

MANSION GLOBAL

Cut the Small Talk. Rich New Yorkers Are Ditching Their Doormen.

In search of living with fewer neighbors and more privacy, some of the city's high-end buyers are forgoing what's long thought to be a staple of luxury apartment living



Though doormen are still mainstays outside Ne...
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Some wealthy New Yorkers have waved farewell to their doorman for the last time.

As the keepers of some of New York City's most upscale buildings, doormen are often equated with luxury living—whether it's opening doors, accepting packages or monitoring who's coming and going, they provide a service that, to some home buyers, is irreplaceable. But for others, living in a doorman building isn't the ultimate luxury that it once was.

"It was a status symbol—it used to be cool, but now it's not," said Frances Katzen, a New York-based broker and founder of the Katzen Team at Douglas Elliman. "The days of the full-service game have changed. Nobody wants the running circus, they want the quality and privacy that they need in such an intense city."

Katzen said she's seen a noticeable uptick in buyers seeking out smaller, boutique condo buildings and townhouses since the pandemic, which affected "the capacity for wanting to deal with people," she said. And typically, these types of buildings don't come with a doorman, as it often makes fees too high when the associated costs of having a doorman are split among fewer residents.

"There's a whole group of people now who want to get away from paying that kind of fee, that Christmas hit," Katzen said, referencing the tips residents are expected to gift their building's staff around the holidays. A StreetEasy guide suggests tipping doormen in New York at least \$100 at the end of the year.

Still, doormen stand at the entrances or sit at the lobby desks of thousands of buildings. They're a mainstay outside the supertall high-rises of Billionaires' Row in Midtown and at the many historic co-ops of uptown Manhattan.

Some who've made the switch to a non-dorman building are realizing it's a luxury that they can live without, thanks to high-tech virtual doormen and other security systems. Some even prefer it.

[Juliet Clapp](#), senior vice president and North East managing partner at the Agency, used to live in a doorman building, but during her last move, she opted for an apartment in a townhouse with a small number of units. She likes that now she can come and go, whether

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at the end of a long workday or during a quick coffee run, without having to engage in small talk with a doorman—or a plethora of neighbors, since she has so few.

“Sometimes you just want quietness,” she said.

When one of Katzen’s clients, Bernard de la Tour, moved to New York from South America in 2003, he rented in a doorman building because thought that was “the norm.”

“If you’ve never lived in New York before, you don’t know what you don’t know, so you just go with the flow and what you see,” he said.

Five years later, de la Tour moved into another rental with a doorman, and after a decade of living in New York, he decided it was time to buy his own place. He analyzed what types of services and amenities drove up the prices of apartments and found the extra cost for a full-time doorman was not something he was willing to pay. Plus, like Clapp, he was tired of the small talk that felt required anytime he left the building or arrived home and wanted a greater sense of privacy.

“Every time I got home or leave, you have to say hi or goodbye to someone, or someone’s telling you a story,” said de la Tour, who has a business designing smart-home systems. “I just want to walk out and leave.”

He said he’s found the adjustment to his boutique condo building in Chelsea pretty seamless, aided by a superintendent, who oversees several buildings on the block and is present during business hours and can assist with package deliveries—often one of the main reasons New Yorkers opt for a doorman.

Though, as a single man, De la Tour acknowledged a doorman might feel more like a necessity to other types of buyers, like a family or a woman living alone.

“If they have a baby in a stroller, or they’re a young single woman—the demographic dictates what your preferences are,” he said.

De la Tour’s main worry about living without a doorman—which hasn’t come to pass—is that there

wouldn’t be someone present to immediately handle an emergency, like a leak, within his apartment if he’s away when the super isn’t around. And with no one monitoring the front entrance, there’s no way of truly knowing if there’s someone in the building who shouldn’t be, he said.

Security and the risk of stolen packages are the biggest concerns about non-dorman living.

As a developer of boutique buildings in Manhattan and Brooklyn, Reuben Pinner, principal and co-founder of New York-based construction company Prime Builders, knows it’s often too expensive for the residents who seek out these smaller condos to have a full-time doorman, so he feels he’s found a solution to these concerns.

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“With a virtual doorman and a package room, you’re really getting what you want from your doorman,” he said. “It’s nice to have the doormen for the safety reasons, but besides that, it’s really for your packages and deliveries.”

The virtual doorman systems employed at Pinner’s buildings go a step further than the typical intercom system by having a live person monitoring the entrance from a remote location. They can see, and even speak to, anyone who buzzes into the front door, and then the virtual doorman can contact the resident to ask if they should be let in.

“I live in a virtual-doorman building, and I love it,” Pinner said.

Prime Builders is currently developing a boutique condo building in Manhattan that will offer a part-time doorman. It hasn’t yet been decided exactly how many hours the doorman will be present, but the part-time doorman allows home buyers to have that luxury without paying for it 24 hours a day.

For some of the most high-profile residents of New York, like A-list musicians and C-suite executives at major companies, security is the very reason they opted to live without a doorman.

“For the ultra-high-net-worth people who have some sort of visibility, where just being openly noticed and having individuals see them every day and know where they live and have access to their properties is a

security concern or is perceived as one,” said Ravi Kantha, a real estate broker and founder of the Kantha Team at Serhant. “It’s not as if this crowd has just sworn off doorman living, but they’re much more cognizant of the exposure they’re getting on a day-to-day basis.”

While Clapp admits she misses some sense of community, like sharing extra food she cooked with her doorman, “the privacy outweighs that,” she said.

“I have fewer neighbors. I have a really cool French elevator with a gate, so I like the architecture here, it’s like stepping back in time,” she added. “For me, it feels more homey.”