for growth, says Jialin, thanks to the large number of Chinese who want to move from rural areas into cities, meaning a continued boom in urbanization. ([Reuters](#))

Southern California Will See More New Construction Housing in 2017

After a year that saw rising prices and shrinking vacancy rates, a new report from the Real Estate Research Council of Southern California predicts a sharp rise in **construction of new residential units over the course of 2017**. The Council's third quarter report predicts a 12.3% increase in residential permits next year across all seven counties in Southern California, which could help alleviate pent-up demand in areas like San Diego County, where the pace of building has been at a historic low; while the vacancy rate is just 3.2%, rents have jumped 7%, and sales prices have risen by 8% over the past year. Santa Barbara County had the lowest vacancy rate in the region, clocking in at just 2.7%. ([Los Angeles Times](#))

Rare But In-Demand Townhouses May Be "Missing Middle" in Australia's Market

After 55 new development townhouses in Melbourne sold off-plan at auction in just three hours, experts are starting to see townhouses as a highly sought-after—but underserved—**section of the nation's housing market, particularly among younger buyers**. Recent construction has focused on large multi-unit complexes in the aim of affordability, but townhouse demand has been rising in capital cities over the past five years. The demand is largely coming from young families who want a yard and more **space, but can't necessarily afford a larger house**. Government officials are beginning to address the vacuum, and in October the NSW government released its Medium Density Design Guide to encourage this type of mid-range, townhouse-style development. ([news.com.au](#))

San Francisco's Millennium Tower Can Be Seen Sinking From Space

The European Space Agency has released data from satellite images that shows San **Francisco's** troubled Millennium Tower sinking at perhaps a faster rate than was previously assumed. The images, collected as part of a larger study on urban ground movement around the world, show that the building sunk between 1.6 to 1.8 inches over a recent one-year period, and nearly double that over a 17-month period. More positively, the data shows a slight slowdown in the sinking process over the summer, but **researchers caution that this trend requires more study, and doesn't change the** troubling overall picture painting by the data. All told, the building has sunk around 16 inches since it was opened in 2009. ([ABC News](#))

Skyrocketing Prices Lead Chinese Buyers To Custom Renovate Smaller Homes

Dizzying home prices in China have led an increasing number of buyers to purchase **smaller spaces than they'd initially planned on, only to remodel them to create the feeling of more light and space.** For instance, one buyer turned his 22-meter Beijing one-bedroom into a two-bedroom apartment with a sitting room, toilet, and kitchen, **with added natural light from two glass doors and a glass wall in the kitchen.** “As the housing prices go incredibly high in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and some second-tier cities, the demand for a smaller living space is increasing,” says noted architect Lian Zhiming. “The trend is obvious. In the past, we focused more on interior design. Now, many of us are ‘space designers’ who work to make each cubic meter count.” (Global Times)