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YOUR HOME

In Counting Square Feet, Elastic Rules

By JAY ROMANO

It is an indisputable fact that one foot equals 12 inches and also that a square foot has 144 inches. It is less certain what the term square foot means when it is used to describe the size of a co-op, a condo or even a house in suburbia.

"Buyers seem to be increasingly interested in square footage these days," said Frederick W. Peters, president of Warburg Realty Partnership in Manhattan. "And when you're talking about New York real estate, square footage is a moving target." For example, Mr. Peters said, in a co-op, the square footage of an apartment typically includes the floor space within the perimeter walls of the apartment. Even that seemingly straightforward measurement, however, can vary. "It doesn't work to just measure the rooms and then add all the measurements together," he said. Doing that, he explained, would miss the space in closets and small corridors. At the same time, he said, just measuring the perimeter walls will include "dead space" within the apartment — like the floor space taken up by interior walls. It turns out, however, that including such space is the most common way of calculating the square footage of a co-op apartment. Mr. Peters noted that it is important to use measurement methods that accurately compare one apartment with similarly sized apartments. "At the end of the day, what I'm concerned about most is not the exact accuracy of the numbers," he said, "but that I am comparing apples to apples."

Even that, however, may be difficult when dealing with condominium apartments. Condo measurements are reached differently from co-op measurements, and there are even variations in the way that condominiums in different buildings are measured, depending in large part on when the condominium was organized.

Alvin Schein, a Manhattan lawyer who represents condominium conversion sponsors and developers, said condominiums converted in the early 1980's and before used a different technique from condominiums converted or constructed in the past 15 or 20 years. "When we started doing conversions back in the early 80's, the method for computing square footage of a condo came pretty close to describing the usable square footage in the apartment," he said. And the method used by most condos would basically describe the same amount of physical space as the measurement used for co-ops. In other words, back then a 1,200-square-foot condo would have the same amount of usable space as a 1,200-square-foot co-op.

Things are different today, however. "Somewhere in the mid- to late 80's, someone came up with a way to expand the measurement of a condominium," Mr. Schein said. "Instead of measuring from the inside surface of the walls, they started measuring from the outside face of the walls."

While that might not at first appear to add significantly to the overall area of an apartment, Mr. Schein said, the additional square footage captured by this method could be significant because of the way some buildings are constructed.

"In some buildings, the exterior walls are 18 inches thick," he said, noting that the additional foot and a half could add a significant number of square feet to the final calculation. And that increase would be even greater for corner apartments, which have two exterior walls to account for. For example, Mr. Schein said, if a corner apartment was 20 feet wide by 40 feet long, and the exterior wall was 18 inches thick, the exterior walls alone would add more than 90 square feet to the apartment's area.

While sponsors and developers generally disclose the method used to calculate the square footage of a condominium apartment, the result often produces confusion. "First of all, it creates a bit of a distortion because you're including common elements in the measurement of the apartment," Mr. Schein said. And second, he said, because the method used has changed over the years, comparing condominium apartments in different buildings may not necessarily be comparing apples with apples. And the distortion can be even greater with larger apartments.

Mr. Peters, the realtor, said that in some cases when he has taken his own measurements of "full floor" condominiums — and some condos in buildings where there are just a few apartments on a floor — his result is significantly different from the one specified by the developer.

"When I've done square footage calculations on my own, my number comes up being about 80 percent of what the developer came up with," he said. "And the only way I can get up to the developer's number is by adding in some part of the corridors or stairwells."

Similar confusion about measurement also occurs with houses. "Sellers naturally want to make their properties seem as big as possible," said Peter Bell, a broker with Balch Buyers Realty in Mamaroneck. "And not many buyers will actually take out a tape measure and check the seller's measurements." Confusion also arises when buyers are trying to compare the square footage of different style houses. For example, he said, when measuring a typical colonial home, an appraiser would generally take measurements around the exterior of the house for each floor that is above grade. So, for example, the measurement of a two-story colonial with a basement and an attic would generally include only the square footage of the first and second floor. And while a finished attic that is used as living space might be included in the square footage calculation, a finished basement typically would not. Things get more dicey when the house being measured is a raised ranch or a bilevel. With such houses, Mr. Bell said, the basement is often partially above grade. As a result, some sellers and listing agents will include the basement in the total square footage calculations. "What that means is that when you're trying to compare a raised ranch or bilevel to a colonial, you may be comparing apples to oranges," he said. Gil Neary, president of DG Neary Realty in Manhattan, said that when the size of a house or apartment is an issue — as it often is in New York — he generally encourages clients to take measurements of their own.

"Square footage is one of the most misrepresented numbers in real estate," Mr. Neary said. "It almost seems as though everybody uses a different sized ruler."

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