

Selling Park Avenue Condos at \$250,000 a Minute (Published 2013)

Selling Park Avenue Condos at \$250,000 a Minute



Part of a film promoting 432 Park Avenue was shot at Silvercup Studios, including a scene the highwire artist Philippe Petit. Credit...Gustav Liliequist

Harry B. Macklowe flew an Emmy-award-winning film crew to southern England, hired the famed tightrope walker Philippe Petit and bought the song rights to a Mama Cass classic, all for a four-minute movie to market his latest condominium development.

For years now, developers seeking to sell their condominiums have produced videos, typically featuring interviews with architects and designers, and rarely costing more than \$100,000. But to make the movie for 432 Park Avenue — the luxury condominium that will reign as the tallest residential building in the Western Hemisphere when completed in 2015 — Mr. Macklowe spent more than \$1 million. The price tag, which comes to \$250,000 a minute, or more than \$4,000 a second, raises eyebrows even in a city where the average condo costs \$2 million.

“This film is a story, a trip, an experience — it isn’t about showing P. Diddy in a yacht,” said Danny Forster, one of the architects who wrote and directed the movie in partnership with DBOX, a marketing and branding agency that won an Emmy Award last year for its six-part miniseries “Rising: Rebuilding Ground Zero.”

The movie consists of a series of dreamlike sequences, rife with images of wealth and privilege, and loosely plotted around a stunning brunette as she travels to her home at 432 Park Avenue from her country estate in England. She is shown leaving the manor in the backseat of a 1957 Rolls-Royce and then flying across the Atlantic in her Learjet.

Mr. Petit, who is famous for having walked a tightrope between the original towers of the World Trade Center, is then seen dancing gingerly down an unraveling tightrope as a helicopter (presumably carrying the same woman on her final leg of the journey home) flits like a tiny insect across the New York skyline hundreds of feet beneath him.

A ballerina being shot for the film at Silvercup Studios. Credit...Gustav Liliequist

“It was Harry’s idea to have Philippe welcoming buyers to their homes in the sky,” said Matthew Bannister, the chief executive and founder of DBOX. “He is like a virtual doorman in a trippy way.” Mr. Bannister, Mr. Forster, who is the host of ‘Build It Bigger’ on the Discovery Channel, and Keith Bomely, a partner at DBOX and its chief creative officer, wrote and directed the movie. (They are all trained architects, although only Mr. Forster continues to practice.)

“We never wanted to look at real estate marketing in any way to describe this project,” Mr. Bannister said. “There is no butler making beds or doorman opening the doors for you; that wasn’t of interest to us.” There is not even dialog, just the throaty contralto of Mama Cass singing, “Stars shining bright above you/Night breezes seem to whisper ‘I love you,’ ” as the images on-screen come and go.

Achievement is a recurring theme, with references to the Wright Brothers, silent movie stars and even Spiderman. A ballerina stretches and bends inside a window frame, in an allusion to the building’s 10-by-10-foot windows. “Ballet is a cultural nod to New York,” Mr. Forster said, “but we also put her in the window because what better way to see how truly large they are?”

There are also references to minimalist and grand architecture, as Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion morphs into a vision of the building’s lap pool, and the ceiling of the Pantheon evokes 432 Park Avenue’s geometric facade. And there is humor: King Kong makes two appearances, as a giant ape peering into the living room, and at a fantastical party, briefly removing his mask to reveal the face of Mr. Macklowe. It is the only sighting of the developer, who met weekly with DBOX and Mr. Forster while creating the movie, and is also credited as a writer.

Just as the movie takes pains to paint a picture of exclusivity, so too do its producers treat the film as a precious commodity. They bristle at any labeling of their effort with so pedestrian a term as “video” — “we prefer film,” Mr. Bannister said — and whereas most marketing videos are readily available

online, this movie can be seen only at the building's sales center. "This isn't a film for everyone," said Jarrett White, the vice president for marketing of Macklowe Properties. "It needs to be seen here."

The process of making the movie took six months, with few expenses spared. There was the trip to Britain, for an on-screen snippet of at most two seconds. "It wasn't hard to convince Harry that we needed to make the trip," Mr. Bannister said.

"We are asking you to make an investment," said Mr. Macklowe, referring to potential buyers at 432 Park. "This will be a legacy apartment. That value will increase as part of your estate, and to get there, you cannot take any shortcuts."

Christina Makowski was chosen to be the face of 432 Park from a casting call of more than 200 models. Credit...DBOX

The team argued for more than two months over song choice, eventually settling on Mama Cass's "Dream a Little Dream" and paying Warner Brothers Music and others for the rights. The song "is like a waltz, going fast and then slow," Mr. Macklowe said, and the motion of the cameras and the images on-screen mimics that rhythm. "We really wanted the film to dance to the music," Mr. Bannister added.

The team organized a big casting call, with more than 200 models, from whom it chose Christina Makowski, the brunette who is the face of 432 Park. "We had to find someone not just for the film, but to do a three-day shoot for the fashion editorial," Mr. Bannister said, referring to a 200-page magazine given to potential buyers as part of the marketing material. "So not only did she have to look good, but she had to have the right personality."

They rented space for five days at Silvercup Studios in Queens, employing a staff of as many as 75. There, Mr. Petit created his own rigging system for the tightrope and performed in front of a green screen so they could digitally create

his skywalk from the spire of the Empire State Building to a finished 432 Park several blocks to the north.

The team also hired tango dancers who choreographed a routine to perform during the party scene, which features Ms. Makowski, leaning on a grand piano, mouthing Mama Cass's lyrics. In addition to Mr. Macklowe's King Kong, party guests include Le Corbusier, Al Capone and the silent movie star Anna May Wong. They mug for a photographer, and the snapshot transforms into a framed photo on a living room mantelpiece.

The movie's creators also designed — or perhaps more accurately choreographed — the sales center. Upon entering the space, potential buyers are marched down a gleaming white hallway lined with custom car ornaments, a photograph of Babe Ruth and prints by Irving Penn. There is a video of a fashion show by Giorgio Armani (a "friend," said Mr. Macklowe), who designed many of the interior spaces seen in the movie. Entering the main gallery, visitors are shown miniature replicas of the building, complete with rows of minuscule treadmills in the model gym and toy Mercedes parked in the plastic driveway.

It is only then that they are taken to the small screening room, where they sit on Eames-style sofas, sip from bottles of Evian and watch the film.

It ends with Mr. Petit, in a purple velvet jacket and top hat, gazing out at the horizon. Mama Cass's lyrics, "Sweet dreams till sunbeams find you/Sweet dreams that leave all worries behind you," tug on your heartstrings, until finally they beseech, "Dream a little dream of me."

The New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/realestate/selling-park-avenue-condos-at-250000-a-minute.html>) · by Julie Satow · June 21, 2013