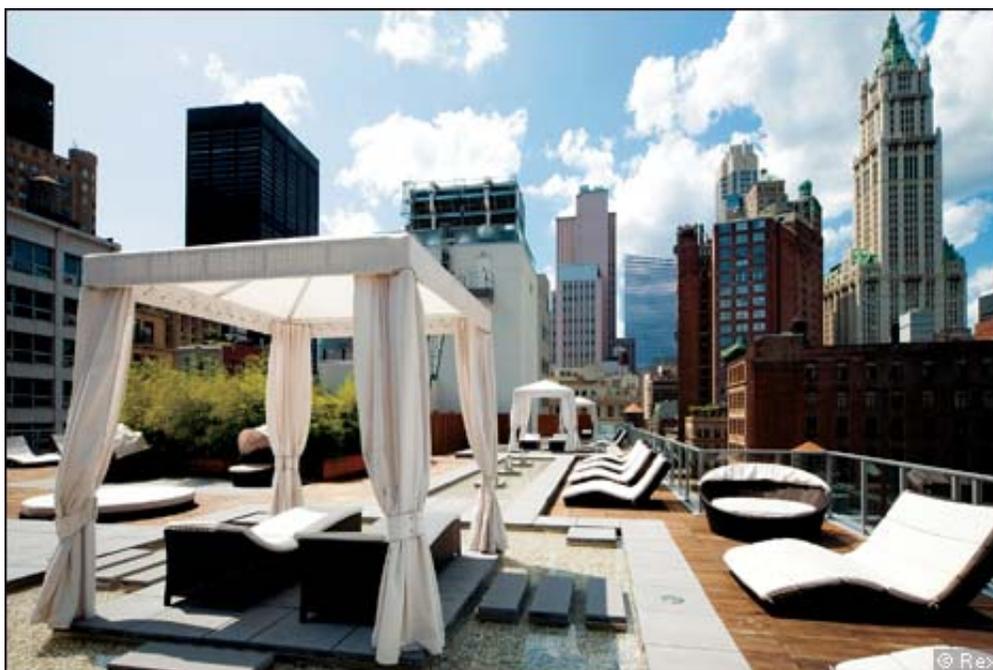


February 12, 2010 4:24 pm

Collective singular

By Mark Ellwood



The roof terrace at singles-oriented building The District in downtown Manhattan, New York

For many Americans, *Melrose Place* is an address with heady connotations. More than just a low-brow 1990s television soap opera, the name is synonymous with sexy, swinging singles, accommodated in a Los Angeles pool-and-condominium complex filled with hard-bodied, soft-headed twentysomethings. This season, the CW Television Network tried to boost its low profile by rebooting the show, dragging original cast member Heather Locklear back to star as a stiletto-heeled den mother to a crop of nubile newbies. But in the US, where more than one-third of homes sold are snapped up by solo buyers, *Melrose Place* has proved a savvy inspiration to developers. The idea of creating a real-life counterpart to the show, filled with free-spending singletons, has proved irresistible, profitable and distinctly American.

One real-life *Melrose* counterpart is in LA. The Rob Clark, a 105-unit condo renovation of a nondescript 1970s building on South Clark Drive, was named after a fictitious resident who embodied the developers' ideal clients: a hip, high-living bachelor with a much-stamped passport – loosely based, it was conveniently claimed, on the development's marketing director, Harry Dubin. "He's in his mid-30s, he's single, he travels and he has incredible taste," Dubin says, describing his alter-ego (Clark even had his own chair, director-style, in the building lobby

and a myspace page – www.myspace.com/therobclark).

The flats are ranged round a pool, a clear nod to the TV series, and the marketing has been as vamped up as the show. For some prospective owners, Dubin left women's clothing draped around the living room of a show home, with a whiff of perfume in the air – just in case his Bond-like allusions had been too subtle. In the later phases, models were hired to amble along the nearby shopping drag of Robertson Boulevard and bring passers by to a (non-alcoholic) party-cum-sales pitch being thrown at the condos.

Over on the east coast of the US, The District tower in downtown Manhattan has taken a similar, singles-friendly approach in seeking tenants. The marketing campaign's main draw was that nightlife legend Amy Sacco, the entrepreneur behind A-list nightclub Bungalow 8, would be on call as the "lifestyle director" of the complex – in other words, she would offer her access and cachet to anyone who signed up for a unit (studios started at \$500,000).

"I've had friends ask me if they can borrow my apartment and my building for an important date," laughs Kajsa Krause, a 39-year-old unmarried architect who's lived there for six months. Krause rents from an owner but was still vetted extensively to ensure she would be a fitting tenant. "It felt like applying to [private members' club] Soho House," she laughs.

Certainly, the building has as many amenities as a private club: a screening room, a billiard room and iPod docks with speakers in the public spaces. "I like the simple things, like a ping pong table on the roof. I'd like even more games, so you can invite people to actually take up a game and start playing," Krause says.

She is excited about the management board's plans to host a monthly Sunday brunch and drinks on Thursday evenings during the summer. "People are very friendly and whatever time I'm down in the spa I speak to someone – in the hot tub, whoever's there with you, you chat with them." Krause is Swedish and notes how many Europeans she's spotted in the building: singles-oriented complexes are the ideal place, after all, for a new arrival in town to make friends as much as meet people to date.

And as an architect, Krause has observed how even the design of the individual units seems to be singles-focused. "There's a small kitchen with a flat stove that looks like a bar counter when you don't use it," she laughs, "but instead [of large kitchens] they did really elaborate bathrooms, almost twice the size of the kitchen, with rain-head showers and double sinks for your one-night stand. That was my first thought: 'I'm not supposed to have someone living with me but I should definitely show off the sinks in the morning'."

The District isn't the only singles-chasing set-up in Manhattan. Ohm is a brand-new rental complex with 288 apartments across 34 storeys. Rents start at \$2,005 a month

and the entire project is expressly aimed at singletons – a smart move, given its location in the centre of clubland, West Chelsea. Like The District, Ohm offers ample communal amenities: billiard and card tables, a large outdoor terrace, a video arcade and even free Wi-Fi in all common areas. The developers have tapped the team from live music venue The Knitting Factory to curate events in the lobby: it will morph into a performance space twice a month, offering everything from open microphone nights to concerts, all gratis to Ohm renters.

As if its party-friendly vibe weren't evident enough, after a night out dancing, Ohm tenants can also stumble home and have a free breakfast: from 2am the building will provide weekend snacks so that residents can socialise (and doubtless soak up some alcohol).

“Avoiding a strong family vibe is definitely a positive for someone like me, because it can get a bit claustrophobic,” says a single 34-year-old media consultant who is about to move into the building and asked not to be named. He is currently living in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. “In Brooklyn there's certainly a strong family dynamic that can dominate certain neighbourhoods and it could be great living in a place that doesn't revolve around children.”

Though the idea might seem novel, developers have been quietly building a condo business based on singletons since the 1960s. That's when LA firm RB Development made the first concrete manifestation of the Swinging Sixties by building a *Melrose Place* forerunner in Marina del Rey, according to technology executive Ken Greenberg.

“I grew up in the area and had a job parking cars nearby while I finished high school,” he recalls. “The Marina Oakwood was the first in a series of singles-oriented apartment complexes that RB built; others dotted the LA area, from the South Bay to the Valley.”

The original still stands, though now it is bland corporate short-term housing and has lost its chic singles-only cachet as well as its outrageous past. “The apocryphal story that put the Marina complex on the map was a party in the late 1960s where, legend has it, potato chips were spiked with LSD.”

Singles-oriented complexes seem to have ebbed as soon as free love gave way to free markets in the late 1970s but have reappeared recently – and for good reason, according to Tara-Nicholle Nelson, a California estate agent and author of *The Savvy Woman's Homebuying Handbook*. She is regularly used by developers as a consultant on how best to market to singles, especially women, and gives private seminars.



The lobby at Ohm in West Chelsea, New York

“Single women bought 25 per cent of the homes sold [in the US] in 2008 and single men bought 9 per cent. Combine them and that’s a third of the market, which is somewhat counterintuitive since people think you buy a house when you get married,” she says. Recent figures from business intelligence group Euromonitor suggest that in western Europe almost one in three people live alone and solo households worldwide are estimated at about 200m – and growing.

Nelson says initiatives like those at The District or Ohm are exactly the right way to lure and satisfy single female buyers. “Buying a home on a single income, you may not be able to afford the square footage ... so smaller units with very large, amenity-packed common areas – pool table, chef’s kitchen, yoga classes – these are big things,” she says, adding that single buyers “like to have a community with events or gathering places that makes it easier to connect with the people they live with. That’s distinct from what families need.”

There is one downside, of course, to marketing to singles. “In my [home-buying] seminars, guys often show up because they know there’ll be a room full of single women,” she chuckles. “A lot of the guys have a different aim in mind.”

The moneymaking potential in lone homeowners has been spotted by more than developers: witness the new Singelringen, an anti-wedding ring that flags to strangers in the know that its wearer is unattached. In Germany, a design firm even offers an antidote to home loneliness with Singles Wallpaper, life-sized digital decals that are flatpack flatmates. There’s a clutch of different designs, from spaghetti-slurping Adriano, an adorable hipster, to bookish Barbara, who’s curled up on a two-dimensional sofa with her latest novel. One Polish firm, Front Architects, has gone further and designed a prototype prefabricated house that is a standalone singleton’s castle: the 6ft by 20ft pod has a bathroom and kitchenette plus a single bed and sits on a giant pole that can be built anywhere. The problem, of course, is that it eliminates one of the main benefits of living among hordes of singles. These complexes are as much www.match.com as *Melrose Place*.

“A friend of mine who lives in the building works in the common areas down in the lobby,” Krause says. “She met someone there every week and ended up going out for dinner with him.”

There is an inherent risk in singles marketing too – that it might work against itself: to keep the young, lively, sexy vibe, perhaps sales and rental agreements need to include a clause that requires newlyweds to make way for a new batch of singletons. After all, it worked for *Melrose Place*.

