



Courtesy, Imago

Brochure depiction of the future Orion towers (Ede Nemeti, architect) along Memorial Drive.



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Balcony at Mercer Condominiums looking toward the Galleria.



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Williams Tower from bathroom spa, Mercer Condominiums.

6 rms hou vu

BY BARRIE SCARDINO

When I moved back to Houston from New York last year, living in a high rise seemed to be the sensible thing to do. Most people in New York City live in some kind of apartment or condominium, and after a few years I became used to elevator waits, cooking smells in the halls, and dogs barking (or worse, babies crying) next door at midnight. But the good outweighs the bad: 24-hour security; valet parking; groceries, newspapers, and dry cleaning brought to your door; packages and mail received when you weren't at home. But it was the gym that really sold me. I could work out or swim anytime, day or night, right in my own building. In no time, I reasoned, I'd be healthy, svelte, and full of energy.

I started looking for the perfect Houston apartment in the perfect building in the perfect location. I consider myself an urban adventurer—not to mention a preservationist—so I started looking downtown, hoping to find a sexy loft in a remodeled old building. There were some wonderful lofts to be had, but they were smallish and (horrors!) no doors, no rms, no vus. "What do you think a loft is?" my real estate agent asked me. Well, I admit the ones I had seen in New York were pretty much just one big room with freight elevator access and no doorman in white gloves. But that was New York—young people lived there, artists lived and worked there. I was a grandmother for goodness sake—and apparently not as cool as I wanted to be.

So I decided to explore possibilities at the other extreme. How about a lovely apartment overlooking Hermann Park? Perfect. The doormen were wonderfully pleasant, and public transit made it right to the front door. But the public spaces smelled like a candle shop and looked like a showroom at Suniland. (Remember Suniland? Over-polished mahogany, brass, patterned carpets...) Besides, the apartments had too many little rms. It was just too nice, maybe too River Oaks. Not quite edgy enough for me. But they had a gym! I couldn't totally write off the old-style Houston high-rise apartments, but they seemed conspicuously full of grandmothers. I

may be one, but I don't want to live like one. So my quest continued. I had wanted to buy, but I realized that to expand my choices I would need to consider renting as well.

One of the curious things about apartment hunting in Houston is that the sales and rental agents were more apt to pitch the advantages of high-rise living in general rather than the qualities of their particular building—as though the whole concept needed explaining. Unlike New York, Houston high rises are in direct competition with on-the-ground houses in good neighborhoods at about the same price—many customers have spent most of their lives in a house on a lot with little or no experience of high-rise living. In any case, all the high rises here have pretty much the same amenities, and after a while one looks like the other.

Then I discovered the soft loft. Edgy but comfortable, without the drawbacks of true lofts, but including the exposed pipes, concrete, and ductwork. Most of all it didn't look like it had been worked over by a neo-classical-crazed interior designer. This was for me. I knew I couldn't live somewhere my architecture friends and colleagues would scoff at—you know where I mean. So I had to dig deeper into my soul (and my pocketbook) to come to terms with my real values. What was really important? It turns out it wasn't the gym or the doorman. Maybe the security. The space—sure; the balcony and the vu—yeah. But what came up number one on my list? I am almost ashamed to tell you: It was image. I wanted to live in a high rise because it looks and feels more sophisticated to me, more urbane if not urban. It's a feeling I try to deconstruct while I sit on my balcony overlooking the traffic and the skyline view silhouetted by the sunset. There are enough of us to support a healthy, steady growth in Houston's apartment industry. Developers know the score, and more than a few new residential high rises are on the drawing boards. It will continue to grow, maybe until all the good vus get used up. ■