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Translating Broker Babble

Real estate brokers have their own language when writing up property listings, but let us decipher it for you.



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Scroll through apartment listings, and it doesn't take long to realize that real estate brokers speak their own language. Call it broker babble.

That quiet, charming one-bedroom is actually a dark, rundown alcove studio. "Bring your architect," is the complete opposite of "bring your toothbrush." The former is a down-to-the-studs renovation that will cost more than what you paid for the place, and the latter is a turnkey home.

If anyone knows broker babble, it's other brokers, who speak it fluently.

Frederick Warburg Peters, the chief executive of Warburg Realty, has a framed New Yorker cover hanging in his office of an enthusiastic broker standing with a hopeful couple on a balcony.

Clutching a clipboard and grinning, she points to a sliver of the Hudson River peaking out through a wall of buildings. In a carefully crafted listing, such a view might be described as a “partial river view.”

“It’s what I call a two-person view,” Mr. Peters said. “If one of you hangs out the window and the other one holds onto his legs, you can see” a tiny bit of the river or whatever view is being touted.

Brokers use all kinds of verbal gymnastics in blurbs that could be applauded if there weren’t a potential buyer at the other end of these colorful but ultimately obscure paragraphs. Since “the possibilities to create your own piece of New York are endless,” according to one TriBeCa listing I came across recently, your imagination could really take you anywhere, maybe even to one of the listing photographs of a virtually staged bedroom with walls where none currently exist.

There’s a reason for the euphemisms. Listing agents work for sellers, not buyers, and they have a delicate dance to do. They must simultaneously avoid offending their client while also conveying to the buyer that, say, although the kitchen was recently updated, the seller’s penchant for flamingoes may have led to some interesting wallpaper choices.

Brokers are also bound by federal and local rules that require them to use inclusive language instead of phrases like “great for families,” which might imply that those without a family would not be welcome. So, if you want to let a buyer know that an apartment would be an ideal space for children, you might list the nontoxic paints the seller used in the bedrooms, giving a nod to anxious parents.

Brokers and their sellers, after all, want to get bodies into the open house, and who wants to see a dark basement apartment when they could instead see one facing an inner courtyard?

“These ads have to stand out, so what are we going to say?” said Lauren Cangiano, an associate broker with Halstead. “Something has to attract the buyer in some weird way.”

And so we’re left with phrases like “cozy,” which, according to Daniela Sassoun, an associate broker for Douglas Elliman, “means the apartment is so small you can’t even bring big thoughts.” (The word also can double for “dark,” so think tiny *and* dim.)

Clever phrases abound. A recent StreetEasy search turned up 1,457 listings that described apartments as “charming.” Another 1,473 were “unique.” And 228 were “priced to sell,” which Kathy Murray, a Douglas Elliman associate broker, translates as: “The seller was extremely unrealistic with their pricing, but after two years of being on the market, they are now just slightly priced over market so please make me an offer.”

The photos are often as coded as the language. See a listing with no bathroom? Assume it needs a new one — or it's so small you can't get a proper picture. No shots of the windows? You're looking at brick walls and air shafts.

Brokers suggest that buyers turn to floor plans, which show the layout. "Floor plans rarely lie," said Elizabeth Kee, an associate broker with CORE. They may not lie, but they can also embellish. "They'll say approximately 1,500 square feet, but it's closer to 1,200," Ms. Kee said. If you're almost halfway between 1,000 and 1,500, why not round up?

So how can a first-time buyer make sense of it all? Visit plenty of open houses, find a broker willing to do the legwork for you and, in the meantime, watch for buzzwords. Here are a few:

Gem. Sweet. Adorable. Quaint: Don't the words just sound small, like something that could fit in your pocket? Like a Hamilton Heights one-bedroom I found that was described not only as adorable, but also charming and cozy? It checked all the tiny boxes!

Jewel box: "That is an apartment that might be teeny tiny, but might be decorated nicely," Ms. Cangiano said. Like a pretty little jewel box, but you have to live in it.

Quiet. Serene. Intimate. Sexy. Cozy: Dark as a cave.

Penthouse level: It's not exactly a penthouse because, well, it's just a top-floor apartment, sharing the floor with lots of other apartments. But doesn't "penthouse" have a nice ring to it?

Estate condition. Great bones. Tons of potential. Vintage New York. Bring your imagination. An architect's dream: It hasn't been updated since the Koch administration.

Partial, park and direct views: Pay attention to that first word. While "partial" could result in a neck injury, even a "park view" could be limited. "There could be a building between you and the park," said Martin Eiden, an associate broker at Compass. To guarantee an unobstructed view, the key word is "direct."

Roof deck: One person's cabana is another's fire door. If a listing says "roof deck," it could mean anything from an infinity pool with fire pits to a slab of asphalt. So look for pictures in the listing.

Three flights up: Do the math. It's a fourth-floor walk-up.

Motivated seller: "It typically means negotiable price, but they're not reducing their asking price," Mr. Guerrieri said. So please just make an offer. Any offer.

Renovated. Newer kitchen. Recently updated: The first question to ask is: "How long ago?" The second: "In what way?" "If you use the word 'renovation,' I would assume they

painted the cabinets and maybe it has a new dishwasher,” Ms. Kee said. If you’re hoping for a brand-new kitchen, look for words like “chef’s kitchen” or “state of the art,” and expect to see a laundry list of fancy appliances and brand-name finishes.

Artfully designed. Creative. Distinct. Unique: The seller spent an armload renovating the place, but has questionable taste. Brace yourself for chartreuse wallpaper and insanely expensive iridescent tiles. Unless that’s your thing — in which case, welcome home!