



Condominium Considerations

Choosing the options to fit your lifestyle

By Steve Lorton

In the same way that the early- to mid-20th century was the era of the bungalow, the beginning of the 21st century is turning out to be the age of the condominium. Many homeowners are moving back to the city, attracted by proximity to jobs and the aesthetics of downtown living. And governmental growth-management policies and regulations across the country—from raised height restrictions to increased mixed-use zoning—are accelerating this trend. Homeowners are realizing that purchasing a condominium equipped with useful amenities can lead to a high quality of city living. ■ Never have so many buildings, in so many locations and with such a wide variety of features, been available to the buying public. It's easy to be both dazzled and overwhelmed. If you're in the market for a condo, first define what you want. Look closely at the materials used in construction—from the condo's cabinetry, hardware and flooring to the foundation of the building. Read the marketing brochures, and do your research: Find out who maintains and governs the building.

A spacious balcony at Seattle's Madison Lofts borders the leafy trees of Washington Park Arboretum.



Amenities 101

While the location, size and style of a building certainly play a role in attracting buyers, what often closes the sale are the extras. And they can be seductive. Slow down. Pay attention. Get picky.

Joanie Parsons, whose Seattle-based firm, Parsons Public Relations, represents several condominiums, puts it simply: “It’s all about quality, integrity [and value]: quality in materials, integrity in design and value for dollar spent. And it’s as much about what you don’t need as what you do need to suit your lifestyle.”

At Water’s Edge Condominiums, near the south end of Seattle’s Lake Washington, a two-bedroom, 900-square-foot unit may sell for around \$500,000. The view alone, which stretches north and east up the lake, attracts buyers. And with a condo purchase, the buyer gets a boat slip. That’s no small thing in a city famous for its boat ownership. That is, unless you want to live on the water but are not interested in boating.

When the purchase of the condo includes additional, and perhaps even glamorous, amenities, think carefully about whether they are important to you, and what your options will be—from resale to rental—with these amenities.

Also keep an open mind, and consider what novel features might mean in the future. Perhaps someday you *will* be interested in boating, or, if you have grown children, they will want to come over for adventures on the water with their children.

Some condos come equipped with heating and lighting systems that you can program so that your unit heats up or lights up before you get home.

This is a convenience to some; to others, it’s unnecessary. Are you willing to pay extra for such an amenity, or to seek it out?

If you really don’t want the added feature a condo is offering, it may put you in a position to negotiate. What, for example, are the true values of the extras offered? It makes sense to discuss options.

Residents of the Bel Air building in Vancouver, B.C., treasure its high ceilings, many windows and neo-Art Deco style.

The marketing materials for Canal Station, in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, list among the building's features, "dual coax cabled multi-media outlets." In addition to this state-of-the-art wiring, the building also has a "convenient business center, with fax machine, computers and copier." To prospective owners, the business center may prove to be an even more important feature.

A roomy, well-equipped space with numerous machines and someone to oversee maintenance can be a real asset—and make a number of home-office devices unnecessary.

Beyond just looking good

Materials matter. What looks good in the show unit or on your first day of occupancy may not pass the test of time. For example, a pleated paper shade covering a ceiling light may look up-to-date, but it will likely catch dust and age quickly.

A glass globe is easier to clean and will stand the test of time better. Similarly, stone or tile countertops have a far longer and more beautiful life than those made from laminate.

Jay Sunderland, associate broker for ZipRealty, which operates nationally, advises his clients to seek out quartz countertops: "It's a super-hard natural stone, is very low maintenance, and comes in a range of colors as varied and handsome as granite or marble. No grout to clean or replace. No sealing required."

Stainless-steel kitchen appliances are as easy to maintain as they are good-looking. Cabinetry, too, is something to consider. When the list of amenities cites "maple, cherry or walnut stained cabinetry," recognize that the word "stained" may indicate lesser woods that have been stained to appear to be higher in quality.

Flooring also merits a discerning eye. Do you see handsome carpeting as you walk into the unit? What's under it? Hardwood floors have a long life. Durable, high-quality bamboo is an excellent flooring material emerging



MATT TODD PHOTOGRAPHY

in popularity.

And don't be afraid to negotiate when it comes to the extras that you know you want. If you are buying an in-progress unit, and the builder doesn't offer the material you want, ask for it. Also inquire about additional charges, if any, for the purchase and installation of the material.

Features outside the unit

Be certain to know, when you sign on the dotted line, where you'll park your vehicle. A good parking space, preferably one that is reserved and covered, is essential. Two is even better.

To be able to welcome guests and invite them to park in your building is a luxury that most first-time condo buyers don't consider—especially if they are

The Canal Station building in Seattle has a gracious, welcoming lobby with ample seating around a fireplace, which residents and visitors appreciate.

At Water's Edge Condominiums in Seattle, owners enjoy sweeping views of beautiful Lake Washington.



COURTESY: WATER'S EDGE CONDOMINIUMS

moving from the suburbs, where parking often isn't a concern.

Builders sensitive to the growing trend toward health and physical fitness are making workout facilities bigger and more state-of-the-art. Or, in some cases, condo ownership comes with membership to a nearby fitness center.

"I like that," says one longtime condo resident in Seattle's Belltown neighborhood. "It gets me up, out and going, at least three times a week. I feel more connected to the city."

If this amenity is important to you, look the space over and ask plenty of questions: Does the gym have windows so you can look outside as you exercise? Is the view pleasant? Are there televisions mounted above the machines? Who cleans the gym, and how often?

A 24-hour lobby attendant represents both security and luxury. If an unexpected guest shows up, that person will contact you. If a package or a bouquet of



COURTESY, THE PACIFICA TOWER IN PORTLAND

flowers is delivered, the door attendant can sign for it and store it safely at the front desk. Often the door attendant is a cheerful presence in the building. Such services add to the monthly building fee, but few would argue the value.

Pacifica Tower in Portland, Oregon, boasts prime views of the Willamette River.

The entry to the building may seem like little more than a passage from the street to your unit, but remember that the building's entry is the equivalent of your front door.

Maintenance is an issue: Are flowers fresh and plants watered and groomed? Are the mailboxes out of view, with secure locks? Is there a pleasant place to sit?

In 1962, a state-of-the-art poured-concrete building debuted on the lake-shore in Seattle's Madison Park to house celebrities for the World's Fair. Mary Henry, a resident there since 1982, appreciates the beauty just outside the building's front door, where native maples are surrounded by low-growing sword ferns. Sweet gum trees were planted in the parking strip and have grown to shade her fourth-floor balcony. The leafy view has become as important to her as the view of the lake. Birds often build nests directly outside her window.

The ability to view wildlife seems like an unlikely feature for most condos. Not so for residents of Seattle's Madison Lofts, which abuts the city's lush Washington Park Arboretum. Urban dwellers have also learned from New York City's experience with peregrine falcons that even wild animals can take to urban living.

Structure and governance

It's important to evaluate the very structure of the building. Realtor Spafford Robbins, who works for Gerrard, Beattie & Knapp in Seattle, goes straight to the bedrock with his clients: "Extras, decor—buyers can figure all that out. But it is essential to know the bones of the building, so do your homework. For soundness of structure in everything from rainy winters to earthquakes, I want [homebuyers] in units made of reinforced concrete or steel. And take a hard, critical look [at] past projects."

Because views can so easily be obstructed one day, Robbins is concerned if a view is a major selling point.

"Zoning ordinances change. Views can be blocked. You're relatively safe [only] if

you're on an upper floor, well up a hill, at water's edge or looking down a broad street."

So choose your views with care. In Portland, Oregon, the Pacifica Tower boasts 1,500 feet of waterfront boardwalk along the Willamette River. The building's residents enjoy unobstructed views of the river and surroundings.

Robbins also points out another question that should be considered by potential buyers: How is the building governed?

Mary Henry secured a seat on the board of her Seattle building, and lobbied to have the spacious entry hall updated: "Instead of redecorating with no input from the residents—as had been done previously—we put samples of floor tiles and area rugs for residents to pick from. As it all came together, there was an air of ownership and pleasure in the results."

Henry's experience points to the fact that a discerning buyer should ask how

MIKE SEIDL



The 5th and Madison condominium building, in downtown Seattle, has a calming green space amid a busy urban location.

such decisions are made in buildings. It could be the manager, the building owner or, most commonly, a board of residents. Be sure to ask how big the board is, how long each member's term is and how many terms a member can serve.

History and a sense of community

When John Goodwin and Michael-Jay Robinson decided to sell their house in a quiet Portland neighborhood and move into the city's thriving Pearl District, they realized that they had options: The Pearl is positively glistening with new buildings and renovated historical ones.

They eventually decided on the Marshall-Wells Lofts. This huge 1910 structure is supported by massive timbers harvested from surrounding forests long ago. It's a grand old structure that has earned a spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

The building has a spacious interior garden with leafy trees and a large fountain. Goodwin, who is marketing director for Portland's prestigious University Club, brims with enthusiasm when he talks about his new home: "It's the real thing. It's historic. We feel like a part of the fabric of this venerable and beautiful city."

Great amenities are a must, but sometimes it's about history and the feeling you get from a building. Follow your heart. You might find yourself saying, "I can't really say what it is. I just love this place." And what better reason to live there?

Urban green

As more homeowners take the environment into consideration when they buy homes, more buildings are striving for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.

Towering 39 stories above downtown Seattle, Olive 8 is on track for LEED Silver certification when it opens at the end of this year. The first 17 floors will house a Hyatt with 346 guest rooms, and the top 22 floors will be 230 condominium units.

The 8,355-square-foot green roof—a

living, growing roof layered with soil and native plants—will reduce storm runoff by 25 percent each year and will lessen the “heat island” effect created by expanses of urban masonry.

State-of-the-art showerheads will save a gallon of water per minute. The building will save 2.4 million gallons of water annually, and it will see lower utility bills due to a 32 percent savings in water and a 20 percent reduction in overall power usage.

In downtown Seattle, the 5th and Madison condominium building also enjoys many environmentally friendly amenities. Underground cisterns capture water that’s used to irrigate the building’s half-acre green space, which is open to the public and provides a welcome habitat for birds. The building has an air-monitoring system that keeps fresh air circulating.

A buyer’s market

In Vancouver, B.C.—a city that was at the forefront of the return to urban living—developers are attracting buyers by adding such upgraded items as plasma TVs and hardwood floors.

Thomas Park, president of Vancouver-Condos.com, points out the classic amenities of the Bel Air building, in the trendy Kitsilano neighborhood: handsome neo–Art Deco style; spacious balconies overlooking a quiet, tree-lined street; 9-foot ceilings; and proximity to one of the best public high schools in the city.

Even in the presence of such lovely features, Park says, “It cannot be overstated, in this market: Now is the time to know what you want, and to ask for what you want, before you buy.”

There’s no doubt that the condo market is thriving. Buyers across the nation are being enticed by the excitement, glamour and convenience of urban living. Condominiums are abundant across the country, with a wide range of excellent amenities. Do your research. Ask questions. Look at the big picture. Think it through. Go for what you want. ▲

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