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"For a designer it was a dream," says Steven Gurowitz of the model residence at The Metropolitan's sales center. "It was something that didn't test as much the ability of the designer, but the ability to put together the best of the best and not be worried that 'I'm spending too much.' In this case, we couldn't spend enough money." The kitchen features top-brand appliances, extra thick granite and custom cabinets.

Budget? What budget?

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Talk about Extreme Makeovers: What's been done to the old Denny's restaurant at Gulf Stream Avenue and U.S. 41 would impress even the cast of ABC television's hit reality show "Extreme Makeovers: Home Edition."

What had been a downscale chain restaurant, jokingly referred to by some as "the Ritz Denny's" because of its location near The Ritz-Carlton, Sarasota, is now the model showcase for The Metropolitan condominium.

And what's inside -- a full-scale mock-up of a multimillion-dollar apartment -- backs up developer Richard Zipes' claim of taking Sarasota's luxury condominium market design "to the next level."

Actually, he's going beyond that. "We are going to present a condominium that has never been done in South Florida," says Zipes on the elaborately produced recording you hear if you call The Metropolitan and are put on hold. (Of course, it features Bobby Darin's "Beyond the Sea"; one wonders if the song ever got this much airplay on Sarasota radio stations back in 1960, when it was a hit.)

Interior designer Steven Gurowitz has worked on luxury condos in all of Florida's priciest markets.

"South Florida has never seen this

before," said Gurowitz when asked if the Metropolitan would be more luxurious than even units in Naples or

Boca Raton. "There's no question. We do all of the work in those areas. I've worked for WCI (the noted luxury tower developer). But nothing compares to this."

Jay Tallman, principal of U.S. Assets Group, a luxury condominium developer in Sarasota, is not so sure.

"Each project we've done, we've set a new threshold for quality and construction," says Tallman. "I'll hold up our current project, Orchid Beach Club, to anything he (Zipes) can do. There will be some things he's doing that we're not doing, but there's other things we're doing that he's not doing. When it all comes out in the wash, I don't think he's that much apart from us."

'A dream'

Gurowitz says The Metropolitan's model has been a work of fantasy.

"The developer's direction to me and my team was ... to bring not only the level of finishes, but also the quality needed to be one that the marketplace has yet to see. And we've done that," said Gurowitz, whose Fort Lauderdale company is Interiors by Steven G.

"Needless to say, for a designer it was a dream. It was fun. It was something that didn't test as much the ability of the designer, but the ability to put together the best of the best and not be worried that 'I'm spending too much.'

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So how does one design a condominium when money is no object. Start with custom-made cabinets, add state of the art appliances, a custom-length freestanding tub, extra-thick granite counter tops in the kitchen, quartz counters in the powder room and marble, lots of it, everywhere else.

"The master bathroom is all marble, including the vanity tops," said Gurowitz. "In the master bath shower, the entire wall is a mosaic done in marble that forms a design. On the summer kitchen, we have a polished stone so it holds up under the weather conditions."

The kitchen has granite, which is pretty much standard these days for homes from the middle of the market on up. But this granite has an edge detail that is 2 1/2 inches thick.

The cabinetry in the kitchen is truly custom, the designer explains.

"In all the luxury condominiums, the cabinetry ... is made by a mass merchant. By that, I mean the manufacturer specializes in producing a hundred of each item, 200 of each item. They are not attuned to a customization or custom finishing," he said. "In the master bath, kitchen, morning bar, summer kitchen -- every cabinet has a different finish. Also, every cabinet is custom made. The dollar value alone is five times what the average luxury condominium spends just to produce the cabinetry."

U.S. Assets Group's Tallman counters that "ours are custom-made, too. Our cabinets ... Neff specializes in supplying cabinets to custom-home builders. We're one of the few multi-family home developers that they even deal with. They're a very high end custom cabinet manufacturer and considered one of the top companies in the world."

In the Metropolitan's master suite shower, the valve handle is located conveniently so the shower can be turned on from outside the stall.

"We also put in a thermostat control, which means the unit owner could actually preset the temperature of their

water," said Gurowitz. "When the shower is turned on, within a second and a half that temperature out of the valve is exactly what they want. Just a thing that makes it a little bit different."

In the powder room, you won't find "the standard pedestal sink." The custom cabinet has an onyx top.

Gurowitz said his firm studied the Sarasota condo market, visiting existing towers and consulting with major real estate brokers before setting standards for The Metropolitan.

"We were most excited to find that everybody in the marketplace used the mass merchant. Nobody went to the customization," he said. "Everybody uses a 72-inch tub because they're standard. We had a custom 78-inch tub made, so that if the husband or wife were taller than 5-feet-5, they could actually stretch their legs out in the tub."

Move-in ready

The biggest difference at The Metropolitan is that buyers are getting a finished unit; in many luxury towers, buyers purchase a "designer-ready" apartment that has concrete floors and primed walls and trim. Then the buyers bring in their own interior designers so they get exactly the stone flooring and finish paint colors they want.

"If you have your furniture and you have your toothbrush, you're going to be able to move in," said Zipes. "This will save you enormous energy, time, etc. Instead of paying us and then worrying about your designer, your flooring, etc., you'll just be able to pay and move in the next day. This is a tremendously different approach to what's been done before."

Buyers have the option of purchasing a shell and getting a discount on the price.

So why Sarasota? Why not Boca Raton or Naples for Zipes' best?

"The location of the property is superb, and, personally, I think Sarasota deserves a high-end luxury condominium to be compatible with the Ritz-Carlton hotel," said Zipes via e-mail.

"He fell in love with Sarasota," said Gurowitz. "When he went there and looked at the real estate and spent a week in the town speaking with people, he knew Sarasota was ready for something of this level. He also knew that if he presented it the right way, the quote 'upper echelon' of the neighborhood, as well as people coming to Sarasota, would come and buy."

And speaking of buyers, how are sales going?

"Terrific!" said Zipes.

"Some of the top prospects at this point are ... people who want to move from the Ritz," said Gurowitz. "That tells you a lot right there. In my opinion, Richard Zipes has brought to Sarasota something that is, without question, spectacular, world-class, that is as custom as you would find. If you were building a 10,000-square-foot estate home and you went through your kitchens and bathrooms with your design firm or your development team, you would not find better.

"This is the M.O. we have taken, and we're very excited about it."