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In Battery Park, Fish Tank Is New Public Square

By DIANE CARDWELL

At some point every day, Amanda Beck's 11-month-old daughter, Emmy, says, "Bah," to her. "It means she wants to see the fish," Ms. Beck said one afternoon last week, holding Emmy up to the double-sided glass tank set into a wall in the lobby of Riverhouse, a luxury condominium building in Battery Park City.

"Bah," Emmy said, a signal for her mother to turn her back around to the tank so she could see the red squirelfish, hippo and unicorn tangs, queen angel and lion fish swimming placidly against a view of the promenade, the Hudson River and a New Jersey high-rise behind it. "It's her favorite thing. They're fantastic."

The fish tanks at Riverhouse — there is another in a second lobby — were part of the overall concept of the designer [David Rockwell](#), who wanted to bring the river inside with nautical nods like wavy aluminum blades lining the walls and abstracted whale-shaped benches. But the tanks, along with those at 1 Rector Park and at the Visionaire, are draws for the youngest residents of Battery Park City, which has become something of a suburban-style destination for the stroller set. Half of all the families in Lower Manhattan live in Battery Park City, according to a 2009 survey by the Downtown Alliance, an economic development group.

"We've found that the majority of the residents here and the majority of the people who look to purchase here are families or are planning families," said John Tashjian, a principal at Centurion Real Estate Partners, which took over the Riverhouse in Battery Park City last year after conflicts between the original sponsors. "Children come through here throughout the day, and they're drawn to this amenity."

In recent years, gigantic in-home custom fish tanks, which frequently cost well into the five figures, have become important status symbols for certain wealthy New Yorkers. But the migration of fish into the apartment building lobby reflects both a desire to cater to the interests of children in

increasingly family-oriented areas like Battery Park City and a belief that the lobby should be a communal destination for residents, rather than a place where neighbors simply pass one another by.

“It’s very much a focal point,” said Michael Gubbins, vice president for residential management at the Albanese Organization, which developed the Visionaire and its 600-gallon, 12-foot-long live coral display. “We actually put a bench by the aquarium so that people would meet and greet and sit there sometimes.”

The initial costs of these large tanks are high, from \$75,000 to more than \$100,000, said Nathan Kamelhar, a partner and founder at [Okeanos Aquascaping](#). It designed and installed two tanks at 1 Rector Park when the building, which began as a rental in 1985, was converted to condominiums and underwent an extensive renovation to create fewer, larger apartments, many with additional bedrooms.

A large, live coral saltwater tank like the one in that lobby is more expensive than, say a fish-only tank, Mr. Kamelhar said, but it is the size that makes the biggest difference. Above a certain size, tanks require three-quarter-inch-thick glass to withstand the water pressure; it is almost double the price of the more typical half-inch-thick glass.

But developers say the large tanks are well worth such expenses because residents find them to be unusual and captivating amenities, whose maintenance, about \$1,000 a month, is roughly equivalent to what a luxury building might spend on, say, flowers in the lobby.

Mr. Kamelhar said he had noticed an increased interest in fish tanks for residential lobbies, calling the tanks a good way for building owners to signal to potential buyers and residents that they were not skimping on services.

“People spend \$30,000 on a trip to go diving and see the most exotic things, and here you can have some of that right in your lobby,” he said. “It’s considered a luxury item. It’s a way of saying: ‘We’re trying to make you happy. We’re trying to make you relax.’”

It seems to be working. The Visionaire, an eco-friendly building with a LEED rating of platinum, frequently hosts visiting students — from elementary schools to graduate schools — interested in the building’s “green” design. And it is the see-through tank, Mr. Gubbins said, that has captured the imaginations of children and adults alike. “People see the living coral aquarium and they go right to it,” he said.

Over at 1 Rector Park, one tank, which sits opposite the elevators, is also a favorite. Before the sales team moved its office upstairs, said Paula Burchill, director of sales, members would come out and just stand there. “We have actually picked out the ones that we think are dating,” she said.

A resident, Sunita Iyer, said her 7-year-old son, Rohin, loved the fish so much that they had to leave the house a few minutes early each day so he could gaze at them, sometimes looking for the plum-colored serpent starfish. He celebrated his birthday in the building with about 20 other children, who all gathered around the fish.

“That was a magnet,” Ms. Iyer said. “We had to pull them to the party.”

Rohin was not too impressed, however, by the clown fish — now familiar as Nemo. And the hippo tang, a former favorite, had fallen out of favor. “Now I don’t have a favorite,” he concluded.

He has always been interested in fish, so he was thrilled to have the tank in the lobby, his mother said. When they moved in, one of his early reactions was this: “We don’t have to go to Coney Island that much anymore.”

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