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BREAKING NEWS

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'Selling New York' explores multi-million dollar real estate in Manhattan

By: Bill Brioux, The Canadian Press
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NEW YORK, N.Y. - Back in the day on "Green Acres," Lisa Douglas used to sing, "I just adore a penthouse view." She'd really adore "Selling New York," the high-end real estate reality show premiering Sept. 8 on HGTV Canada.

How high end? Oliver and Lisa Douglas could not have afforded these castles in the sky. On a recent tour of four Manhattan penthouse properties showcased on the series, none were listed for less than US\$8.9 million. The priciest and most spectacular — an 8,300 sq. ft., Fifth Avenue penthouse across the street from Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum of Art — was listed at US\$28.5 million.

While that lavish residence boasts seven bedrooms and nine bathrooms, it doesn't come with parking.

"If you live here, you don't need a car," says Michele Kleier, matriarch of the Gumley Haft Kleier agency, one of two real estate boutiques showcased on the series.

Kleier and her two daughters, Samantha and Sabrina, are key players in "Selling New York." They often walk their well-heeled clients through properties together, all in their matching red shoes and designer bags. They even finish each other's sentences.

Although discreet about dropping names, the high-end agents have helped A-list clients like Al Pacino, John Travolta and A-Rod find their cozy corners of Manhattan.

Selling lifestyles of the rich and famous to the rich and famous was why Kleier turned down the first few offers to front a real estate reality series. "First, we never planned to be on TV, second we were nervous," she says from the massive master bedroom of a Park Avenue penthouse. "Many of our clients want their privacy and want no part of this."

Neither, at first, did the Kleiers. Other networks had pitched similar show ideas, but the family was wary of being depicted as The Real Housewives of the Upper East Side. One producer promised that, as Kleier recalls, "we wouldn't position you as a train wreck, but very often that's how you come off." Thanks, but no thanks, said the Kleiers.

The family was turned around after meeting another mother-daughter team, Vyvyan and Courtney Campbell from Toronto-based JV Productions, who assured them the focus of the series would be on properties, not improprieties.

That notion also appealed to Shaun Osher, CEO of the CORE Group. His Soho-based boutique agency is the ying to the Kleier's yang on "Selling New York."

Osher, a sauve South Africa-native who moved to New York in his early twenties, knows every square foot of the Village and exactly what it will sell for. He sees changes in zoning restrictions as opportunities and knows more about Beaux-Arts facades, terra cotta detailing and other historical touches than most museum curators.

"You used to need to be an artist in residence to live in Soho," he notes. "Not all are artists today in the old fashioned sense."

He and his Canadian-born colleague Maggie Kent — originally from Oakville Ont., where her family was in real estate — are the John Steed and Emma Peel of the series.

Red-haired Kent is shown in an early episode bluntly telling a house-proud seller he has to drop the price of his loft by \$1 million. The advice was needed — it still hasn't sold.

The stubborn downturn in the economy still has Manhattan in its grip, but these agents don't scare easy. Ask them how business is and they'll admit things take a little longer to move these days and a few clients have dropped their prices. But the rich and famous still need places to live.

At these prices, you won't see a lot of deals close on "Selling New York." As the Kleiers note, each season is shot over three months, and it often takes that long to get even Fortune 500 clients to "sign off on the dotted line."

There are sales in season 1, however, and plenty of drama.

One stunner on the market CORE is showcasing is on Thompson Street in the heart of Little Italy. The enormous rooftop terrace offers a breathtaking view of the Empire State Building to the north and Wall Street to the south.

Inside, a massive, 57-foot x 52-foot great room with 13-foot ceilings grabs you by the throat the moment you step off the keyed elevator and past the heavy metal entrance door. A giant Bahia granite wall divides the kitchen from the great room. Presidents Clinton and Obama have been entertained in this residence, it is noted. The sleepy pooch who greets visitors as they enter seems unimpressed.

The staircase, leading to the planted terrace, was designed by the same craftsmen who did the makeover at the Louvre. That, and five bedrooms, will set you back nearly \$13 million.

Again, no parking, and worse, the dog is not part of the deal.

Bill Brioux is a freelance TV columnist based in Brampton, Ont. While in New York, Brioux was a guest of HGTV Canada.