

360 VIEW

Aroma: The New Building Amenity

By Ronda Kaysen

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Scented candles. Fragrance sticks. Incense. Potpourri. Many of us spend a lot of time (and money) trying to make our homes smell pretty. Hotels have been dousing their lobbies with fragrances for years, hoping we'll keep booking rooms at the Westin because it smells like White Tea.

Now, rental buildings and condominiums in New York City have caught onto the idea, infusing lobbies, hallways and fitness centers with fragrances. Sometimes they are blown in through the ductwork, other times stand-alone machines do the job. Either way, the building smells a whole lot fresher than a city sidewalk.

Take 21 West End, a rental on the Upper West Side. Ever since it opened in September, tenants have been attributing its summery aroma to the floral arrangements. Building staff members are quick to set the record straight: The lobby smells like a beach because of Ocean Mist, a fragrance pumped in through the ductwork. "You really pick your head up and take notice," said Ken Ludwig, 21 West End's general manager.

Come November, Ocean Mist will be replaced with Season's Greetings, which reminded me of hot apple cider and cinnamon when I sampled it. (After I tested both fragrances, my office smelled like Christmas in July.) The building will eventually rotate four fragrances, including White Blossom Tea and Cranberry Apple — the result of a painstaking selection process. "You have no idea how hard it is to smell 1,500 fragrances," Mr. Ludwig said. "Your nose can become numb to anything."

Numb noses or not, buildings are rushing to aromatize. ScentAir, the company behind the fragrances for 21 West End and Westin's White Tea, says multifamily properties have been the largest growing segment of its business for the last three years.

The North Carolina-based company now provides fragrances for 67 residential buildings in the New York area. While some properties, like 21 West End, choose fragrances from an existing catalog, others want something original. Find the perfect scent and a resident — or, more important, a prospective one — could walk through the door, inhale and feel at home.

Dawn Goldworm is the scent director for 12.29, the New York fragrance design company she founded with her twin sister, Samantha. Dawn Goldworm says smell is often an overlooked element of the luxury experience, which is surprising considering our sense of smell is so interwoven with our moods and feelings. "If you walk into a building that has the most beautiful architecture and the most incredible design you've ever seen, and it smells like the pollution and the trash outside in New York City, you're not having a luxury experience," she said.

Last year, the Goldworm sisters, who have designed fragrances for Lady Gaga and Valentino, created Craft, a signature fragrance for the real estate developer DDG. Now, the lobbies of all DDG properties, including the condos XOCO 325 on West Broadway and 41 Bond, share a sultry aroma. What exactly does Craft smell like? Ask an olfactory expert, it's like talking to a sommelier about a fine wine: "The scent is very much plain, with the warmth of wood milk," Dawn Goldworm said. "But also a slightly creamy ambery, textural feeling with all these natural wood notes."

All this sniffing makes me wonder: What if you don't like what you inhale? Smell evokes emotions and memories, including those we'd rather forget. If the lobby mural is not to your liking, you can avert your gaze and move along. Not so with a distinct perfume. Like it or not, it will greet you like an eager puppy whenever you walk through the door.

"The whole idea of aromatherapy at one level is wrong," said Rachel Herz, an adjunct assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University and the author of "The Scent of Desire: Discovering Our Enigmatic Sense of Smell" (Harper Perennial, 2007).

Our culture has collectively decided that lavender makes for a relaxing yoga class, but the flower is not a natural sedative. So, a person might not feel calm in a lavender-infused gym if his first encounter with the fragrance takes him back to elementary school, where the plant bloomed outside as he struggled through long division. Instead, he might cringe and leave.

"It's not like everyone's going to have the same experience," Dr. Herz said. "It has to do with your own past."

Olfactory experts point to signature fragrances as a solution: Create an original scent and no one will recoil at some troubling memory. But that aroma could become a fragrant monster if a prospective resident's first encounter with it is a negative one. Perhaps the first time she visited the building was after a particularly trying day at the office. Even if she goes on to rent or buy the apartment, every time she walks in the lobby, she might associate it with her crummy mood, according to Dr. Herz.

Memories aside, some people just don't like perfume. Fragrances can cause eyes to burn, throats to itch and noses to run, even if allergies are not involved. "It functions like an irritant — it's overwhelming to the system," said Beth E. Corn, an associate professor of allergy and immunology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, adding, "Why do you want to expose yourself to this?"

Is it worth it then? Will a floral-scented vestibule really improve your life?

"To me, it means a headache," said Jonathan J. Miller, the president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel, who described the trend as a gimmick used by developers eager to stand out in a saturated housing market. "Everyone is trying to one up each other to make the most noise." Or, in this case, the loveliest aroma.

Over at 535W43, a Manhattan rental that opened this summer, the CetraRuddy-designed building uses not one, but two fragrances. Sandalwood infuses the lobby, leasing office and model apartments. The fitness center smells like lavender.

"When you step off the streets of Hell's Kitchen, you immediately smell it," said Matthew Villetto, a vice president for marketing at Douglas Elliman Real Estate, the leasing agent. "It's like you've arrived somewhere." And, with some luck, it smells like somewhere you want to be.