

Wrapped in green

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For more than a decade, as property values soared, luxury condominium developers found creative ways to promote projects. Some touted exclusive addresses and lavish amenities while others enlisted celebrity architects and endorsers to help drum up enthusiasm. Now, as numbers of sales fall in even the most resilient real estate markets, developers are having to work even harder. And many are turning to an area that once received only perfunctory attention: landscape design.

“Today, a buyer is just as likely to ask about the gardens and public spaces at a development project as what kind of kitchen or bath amenities there are,” says Edward Lewis, a London estate agency that specialises in new properties. And in a slowing market, every detail matters.

The trend is helped by the rise of garden designers who, while not quite celebrities, are big names. US landscape architect Bill Bensley, noted for creating lush, tropical exteriors at commercial projects across Asia and Europe, is working on several large condo buildings, including the overall design of the Kemang Village, an integrated estate south of Jakarta, Indonesia. British-born Henry Steed, long one of Europe’s best-known landscape designers, has meanwhile entertained more than a dozen new project offers from residential developers in Asia and Europe this year, up considerably from just three or four in 2007. He’s working on the Four Seasons and Ardmore Park residences in Singapore.

In New York the backers of Beekman Plaza have listed their landscape architects, Field Operations, in collaboration with Dutch planting expert Piet Oudolf, alongside their star architect, Frank Gehry. Their plan calls for two large spaces around the base of the building, with water features, furniture and lighting. Uptown, at the 555 West 23rd Street project, a courtyard designed by Howard Abel, featuring evergreen plantings, a fountain and an illuminated waterfall, is also a key part of the project’s marketing campaign. The aim, says Jeff Levine, a principal with the development team, is to make the building “stand out” among a glut of new condos.

“It really has become almost a prerequisite at newer buildings,” says Stephen Larkin, a Manhattan marketing manager who works with real estate agents.

Highlighting a project’s landscaping also taps into buyers’ growing infatuation with all things green, say estate agents. Landscapers who specialise in eco-friendly gardening are reporting a sharp increase in business. At the Grangeford Apartments in Singapore’s Leonie district, developers say they spent more than \$1m on sustainable landscape elements, including multiple terraces with native and low-maintenance planting and a green roof that covers about 25 per cent of the total site. In Paris, French architect Jean Nouvel is teaming up with several noted landscape designers to incorporate eco-friendly greenery around the 71-storey Signal Tower on the edge of the city, while British architect Lord Foster is doing the same with his mixed-use Russia Tower in Moscow.

“Promoting your green credentials on a project is one of the strongest and most effective ways to attract homebuyers these days,” says Nikolai Mitevskia, an independent property developer who has worked on several large Moscow projects. “Moscow and other big cities are running out of space to build, so whatever green landscape elements you add to a project is seen as a major perk.”

For their part, top architects say working closely with landscape designers from the outset of a project is essential, particularly on large-scale housing developments. “Landscaping used to be one of the weak links in residential condominium design,” says Gisue Hariri, a partner at design firm Hariri & Hariri Architecture. “Developers are now spending more money working on landscaping because they now know that buyers covet these spaces.”

Hariri & Hariri is designing a mixed-use condominium project in Salzburg, Austria, that includes a man-made creek and waterfalls to run along the edge of the site between the structure and the adjacent Rainsberg Mountain.

Not everyone is convinced that impressive landscape architecture makes good investment sense in the long run, however. “It will take years before a developer truly knows if the money spent really makes a project more desirable,” says Frankfurt-based property appraiser Jens Rudolph.