

DESIGN EVENTS

Design Above All adds a twist to Designers' Showcases

Four Northern California design firms display their handywork at One Rincon Hill

By **Larry Rosen**
Examiner Staff Writer

With so much high-rise development happening South of Market in San Francisco, it was inevitable that someone would hold a designers' showcase high above the city streets. This week, that became a reality when the San Francisco Design Center's "Design Above All" opened on the 53rd floor of One Rincon Hill.

The set-up is familiar: out of a large group of applicants, four designer firms — Carver+Schicketanz, of Carmel, Eugene Anthony and Associates, of San Francisco, Labexperiment, also of San Francisco, and Donald Joseph Inc., of Sacramento — were chosen to participate. Each group was charged with outfitting a full three-bedroom con-

"young, single Google executive," "empty-nesters" and a "downsizing couple from Pacific Heights"), the four participants found vastly different solutions to the same riddle.

Take Donald Fugina, of Donald Joseph. His design revolves around a single motif: that the condominium is a natural refuge from the busy city below. "It is meant to be cleansing," Fugina says. Natural materials (including a cork-covered living room couch) are meant to frame the unit's breathtaking view, not compete with it.

Meanwhile, young designer Leslie Bamberg of Labexperiment went for the full fan-boy look, from the skateboard decks mounted in the entry hall to the Space Invaders marching silently down an office wall. While Anthony aimed his efforts at "a worldly individual," Bamberg scoured the shelves at Kid Robot for wall décor.

If these three efforts share anything, it's that they have a masculine feel. Not so the work of Mary Ann Schicketanz, of Carver+Schicketanz. The Carmel-based designer centered her design around artwork, beginning with the



Most Design Above All participants chose to complement, not compete with, the view.

dominium. To say they did so with different results would be to underestimate the impact each team made on their assigned unit.

From the start, Design Above All presented challenges unlike those of "normal" showcase exercises. Instead of a sprawling mansion, the teams had roughly 2,000 square feet to work with. Some chose to leave internal structures as-is. Others moved walls. Eugene Anthony radically changed the layout of unit 5302, adding a family room and a wet bar.

Anthony, a native San Franciscan, created a traditionally elegant space. His is the unit with a grand piano that "combines the 18th and 21st centuries," according to the designer.

The most striking thing about Design Above All is the contrasts between designers' visions. Given similar blank canvases and a limited list of client scenarios (designers chose between a

brooding Richard Avedon portrait of counterculture icon William S. Burroughs that greets visitors in the entry foyer. Schicketanz targeted the downsizing Atherton empty-nesters, blanketing their new pad with white.

Design Above All is a treat for fans of design, people looking for design ideas and people who simply love to gawk at breathtaking city and bay views. The event — which drew 200 visitors to its opening day, runs Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays through its November 1 finale. Tickets are \$20, with proceeds benefitting PAWS (Pets are Wonderful Support).

One other thing: the units are also for sale, ranging in asking price from \$3.1 to \$3.6 million — furnishings and art included. And you don't need to be a Pacific Heights couple, some Atherton empty-nesters or a Google executive to apply. All qualified buyers are welcome.

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REAL ESTATE NEWS

New US home sales rise 0.7 percent in August

By **Alan Zibel**
AP Real Estate Writer

WASHINGTON — New home sales rose a tepid 0.7 percent last month, missing Wall Street expectations and providing more evidence the housing market recovery remains tentative.

The Commerce Department said Friday that sales inched up to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 429,000. That compares to July's reading of 426,000, which was revised down from 433,000.

Economists surveyed by Thomson Reuters had expected a pace of 440,000 last month.

Homebuyers are running out of time to take advantage of a federal tax credit of up to \$8,000 for first-time owners. Both the home construction and the sales transaction must be completed by the end of November.

The new home sales report counts sales contracts signed in August, rather than final purchases. And buyers are increasingly nervous they won't make the tax-credit deadline.

"This represents the waning effects of the first-time homebuyer tax credit," said David Crowe, chief economist at the National Association of Home Builders, which is pressing Congress to extend the credit.

While August marked was the fifth straight monthly increase and the strongest report in almost a year, sales were 4.3 percent lower than the same month last year. Sales have risen 30 percent from the bottom in January, but are off about 70 percent from the peak of four years ago.

"From a builder's perspective, the market for selling new homes is still brutal, despite the pickup in sales in recent months," wrote IHS Global Insight Economist Patrick Newport.

The report was the second straight disappointing sign for the U.S. hous-



An unidentified construction worker works on a new townhome in Beaverton, Ore.
AP Photo/Don Ryan

ing market, which is struggling to emerge from the most severe bust in generations. On Thursday, the National Association of Realtors said sales of previously occupied homes, which make up the bulk of the market, dipped 2.7 percent last month.

While August's housing reports have been disappointing, "we believe both remain on an upward trend," wrote David Resler, chief economist with Nomura Securities.

Sales of lower-priced properties are surging, pulling down the median price to \$195,200, off 11.7 percent from \$221,000 a year earlier and 9.5 percent below July's level of \$215,600. That was the largest monthly drop on records dating to 1963.

There were 262,000 new homes for sale at the end of August, down more than 3 percent from July and the lowest in nearly 17 years. At the current sales pace, that represents 7.3 months of supply — the smallest amount since early 2007. The decline means builders have scaled back construction to the point where supply and demand are coming into balance.

Still, it's taking more than a year to sell the homes on the market.

"No one ever said that the homebuilders were breaking out the bubbly

and party hats and doing the cha-cha around town," wrote Jennifer Lee, economist with BMO Capital Markets.

Buyers, meanwhile, are rushing to take advantage of a federal tax credit that covers 10 percent of the home price, or up to \$8,000 for first-time owners. Home sales must be completed by the end of November for buyers to qualify. Builders and real estate agents are pressing Congress for that credit to be extended.

Sales varied dramatically around the country. The best performance was in the West, where sales rose more than 12 percent, and the worst was in the Northeast, where sales sank more than 16 percent. They were unchanged in the South, and down nearly 6 percent in the Midwest.

Meanwhile, KB Home posted a smaller third-quarter loss of \$66 million on Friday as new home orders increased and the builder cut costs. Though the results missed analysts' expectations, KB Home said its new orders jumped 62 percent in the third quarter from the year before, with every region showing annual growth.

And fewer homebuyers backed out. The company's cancellation rate dropped to 27 percent during the quarter, compared with 51 percent a year ago.

Gov't considers crackdown on companies offering help with troubled home loans

By **Alan Zibel**
AP Real Estate Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The head of the Federal Trade Commission said last Thursday the agency is considering banning upfront payments to companies that advertise help for borrowers who are in trouble on their home loans.

Government officials say scammers seeking to take advantage of borrowers in danger of default often charge upfront fees of \$1,000 to \$3,000 for help with loan modifications that rarely, if ever, pay off.

"If you are concerned about keeping your home, avoid any company that asks you for a large fee in advance. That is a real red flag," said Jon Leibowitz, chairman of the FTC. Such upfront fees are already prohibited in 20 states.

His comments came as his agency announced it filed civil charges against two companies, San Diego-based Nations Housing Modification Center and Infinity Group Services of Orange County,

The government accused both companies of charging homeowners large fees for assistance in working with their lenders, but doing "little or nothing" to actually help borrowers.

Separately, the agency filed additional charges against New Jersey-based United Credit Adjusters, Inc. The company, which was already targeted by the government in a credit repair scam, was accused of running a loan modification scheme under the name Loss Mitigation Services Inc.

Leibowitz said the FTC was also considering restrictions on how mortgage rescue companies can advertise their services. Ads for loan modification companies frequently appear on late-night TV and on billboards in some parts of the country. Nations Housing, for example, mailed homeowners official-looking letters purporting to be from an address on Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation's capital.

They were designed to trick consumers

into thinking that they were participating in a government program, regulators said.

The government has filed charges against 22 companies operating such schemes and said the firms often have names or ads designed to make borrowers think they are using the Obama administration's efforts to help modify or refinance millions of mortgages.

Authorities emphasized that help is available for free from government-approved housing counselors.

Homeowners can locate free housing counselors at www.makinghomeaffordable.gov or by calling (888) 995-HOPE.

On Thursday, 12 state attorneys general met with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan to discuss their anti-fraud operations.

"A lot of these scams operate nationwide, from outside our borders," said Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.