

Real Estate

The New York Times

A White-Glove State of Mind

New luxury buildings, channeling five-star hotels, opt to tweak staff behavior.

By RONDA KAYSEN

As New York City's luxury buildings wage battle over who can deliver the most outsize amenities to residents, some are expanding their focus to include the doormen who quietly usher in residents, handle the packages and hail the cabs.

For older buildings in neighborhoods that used to be solidly middle-class, like the Upper West Side, keeping up with luxury standards also means rethinking how staff members should treat tenants. New-

er, well-heeled residents often expect customer service more commonly found in a five-star hotel than a prewar apartment building. Gone are the days of the doorman who doubled as a buddy at the desk, chatting about the Yankees game or asking how the children are doing. Residents expect white-glove service in buildings that, a generation ago, were much less fussy.

To keep up with changing demands, some older upscale buildings are training staff members, updating uniforms, installing concierge desks and adding high-tech communication systems. For the roughly 10,000 doormen working in 3,200 buildings in the city, the changes in recent years have reset the relationships they have with the residents who pass them by each day.

"Younger people with money are moving into buildings," said Frank Monaco, a retired doorman who also worked as a representative for Local 32BJ, the service workers union, "and they want to make it a white-glove building. One of the things I hear from management is they want the staff to be very attentive. They don't want them to be distracted by reading the paper. In the past it was different. People were a little bit more laid back, but that's changing."

Doormen often start out as porters or handymen and work their way up through a building, staying there for decades. Unlike staff members in the hotel industry, which has long invested heavily in custom-

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er-service training, doormen are generally trained in-house. But many newer luxury buildings have embraced the hotel industry's hospitality model — not always to the delight of doormen, some of whom have only begrudgingly participated in training sessions.

The Related Companies, which owns and operates luxury residential high-rises, spends more than \$100,000 a year on employee training and spent more than \$1 million when it overhauled its training program a decade ago, according to the company. New hires take a weeklong course to learn how to color-code residents based on their personality type. A red-coded resident needs to be validated and heard, whereas a blue resident simply wants the facts. Building staff members wear ear buds, so that if, for example, a porter spots a resident leaving his apartment, he can radio the front desk to suggest that someone hail a cab. Residents can sign up for a service called the Invisible Butler, for watering plants, supervising the housekeeper and even packing and shipping items that a resident forgot to bring on a trip.

In once-relaxed buildings, the expectations of wealth reshape doormen's role.

"It really is like walking into the Ritz-Carlton," said Gus Michael Farnella, who lives at One MiMa Tower, where a three-bedroom rental apartment was recently listed for \$22,995 a month on Streeteasy.com. "I feel like I live in a hotel, but it's home." When he moved in, Mr. Farnella was greeted with a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

Residents of buildings whose staffs have had training programs describe eager, attentive service. Seven months ago, after they sold their five-bedroom apartment on LaGuardia Place for \$5.725 million, Richard Allan and his wife, Lee, moved to the Strathmore, a Related high-rise rental on the Upper East Side, where service outshone the lackluster treatment they had experienced in other buildings. The couple enjoyed the newfound attention.

"In my son's building," said Mr. Allan of his son's Upper East Side doorman rental, "maybe if you drop dead on the sidewalk the doormen will call an ambulance."

Tar Beaty noticed a marked improvement when he moved to 201 West 85th Street, a rental owned by Argo Real Estate, which has recently retrained its staff. "Compared to the old building, this is a gem," Mr. Beaty said. At his previous residence, also on the Upper West Side, the doormen paid little attention to the residents and instead chatted with friends. But at a one-bedroom apartment at his new build-



ing rents for nearly \$3,000 a month, significantly more than the \$1,100 a month he paid for his previous one-bedroom. Rising housing costs certainly contribute to changing expectations. The average sale price for a condominium in Manhattan was \$1.78 million in 2013, up from \$795,911 a decade ago, according to CityRealty. The average rent in Manhattan was \$3,797 a month in November, according to MNS.

Older buildings are also stepping up their training, at least in part to help maintain property values. In 2013, the number of buildings that requested customer-service training from the service workers' union rose to 35, from 10 in 2012. At the Churchill, a midcentury co-op in Murray Hill, the board recently trained its 30 employees. "It's a 45-year-old building that needs to keep up with newer buildings," said Ronald Kaslow, the president of the co-op board, which also invested in new uniforms.

Although about half the staff initially resisted the training, Mr. Kaslow said he noticed "a dramatic change" once they had completed it. Staff members were more patient, friendlier and more service-oriented. "We always put on a good show," he said. "Now we put on a better show."

Since his retirement last spring, Mr. Monaco has offered customer-service training for Brown Harris Stevens and Argo Real Estate. At a recent Argo seminar at the Beacon Hotel on the Upper West



Side, more than 100 doormen sat in folding chairs listening to Mr. Monaco lay out the new rules of engagement. First on the list: Residents are not your friends. In an atmosphere that was at times boisterous, doormen expressed frustration with the demands. "They treat us like we're their personal slaves," shouted one audience member. Several complained of residents with outsize expectations, asking doormen

Frank Monaco, a labor consultant, provides customer-service training for property managers around the city. He worked recently with the doormen in the lobby of 69 Fifth Avenue.

to park cars like a valet; accusing them of stealing jewelry; refusing to open a door for themselves under any circumstances; or expecting instant results to complicated problems. "We have residents who are just as bad as children," lamented another audience member.

One doorman shared a story of two tenants nearly coming to blows over their dogs. As the dogs started fighting in the lobby, the residents began a fight of their own. One of the residents demanded that the doorman come to her defense and help fend off her neighbor.

To all these complaints, Mr. Monaco, who has an earring, a shock of black hair and a graying soul patch on his chin, offered the same response: Keep your cool, keep your distance and call your boss if there is a problem. "You are the captain, you are the general of the lobby," he said. "You are in charge, regardless of what they say."

As residents get wealthier, the divide between the doormen and the people they serve grows. Doormen are typically working-class immigrants who live in the outer boroughs, according to the book "Doormen" (University of Chicago Press, 2005) by Peter Bearman. The average doorman's salary is \$44,387 a year, according to the service workers' union. By comparison, the median annual income on the Upper West Side from 2008 to 2010 was \$97,087, according to the city Planning Department.

"The environment has changed tremendously," said Kyle Bragg, the secretary-treasurer for Local 32BJ. "The vast majority of these buildings housed middle-class folks, and now they are home to the super-wealthy, and so the demands have changed, the interaction between members and this new tenancy has changed."

Wealthier residents may have different expectations than their middle-class predecessors. Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology who studies wealth, class and power at the University of California, Berkeley, theorized that "with increased income disparity and class distinction, there is this sense of entitlement and disconnect and a narcissistic desire to be catered to."

In addition to offering the training seminars, Argo has designed staff uniforms and set up an email work-order system allowing staff members to alert residents to package deliveries or update them on repairs. The company is considering adding the system in nondoorman buildings.

In one building, elevator operators became doormen after the elevators were automated. The newly minted team was trained to interact with the residents in a more formal manner, according to Julie Zuraw, the chief operating officer of Argo, who said, "We had to instill a more upscale mind-set about how they approached their work."