

Multifamily Developers, Art Patrons

Searching For Identity, Complexes Add Local Works

By Steve Adams



Demand for original artwork in new luxury apartment complexes is spiking as multifamily developers try to make their projects stand out.

When designing the next wave of multifamily projects, many developers pay as much attention to common areas as the layout of the living units themselves.

With thousands of apartments and condos on the market in newly built high-rises and more on the way, local developers have been caught up in an amenities arms race. But as roof decks, green walls, yoga studios and game rooms have become standard issue in complexes, it's not so easy to stand out. Increasingly they're tapping into the creative energies of the local art community for unique flourishes.

At One Canal, a 320-unit apartment complex set to open this month in Boston's Bulfinch Triangle, developer Trinity Financial will display 152 pieces of original artwork in lobbies and common areas.

"No one wants to live in a hotel that has generic art all around," said Abby Goldenfarb, vice president of development for Trinity Financial. "It makes the building more attractive to residents, and it makes the building more authentic when you can incorporate local art."

The 442-unit Millennium Boston Tower will include an extensive collection of contemporary art in lobbies, corridors and its 23,000-square-foot resident club. Curated by East Hampton, New York gallery owner Edsel Williams, the collection will exclusively feature works by artists who have studied or taught at Boston-area art schools.

“Many of these artists have been students and teachers of each other. These significant relationships are set forth in this permanent collection for the first time in the history of Boston,” developer Millennium Partners said in a statement.

Connecting Landlords And Artists

The search for differentiators has provided a growth opportunity for Boston-based companies like Boston Art Inc. and Turning Art, which maintain relationships with local artists groups and work with developers, property managers and brokerages nationwide.

John Kirby has been supplying art to commercial landlords for 30 years, first with his firm Boston Corporate Art, and since 2001, its successor, Boston Art Inc. The company provides full-service art installation services, with a team of four art consultants and a frame shop that provides installation services.

Although the company’s motto is “Art for all settings,” the bulk of the business is coming from the booming luxury apartment segment.

“We’ve been drawn into multifamily because so much of it’s being developed in Boston and beyond,” said Kirby, whose clients include a who’s-who of active local developers including Skanska USA, Related Beal, Davis Cos. and National Development. “The art really bridges the chasm of what’s hip to youngsters and what connects with the past. Mainly it’s contemporary. But if they want ships on the harbor, we’ve got them.”

Pieces range from \$200 to as high as \$28,000, with the majority of artwork in the \$3,500 range, Kirby said.

Kirby has developed relationships with a network of artists and brokers across the country over the past three decades. Boston Art refreshes its pipeline with visits to national art fairs, including Art Basel Miami, and open studios.

FP3, a loft condo complex developed by Berkeley Investments in Fort Point, incorporated a 2-story art gallery when it opened in 2008 and partnered with James Hull, founder of the Green Street Gallery in Jamaica Plain, to host solo exhibitions by local artists. When development restarted after the recession, projects like the Kensington tower in Downtown Crossing set the tone with textile and salvaged metal sculptures, generating interest among the development community.

“Everybody said, ‘Whoa – look at the Kensington!’ They’re all very collegial, and they see each others’ projects,” Kirby said.

Jason Gracileri founded Boston-based TurningArt in 2010 with a Netflix-style business model that gives homeowners and apartment-dwellers a rotating portfolio of artwork on a subscription basis. Since then, the venture-backed company has shifted its focus to commercial real estate.

It works with brokers such as CBRE's asset services division, landlords including Lincoln Property Co. and multifamily developers to match them with a network of 20,000 pieces by 1,000 artists, from limited-edition prints to commissioned sculptures for multistory lobbies.

Gracileri, a veteran of the tech startup scene, made connections in the local art community through his wife, Julie Kramer, a painter and former gallery director at the North Shore Arts Assoc. of Gloucester.

Most clients opt for TurningArt's lease-and-rotation service, signing an annual or multiyear contract that covers design, curation, installation and rotation. A smaller number of clients opt for commissioned artworks, paying a one-time fee up front.

An online voting option enables companies to let employees have a say about which pieces will be installed in their workspaces.

"That tends to be a really big draw for people," Gracileri said. "It's a tangible way to build community and provide more engagement to the space."



The lobby of the law firm Manion, Gaynor & Manning in Boston.