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On The Up And Up: As expectations and demand rise, so does the price of our views

By William Dietrich

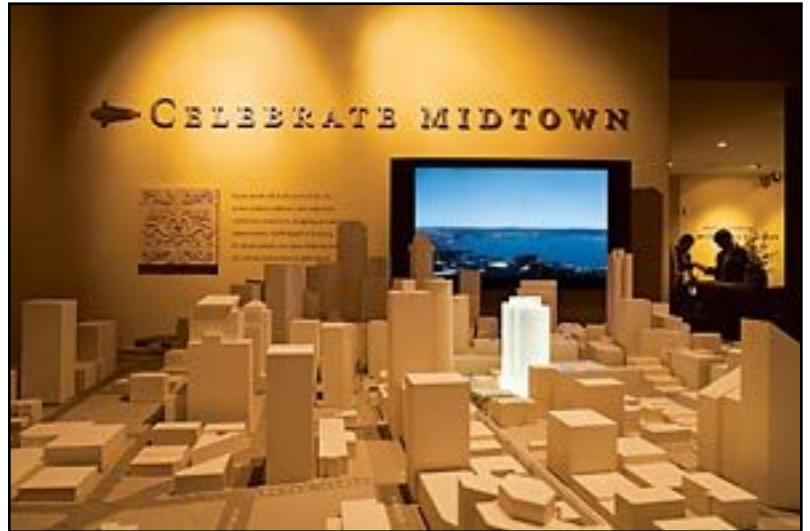
To understand the value we in the Seattle area put on going high and looking far these days, get into the stairwell of a condominium tower and count your way up the thousand-dollar steps.

Condos are more costly the higher you go. In downtown Seattle or Bellevue, each riser pumps the price of a condo up a thousand bucks or more. We all want to be on top, in more ways than one.

"I'm a native Northwesterner," says Doug Howe, a commercial real-estate developer at Touchstone Corporation and condominium resident himself. "I put a high value on views."

We hear you, Doug. Each floor you ascend in a new condominium tower in the central area of the city generally costs the buyer at least \$10,000 for the same unit, and more typically \$20,000, appraisers say.

Howe's office customers are no different. "They spend more time at work than at home, particularly during the daylight



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The Escala condominium project glows at the northern edge of downtown Seattle in this locating model, which features a flat-panel TV display of the view from each floor. As demand for view properties has escalated, so has the price and the prestige associated with them.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

At the now-under-construction Escala condominium project in Seattle, a full-scale mock-up of a large, luxe unit is surrounded by a photographic mural of the expected view. Units here follow an area-wide pattern in which prices rise the higher up you go. At Escala, prices on the lowest floor start at \$570 a square foot and rise to \$1,100 on the highest floor.

hours. They put a premium on view." He estimated a good view can add from \$1 to \$15 a square foot to the monthly rent of a commercial property.

His 9th and Stewart Life Sciences building? The site was picked partly for the views. His 8th & Virginia building? 360-degree views. His Kirkland Park Place parcel? You guessed it, western views. And who's going to be stuck next to the elevator?

"The secretary is always in the core of the building," says appraiser Robert Taylor of Cushman & Wakefield. He says the highest floors in the Washington Mutual Tower that look out over the neighbors can fetch twice the rent of floors lower down.

Water view? You'll pay more. Western or southwestern? More. Skyscraper lights instead of suburban flatness? More. Mountains? Ka-ching. Waterfront? God couldn't pay the mortgage.

"A view is worth a thousand words," says appraiser Alan Pope of Redmond. And a fistful of dollars. "Views can double the value." He cited two otherwise identical lots in the Eastside's Clyde Hill, one for \$1.2 million and the other for \$2 million. Guess which one had the view?

Bob Chamberlin, an appraiser with Allen Brackett Shedd, took a look at properties in Kirkland and agreed that a great view can essentially double the value of a lot or house. For example, in the prime downtown area, a minimum-size lot with no view cost \$550,000, while the same-size property with a great view fetched as much as \$1 million. A new



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Seattle has its hills, and those who want to own view homes on them are paying ever-higher prices for the privilege. The reasons we're willing to do so range from the evolutionary -- those who could see what was coming were more likely to survive -- to the technological -- better glass and elevators have allowed us to go higher.



COURTESY OF NYHUS COMMUNICATIONS

The new Four Seasons hotel-condominium project bought air rights over the property to the west to ensure the views. In general, views both downtown and in traditional neighborhoods enjoy no direct legal protection from the city, except for

with an exceptional view.

"View is a scarce commodity," he explains, "and scarcity creates value."

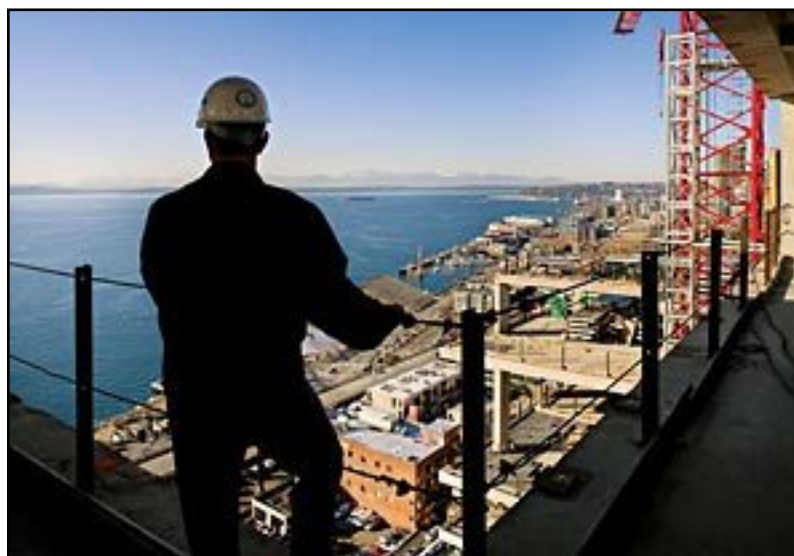
He examined one downtown condominium going up and found similar-sized units on the same floor varied by as much as \$90,000 in price, mostly depending on what direction they face. Preference varies by property, but traditionally water view costs more than city, western more than eastern, and southern — with its sun — more than northern, which reportedly has less "feng shui," or proper harmony, for some buyers.

We mortgage for view, pay higher property taxes for view, sacrifice square footage for view, commute for view, protest and sue to protect view, add on for view and risk steep slopes for view.

Truman Katz, former president of Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center, saw the value of his 1.5-acre property in Bellevue with its spectacular view across Lake Washington to downtown Seattle jump from \$770,000 when he bought it in 1993 to nearly \$6 million today. Now he's selling it for relief from the yard work, but he and his wife, Sue Ellen, are buying a condo on the 40th floor of the new Bellevue Towers with — you guessed it — a great view.

They're turning from west to east, and from water to urban and mountains, and consider them both an integral, essential part of Northwest living. "We had a lot of parties" that were high-end charity affairs, Katz says, "and people saw the view and said it was one of the nicest pieces of

zoning codes.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES



COURTESY OF NYHUS COMMUNICATIONS

The new Four Seasons will feature what owners say is the only outdoor pool with a full-on view of Elliott Bay. The project, with 36 multimillion-dollar residences, will offer owners a host of other amenities, including 24-hour concierge service.

property they'd ever seen."

WHEN IT COMES to pitting one iconic Northwest element against another, we even cut trees for view.

Back in 2003, U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Jerome Farris of Seattle was fined \$500,000 after his gardener cut 120 trees in Colman Park to improve the jurist's view.

In December, the city of Bellevue announced it was seeking up to \$411,000 in fines and civil penalties in two separate cases against a homebuilder and a homeowner. Combined, they cut 31 mature trees on city property to enhance views. That's \$13,258 in penalties per tree. Ouch.

In November, a conflict erupted in Oregon's Troutdale when a dentist logged part of his 3.85-acre property and neighbors across the Sandy River said it wrecked their views.

Building in the Columbia River Gorge is strictly regulated to, yep, protect views.

At Lake Tahoe in January, a \$35,000 fine was levied against a property owner who cut seven pines to get a better view of the lake.

In downtown Seattle, concern is erupting over planned towers blocking some of the views from existing condominiums or those under construction, including the Cosmopolitan, Escala and Cristalla. And some fear a 14-story luxury apartment building that developer Martin Selig plans to have built just 15 feet from the Olympic Sculpture Park would disrupt the art-filled park's dynamic view backdrop.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Truman and Sue Ellen Katz saw the value of their property (with its great view over Lake Washington to Seattle) jump to nearly \$6 million from when he bought it in 1993. Now the couple is moving to a condo that also features a terrific view.



BENJAMIN BENSCHNEIDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Seattle's Land Use Code has "no direct view protection from neighboring projects," says spokesman Alan Justad of the

Veteran Coldwell Banker real-estate agent Wendy Lister represents some of the area's higher-end properties and estimates that a home with a view can fetch from 50 to 150 percent more.

Department of Planning and Development. Rules adopted in

April 2006 do require spacing of 60 to 200 feet in various downtown areas, but buildings vested under the old rules don't have to comply. That will be the case for two towers proposed cheek-by-jowl in the 1900 block of Second Avenue, for example.

Neither do buildings outside the zone, which is why two 500-foot towers are proposed to be built almost just alley-width from the Escala, and another tower just north of Crisilla.

Two other towers proposed at Minor and Stewart are so close they would need a waiver from the 60-foot rule for both to proceed.

The city has already reversed itself regarding 1980s-era caps on commercial- and condo-building heights — now allowing higher structures in some downtown zones and South Lake Union to encourage more development.

Single-family homeowners don't have much recourse, either, if neighbors build up and block their views, as long as they keep within zoning height requirements. Each owns the "air rights" above an individual property.

In other words, there is little legal protection against the loss of a property value — worth hundreds of thousands of dollars in some cases — because when it comes to view, each property owner is sovereign.

IF YOU THINK about it, trying to guarantee views is incredibly sticky because it freezes a skyline in place. If views were protected in 1890, we'd still have an 1890-height city.

So it's the Wild West out there, condo vs. office tower, and McMansion vs. bungalow.

That's why developers of the Four Seasons hotel-condominium project across from the Seattle Art Museum — where home prices hit \$2,000 a square foot, a Seattle first — bought the air rights over the Lusty Lady and are counting on a City Light substation and the Alaskan Way Viaduct corridor to help keep water views unobstructed.

The investors looked hard for a lot at the top of a grade that would protect its condominium views, says John Oppenheimer, one of the Hotel Group's three principals, and rejected 20 other sites. Each of the 36 multimillion-dollar residences is promised to be a "one-of-a-kind experience" — including permanent water, mountain and city views. And their one-of-a-kind price? The most expensive is more than \$10 million.

"We raised prices and they kept selling," explains Paul Zumwalt, the owners' representative. "We'll have the only outdoor pool (on the fourth floor) overlooking Elliott Bay."

Which brings us to *"Why?"*

Moles don't have views. Beavers don't have views. Why do humans care? Why do we have books and movies titled "A Room With a View," "Rear Window" and "View From the Top"? Or developments like View Ridge, Island View, Valley View, Mountain View, Lake View, Pine View and Bay View?

One theory is evolutionary: We have an inborn love of nature and views because they represented real value to our primitive ancestors and psychological peace to us today. Harvard ecologist E.O. Wilson coined the term "biophilia," or "love of life," for our affinity.

We stood upright, perhaps, to get a better view in the tall grass of the African savanna. A view home replicates the perfect hominid vantage point: a high point in which we are concealed but have a panoramic lookout for enemies and game. There's nothing a cat likes better than to lie by a windowsill, taking in the view.

Another hypothesis is historical: From the beginning of civilization, priests and kings went high with towers, pyramids and steeples. Castles were on hills for defense, and palaces took the high ground to get away from the smoke and squalor of the plebes. The richer and more powerful you were, the better your view, so we equate views with success.

A third idea is geographical: Seattleites are nuts for view because we actually have them, a passion you won't find in Waco, Omaha or Birmingham. And views work for us because of the temperate climate. In Siberia, you have to keep the windows small. In hotter climates like North Africa and Arizona, traditional houses minimize glass and turn inward to shaded courtyards.

A fourth explanation is technological: Appraisers like Chamberlin have noticed that homes built before World War II in Seattle, even in the swankiest neighborhoods, generally don't have that passionate orientation to view — that design-from-the-inside-out look — so common today. What changed?

Glass, heat, air conditioning and the elevator.

Window glass was a rare luxury until the 18th century, when rolled glass began to replace crown glass, that wavy blown bottle glass seen in antique window panes. Large sheets of plate glass, invented in France, weren't made in the United States until 1883, and remained precious through the 1950s because they had to be ground and polished. But in 1945, PPG Industries in the United States invented double-pane insulated glass, and in 1959 the English invented "float glass," in which large sheets could be cheaply manufactured by floating molten glass on a bath of molten tin. By the 1960s, the suburban "picture window" was born.

At the same time, postwar architects were championing glass, most radically with Philip Johnson's demonstration Glass House in 1949. "Bringing the outdoors in" was all the rage. New heat-strengthening techniques made large sheets of glass less vulnerable to bird strikes or accidental breakage from inside.

Electric and gas heat and air conditioning let us heat and cool the result.

And no one wants to climb those thousand-dollar steps. The elevator made possible the spectacle of height and light that downtown Seattle and Bellevue have become.

Perhaps glossy magazine photos and eye-popping sales prices helped educate us. "As house values have increased, people have put more value on a view," says veteran Coldwell Banker real-estate agent Wendy Lister, who represents some of the area's higher-end properties and ranked 19th in the nation in a Wall Street Journal list for sales volume. "As people become more sophisticated in their tastes, they're more aware of it."

For some, including Lister herself, "view" can mean patio or garden. But "I will never stop gasping when I go across the (Lake Washington) bridge and see Mount Rainier," she says. Like the appraisers, Lister estimates a similar house on a view lot can fetch from 50 to 150 percent more.

The sales display of the Escala condominium project in Seattle is typical. Set at Fourth Avenue and Virginia Street, the 28-floor tower offers residences ranging from \$600,000 to \$2.5 million, and views ranging from the urban territorial to the panoramic. As you go up, the units get bigger and pricier, with square-foot-cost ranging from a low of about \$570 on the lowest floor to \$1,100 on the highest.

But how to know what you're buying when the tower is a hole in the ground? There's a full-scale mock-up of a large unit, complete with terrace and photographic mural of the expected view. Nearby, a television flat panel displays pictures taken by balloon of the view at each floor height. Every potential buyer wants to know their view, and by mid-January, 40 percent of the 270 homes had been sold in a tower that didn't exist yet.

"My advice is to find a beautiful city view," said Sam Cunningham, a Windermere agent representing the project. He's buying his own view of Fourth Avenue there to watch the people. "Don't pay premium for the water — in the city, there is no such thing as guaranteed views."

What is guaranteed is that if you do have a view — be it of water, city, shipyard or even clear-cut — chances are it's going to increase in value as 100,000 people crowd into Pugetopolis each year. And increase. And increase.

Lister, child and mother of real-estate agents, gets inquiries about high-end Seattle properties from around the world. And who knows

how high that commodity will go?

In 1960, her parents sold her childhood home on Queen Anne Hill, with a partial view, for \$57,000.

It recently resold for \$4.7 million.

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