

## The rise of stealth luxe home brands

Article

Reassuringly expensive



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Top products in the bathroom, kitchen and plant room reassure homebuyers that the quality is right, says Carol Lewis

A penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park in New York recently sold for \$100 million (£66.240 million) — reportedly the city's most expensive residential sale. Almost immediately, the high-end British kitchen-maker Smallbone of Devizes sought to associate itself with the record sale. The kitchen-maker sent out a press release detailing how it had made bespoke cabinetry for the 129 apartments in the One57 development, including the penthouse.

Can the presence of a brand really make the difference between whether a property sells or not and, if so, which brands hold that power? Interior designers for some of the world's most prestigious developers and wealthy homeowners are unanimous — there are just a few key brands that do matter to the moneyed.

Adam Hunter, projects director for developer and interior designer Finchatton, says: "They don't just buy the product but want the lifestyle that goes with it. They want the brands they see in the hotels they visit and high luxury magazines that they read. In the kitchen it tends to be Bulthaup, Boffi, Gaggenau and Miele. Although serious cooks might ask for Electrolux Grand Cuisine."

The Walpole development by Oliver Burns features a Versace rug and bespoke Swarovski chandelier  
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Because nowhere in the home do brands matter more than in the kitchen, a few key names recur here time and again. The international wealthy, whether buying in New York, London, Los Angeles or Hong Kong, want the same quality stamps in their homes.

Penny Mosgrove, chief executive of the property consultancy Quintessentially Estates, says: “It is nearly always the women who choose and we are finding, especially with new-builds, that if it doesn’t have Miele, then they don’t want it. They don’t necessarily want people to know, they don’t need it to be branded all over the place, but especially in Asia the brand matters — Miele, Gaggenau and so on. So I wouldn’t be surprised if the Smallbone name did help make the sale.”

Mosgrove has hit on a key point. While the wealthy might seek out brands, they are resolutely searching for the quality that the brand represents rather than showing off. This is the age of stealth wealth. In a world where just a few key names are held in such high esteem, you don’t need logos: anyone who is anyone is going to recognise the brand from a hundred paces — and, more importantly, the quality.

Joe Burns, managing director, of the architectural interior design company Oliver Burns, says: “It is about brand awareness. You would be amazed how aware our buyers are of products without needing to see a label. If it is part of their day-to-day lifestyle, they will see it and recognise it, perceive the value and gain reassurance.

“We have a checklist of brands we go through on each development: Miele, Gaggenau, Sub-Zero Wolf, Aga, La Cornue . . . Sometimes though we ask for products to be debranded, especially if they have a large badge. Our clients believe that the quality should be obvious.”

Debranding is a growing trend on the east coast of America, too. Gavin Brodin, creative director of luxury developer Domvs London based in Beverly Hills, California, says: “They want the quality of the brands but don’t want to show off the logo.”

Instead they want to customise the products and make them their own. “For instance if they have a Mugnaini wood-fired pizza oven, they will want the outside of it bespoke. Nobody wants anything standard anymore. If you have a Gaggenau fridge, then you will have bespoke handles made. It’s not about showing off, they often remove the logos, for instance the La Cornue badge on range cookers.”

There is no cutting corners, though. Mosgrove relates the tale of properties in Hong Kong in which the developers had installed Miele ovens and appliances where the logo was on display, but where it was covered by cabinetry they used a lesser brand on those products. Would-be buyers spotted the discrepancy immediately.

“People won’t think twice about paying £10 million for a home and then ripping out a brand new kitchen if it isn’t exactly what they want,” she says.

But while there is brand awareness in some areas of the home in others no brand, except own brand, is good enough. Ben Wilson, co-founder of the luxury developer Residence One, explains: “People are brand-conscious in certain areas – kitchen appliances and audiovisual, for example – but when it comes to home furnishing they want bespoke, custom-designed. They don’t want their friends coming round and saying ‘I’ve got that’.”

At the very top end, people will expect bespoke kitchen cabinetry in which to house their Miele ovens, Quooker taps – no one in this salary bracket has time to wait for a kettle to boil – and Elica flush-mounted remote-control extractor fans.

Some people carry their brand fixation into the bathroom with a penchant for Hansgrohe, Dornbracht, Kallista or Waterworks showers and taps. There is a fast-growing trend in London, too, for Japanese loos. “Everyone is asking for Toto’s all-singing-and-dancing WCs. We are installing quite a few of these, many people have them in every bathroom,” says Hunter.

Aside from the kitchen and bathroom, brands matter in just one other area of the home. Most developers and interior designers agree that for home automation systems it has to be Crestron or Lutron. A few say Americans might request Control4 or KNX while Apple fans might have a preference for Savant, but on the whole the original two systems reign supreme with their clientele.

Of course, there are requests for specific brands – London gym bunnies often want a Kinesis machine and Los Angeles residents an AMF bowling alley they can customise – but for most, once they have satisfied their brand obsession in the kitchen, bathroom and plant room, everything else has to be bespoke.

Mosgrove says: “There is a lot of emphasis on bespoke – furniture, doors, floors – and they are prepared to pay a fortune for it. It can cost about a quarter of the value of the property again.”

Although in LA, this can mean bespoke around brand. Brodin reports that there is a vogue for wine or champagne rooms, built with a favourite brand in mind, whether that be Krug or Veuve Clicquot, in living spaces (not in the cellar) where their wine collection can be shown off. The wealthy tend to tread a fine line between stealth and show off.

When fixing an apartment for marketing, Burns has no hesitation though in brandishing the brands. “When we are dressing an apartment we use a lot of brands. Tom Dixon, Armani Casa, Versace, Lalique, Mulberry, Hermès, Baccarat. Buyers see luxury brands as assurance that the development has been done to the right spec and standard. Also in our marketing, we list the brands featured. It is a like a checklist for the wealthy, tick, tick, tick.”

### **Lalique and Damien Hirst**

Lalique, the French crystal brand beloved of wealthy homeowners across the world, has joined forces with the British artist we all love to hate, Damien Hirst. It is not the first collaboration that Lalique chief executive Silvio Denz has formed with a British artist: last year the Swiss entrepreneur launched two monochrome vases designed in collaboration with the architect Zaha Hadid. And Denz, who lives in London, has hinted at more to come. The company’s collaboration with Hirst, launched this week, has resulted in the Eternal collection of crystal panels with three butterfly motifs: Beauty, Love and Hope. The panels, each measuring 37.5cm x 41cm x 2cm, are available in 12 colour combinations and cost from £16,000 each. Hirst says: “I’ve always loved crystal and it’s both beautiful and difficult to work with . . . I love that the panels have an almost religious feel: they make you think of stained-glass windows, which I’ve always adored.”