

The (NEW) Good Life

**With a concierge
at your disposal,
spa services
at your fingertips
and a parking
space for
your yacht,
hotel condos
turn everyday
living into a
luxury
experience**

Story by ETHAN GILSDORF
Photographs by MICHAEL PIAZZA



AT BATTERY WHARF'S SALES and information center at 344 Commercial St., sales manager David Theran is conjuring a fantasy. He stands in the showroom kitchen, surrounded by a Thermador gas cooktop, oven, warming drawer, refrigerator and dishwasher; a Gaggenau built-in steamer; and a U-Line wine fridge. He uses phrases like "blue eyes granite," "four pipe heating and cooling system" and "smart card technology." He talks about floor-to-ceiling windows, 24/7 concierge and room service, and housekeepers to scrub that Bordeaux stain off the carpet.

"They'll put a mint on your pillow if you want," he says with a smile. Perched on the North End's waterfront, Battery Wharf's four buildings (two of them vaguely cruise ship-shaped) will house 104 condominiums, the 150-room luxury Regent Boston at Battery Wharf, an 18,000 square-foot fitness center and spa by Guerlain, and three restaurants (including one headed by three-star Michelin chef Guy Martin). Surrounding the buildings will be landscaped walkways and plantings, a Coast Guard museum, water taxi stop and a 300-linear-foot marina, should residents need to dock their yachts.

He moves to the conference room. On a flat-screen TV, he shows off the project's Web site—slick graphics, daily images from the construction site and photos of the Italian mountain where marble is being quarried. A QuickTime video seamlessly melds a real drive down Commercial Street with a computer-gen-

erated, in-the-driver's-seat rendering of a prospective resident's entrance into the premises (a mere block from Hanover Street and its humble Italian cafés). All that's missing from the song-and-dance is a little pixelated valet to escort the virtual Lexus to the safety of the 376-space underground parking lair.

Theran is a magician, waving his verbal incantations in the air, seducing you to live this dream of splendor and convenience, to imagine this waterfront mirage rising from a tangle of girders and hand-laid brick. Battery Wharf is being sold to Boston as "utopia engineered" and an "urban resort." To buy in, simply sign on the dotted line. Asking price for the approximately 900- to 2,500-square-foot units: \$675,000 to \$8.4 million.

Come December, when the first owners move in, Battery Wharf will be reverie turned reality. And Boston can say the living-large trend of luxury condo housing fused with posh hotel services has officially arrived—but in fact, it's been coming for decades.

Puttin' Up the Ritz

It all began gently in the 1980s, with the launch of condos linked to the Ritz (now the Taj), Four Seasons and Boston Harbor Hotel's Residences at Rowes Wharf. In 2001, the "new" Ritz-Carlton on Boston Common upped the ante with its 367-unit condominiums. In autumn 2006, 130 Residences at the gleaming-new InterContinental Hotel opened their doors. Battery Wharf will be joined in the near future by two other hybrid hotel-residential projects looming on our skyline: the Mandarin Oriental (in the Back Bay near the Pru) and the W (in the Theater District).



Doomsayers decry this rich taste for hotel-condos as the Manhattanization of Boston. But so far, people are buying it.

"It's time for a change," says Nancy Greenblatt who, with her husband, Daniel, purchased a three-bedroom unit at Battery Wharf. The couple has lived in Brookline for over 40 years, but with their children grown, the Greenblatts say they craved a new social life. "We live in a lovely area, but the people all work. We want to get to the point where we can talk to people. A little excitement."

Like other hotel-condo buyers, the Greenblatts are ready to socialize. "It's time to spread our wings a bit," she says.

"Empty nesters downsizing" are driving the luxury hotel-condo market, says Kevin Ahearn, president of the high-end residential brokerage company Otis & Ahearn. "They are the biggest group and they are looking for full service, including hotel service living."

Some already live in Boston and want to upgrade; others are moving into the city from the 'burbs like Wellesley. Also buying in are middle-aged singles rediscovering the urban life; bicoastal folks needing a Boston residence; second (and third) home owners; foreign nationals; and young professionals, including singles, DINK couples and even a few families.

They all say the primary lure is having amenities like fine dining, a fitness center and other creature comforts in-house and available at a moment's notice. Even if they don't often order up a midnight snack, use the one-hour pressing or get their shoes shined, just knowing these services exist makes hotel extravagances worthwhile.

"[Residents] are a very sophisticated, well-traveled group, with high expectations," says Elaine Flegert, condominium manager at the Four Seasons. "They are looking for access to anything

from having firewood for their fireplaces to having a staff member run out for postage stamps to an in-house catered event in their unit." Some services, like the concierge making restaurant and theater ticket reservations, are typically covered by monthly condo fees; other amenities, like room service, cost extra.

Back in the old days, Boston's upper crust would live in a swanky 'hood and maintain a staff of maids and cooks. Now, folks can't be bothered with the upkeep and personnel hassles.

"Many people who live in these places used to live in a townhouse on Beacon Hill," says Tony Pangaro, a developer with Millennium Partners, which built the Ritz-Carlton Towers. He worked with the Four Seasons to construct Boston's first fully-integrated hotel condominium. "But now they don't want to deal with the building itself. People used to have a butler. Now there's the concierge." Condos attached to hotels are ideal for those away on business who can't maintain a residence—clearing snow off the walk or bringing in mail. Or those who just want to purge possessions and streamline living.

It's a Luxe, Luxe Life

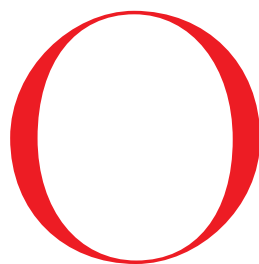
"We were looking for something to simplify our lives and provide the services for the future," says Roger Saunders, owner of the Lenox and resident at the Four Seasons since 1985. "Instead of having a 14-room home to care for, now we have a five-room condominium facing the Public Garden." Saunders says the "best thing is the location," but the restaurants, the Bristol and Aujourd'hui, being "an elevator ride away" ain't too shabby, either. Saunders also appreciates the tight security. Most hotel residences, like the Four

Left to right: The InterContinental Residences' pool and concierge are some of the many condo perks for Magdi and Dianne Bichay who live on the 16th floor; Rumba at the Intercontinental is another; Roger Saunders has been living at the Four Seasons since 1985.

Seasons, have a separate entrance from the hotel, so that ordinary four-star riff-raff can't wander up to the condos.

On the condos' board of managers, Saunders says that, in the past, units in his building with garden views have sold for about \$1,500 a square foot; those with city views go for about \$500 less.

That's in-line with the market, says Ahearn, adding that price depends on location, views and levels of service. "A full-service [condo] with hotel, typically they run \$500,00 to \$600,000 for a one bedroom right up to over \$6 million for the biggest units at the top of the building. In between those two prices you have a lot of different price points."



OVER AT 500 ATLANTIC Ave., about 30 units remain to be sold at the InterContinental, which offers one- to four-bedroom condos on the hotel's upper floors. The vibe is contemporary, with walnut-stained flooring and pale carpeting, French St. Croix limestone baths, and off-kilter room

shapes with interesting angles. Sizes run from 425 to 4,700 square feet, with prices topping out at around \$6,850,000 for the monstrous 21st floor penthouse with roof deck and panoramic view of Bunker Hill, Logan and the Harbor Islands.

"We both agree it's a 180 from our [previous] lives," says Dianne Bichay, 52, who moved into a 16th-floor, 1,630-square-foot, city-view unit with her husband Magdi, 56, in November. Previously, they'd lived in three different homes in North Andover over the years, including what she called a "McMansion." "When we really began to see how the Big Dig was reshaping Boston, it really encouraged us to think about living [here]."

The Bichays have had to adjust to smaller living and storage space—and the lack of nature. "Instead of looking outside to trees and birds, I'm seeing people and cars," says Dianne Bichay, who had never lived in a city. Her building has an enviable location, sandwiched between the Rose Kennedy Greenway and Fort Point Channel. Jokingly, she refers to the Greenway as "the front yard."

Life at the InterCon, she says, is good—almost too good. "You can't go back now. There is a degree of being spoiled."

For Matt O'Connor, who works in commercial real estate, buying his 890 square footer was a no-brainer investment. "Personally, I don't need the hotel amenities as a 27-year-old. But it's more valuable for the resale," he says. "My parents' generation, the thing was to buy and pass onto your children. I was looking at the resale rather than living there myself."

It doesn't hurt that O'Connor lives on the waterfront, at the edge of an up-and-coming neighborhood that's only 50 yards away from his office in the Financial District. When he travels, he also likes getting preferred rates at other InterContinental hotels.

With all these highfalutin edifices springing up, one might think the Boston market would be supersaturated. Not so, says Brian Fallon, New England partner in Extell Development, which built the InterCon. "On the contrary, there are very few units that are available now," he says. The market is "very vibrant," and Fallon thinks 2007 will be a record year for sales.

Even more over-the-top properties are in the works, like Mezzo Design Lofts in Charlestown, and Nouvelle at Natick, which combines high-rise condos with a shopping mall. The ultimate twist: Condos with hotel services, but no hotel.

"The next round of places doesn't need a hotel," says Pangaro of Millennium Partners, which developed One Charles, luxury units near the Public Garden with a club room, fitness center and dining room. Millennium will also build condos across Washington Street from the Ritz at Hayward Place. Residents there will have a private library, movie screening and billiard rooms, and a dining facility, among other features.

It's all for clients, Pangaro says, who are growing tired of the hotel glitz. "What we're discovering is we can deliver hotel-like services without the exposure, with a greater sense of exclusivity." In Boston, apparently that sells. ■



Top: Battery Wharf comprises four buildings and features a 300-linear-foot marina, where residents can dock their yachts; middle: a Battery Wharf kitchen and a light-filled bedroom at Mezzo Design Lofts in Charlestown; bottom: artists' renderings of Nouvelle at Natick, where high-rise condominiums couple with the retail shopping experience.