

# MANSSION GLOBAL

## Developers Scour the Earth for Rare Condo Finishes

To woo a limited pool of luxury homebuyers, it takes hardwood sourced by Benedictine monks and brick found only in one region of Denmark

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Dan Cobleigh flew to Carrara, Italy, last year with a mission: find the best statuary marble money can buy—for the kitchen countertops in his firm’s condo project in downtown Manhattan.

He found Cave Michelangelo, a marble quarry widely recognized as the source for the Renaissance artist’s “Pietà.” Sculptor Franco Barattini, the quarry’s owner, noted that the stone is used for monumental statues and objets d’art, and seemed less than impressed by the real-estate developer. “One expression that was translated to us was ‘pearls before swine,’” says Mr. Cobleigh, a managing director at Madison Realty Capital.

After a friendly dinner that included a translator and a select vintage of Galatrona wine, the two came to terms: \$3 million of creamy calacatta marble for 16 kitchen islands and backsplashes at 1 Great Jones Alley, association with Michelangelo included. (A relative pittance for a tower expected to close at least \$130 million in sales, or about \$2,640 a square foot.) Prices at the 12-story boutique condo, now under construction, range from \$4.725 million up to \$23.75 million for the 5,400-square-foot duplex penthouse.

The devil is in the details for developers, who in a packed luxury condo market are competing over a limited number of qualified buyers. As of August, there were 65 luxury condo projects in the pipeline in Manhattan, down 23% from the same period last year, according to the data website CityRealty. “The elephant in the room is that the ceiling was reached in terms of demand for very-high priced units,” said Gabby Warshawer,

the site's director of research.

For builders with projects already in the pipeline, that means scouring for the rarest materials to woo buyers and to justify top-dollar prices. "There's tremendous effort to pull out all the stops and try every idea," says appraiser Jonathan Miller.

For New York developer DDG, the flooring is part of the brand. Walk into one of the model units at XOCO 325, its under-construction condo conversion in Soho, and you'll notice two things: the woodsy scent of their custom-made fragrance, "Craft," and the striking 7½-inch white oak wood flooring.

This is the eighth time the developer has used the sustainable, engineered hardwood, says CEO Joseph McMillan. The wood hails from forests near Admont, an 11th-century Benedictine abbey in southeast Austria; its monks run a company that harvests and manufactures luxury wood products. Less than 1% of the company's products are exported to the U.S., a company spokesperson said.

A model kitchen for 1 Great Jones Alley shows off the marble from Cave Michelangelo, a marble quarry widely recognized as the source for the Renaissance artist's 'Pietà.'

Mr. McMillan says his team discovered the company, which is still owned by the abbey, around 2009, and liked their ethos: Pulp from the engineered floors is used to heat the nearby town. (The monks no longer cut the wood, but the abbot is known to bless the equipment.) "Aesthetically, it's beautiful," says Mr. McMillan, who outfitted his own home with the wood. All told, it costs \$19.50 a square foot—compared to about \$8 to \$14 for similar products—and will be featured in all 21 units at XOCO, where prices range from \$2.5 million for a one-bedroom to \$25 million for the penthouse. Completion is expected this summer, he says, with half of the units sold.

Then there's a green-gray variety of Petersen brick made only in the Sønderborg region of Denmark. "Going to Denmark in the dead of winter for 48 hours wasn't the first thing on my [to-do] list," says Jeffrey Gershon, head of Hope Street Capital, who made the trip to buy 25,000 square feet of the material. The coal-fired brick, colored by the natural mineral composition of the Danish clay, completed the look for his 33-unit Brooklyn condo project, The Hendrik, where prices range from about \$1.7 million to \$4.5 million.

Cave Michelangelo's owner, sculptor Franco Barattini, was initially less-than-enthused about the use of his marble for high-end kitchens.

Appraisers say fancy finishes can move buyers. At 70 Vestry, a 46-unit tower in Tribeca designed by the firm of Robert A.M. Stern, developer Related Cos. tapped stone experts to find the perfect limestone facade for its Hudson River views: a café-au-lait-colored stone with rosy hues at dusk.

Malcom Swenson, president of Swenson Stone Consultants in Hanover, N.H., helped select roughly 50,000 cubic feet of Beaumaniere limestone from farmland in the French province of Burgundy, at an estimated cost of \$7.5 million. Daniel Lobitz, a partner at the architecture firm, says they searched several U.S and European quarries and shipped blocks of the stone to the build site, to test its coloration in the light.

Prices at the 14-story tower start at \$7 million, with a penthouse going for \$65 million. The building is slated for completion in 2018, but people familiar with the transaction say quarterback Tom Brady and model Gisele Bündchen have already purchased a roughly \$20 million five-bedroom apartment. The couple couldn't be reached for their thoughts on limestone.