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Real Estate

Penthouses still suggest a certain amount of luxury, but the definition has been changing

View from the top

By James McCown
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

It's the kind of setting where Cary Grant might woo Deborah Kerr over a starlit dinner: a rooftop terrace with the skyline of the Back Bay twinkling in the distance. Through the wide glass doors is a duplex apartment of expansive, light-filled rooms and sumptuous details.

Perhaps no other real estate so evokes the cosmopolitan set as the penthouse apartment, such as this one on Commonwealth Avenue, listed for nearly \$4 million.

But now the term is so widely used that it is applied to virtually any apartment in the upper reaches of a building — even to relatively humble dwellings selling for less than \$300,000. Some brokers insist that the concept needs a sharper definition, so as not to lose its luster.

"A penthouse is the absolutely highest floor with some kind of outdoor space, a terrace or a balcony," said Tracy Campion, senior vice president of R.M. Bradley & Co. in the Back Bay, which is listing the Commonwealth Avenue property. "It's important that you have no one above you."

Yet buyers of any of the penthouse units on floors 11 through 13 at Folio Boston on Broad Street would indeed have someone liv-



The roof deck at 309-311 Emerson St. in South Boston offers a panoramic view of the downtown skyline.

PATRICIA MCDONNELL/FOR THE BOSTON GL

Developers redefining the penthouse

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ing above them. The new 14-story building, wrapped around a historic Charles Bulfinch structure, is aiming to turn a formerly all-business block in the Financial District into a hip urban neighborhood.

Stephanie Wilkinson of the Collaborative Companies, one of the developers, said floors 11 through 14 are "designated as penthouse floors," where units will range in price from \$1 million to \$1.85 million.

In keeping with the trend of the democratization of the penthouse, the building is conceived as "entry-level luxury," Wilkinson said. The penthouse-level apartments will have higher-grade finishes, although because of the building's step-back design, only selected ones will have terraces.

Some dictionaries tilt toward Wilkinson's interpretation, defining a penthouse as a residence on the "top floor or floors." Purists won't hear anything of it.

"Just putting 'PH' on an elevator button doesn't make a penthouse," said James Sanders, a New York-based architect and urban historian. "There's a devaluation of the language." Unless they're duplexes, he said, "More than one penthouse floor is a contradiction in terms."

Still, the term penthouse has been radically redefined within the real estate world during the last century. It was originally a utilitarian structure for mechanical equipment, either on top of or leaning against a building.

It all changed in the 1920s.

"It represented a real social transformation," said Sanders, who wrote "Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies."

"The convenience of elevators and a real estate boom coaxed the rich from their somber, formal town houses into these light-filled spaces that sat in the clouds. The penthouse was progressive, outward-looking, urbane."

Latter-day Cary Grants such as Ben Affleck or Matt Damon may be able to afford lavish, Hollywood-style aeries, but in Boston far more modest digs are being marketed with the penthouse moniker.

For example, a 705-square-foot unit on the top floor of the old Eaton Hotel on Emerson Street in South Boston is listed for \$289,000. It has spectacular Boston Harbor views and a roof deck directly above that offers stunning panoramas, said listing agent Patrick Lynch of Gibson Domain|Domain.

By the mid-20th century, a penthouse denoted a separate structure with room layouts and ceiling heights distinct from the rest of the structure. This idea has been given a modern interpretation at Lafayette Lofts at 88 Kingston St. in downtown Boston, where an old textile building has been topped off by three floors of glassy modernist space, with the top two floors being marketed as duplex penthouses.

"There was a lot of freedom in designing the upper portions," said David Hacin of Hacin + Associates the building's renovation and expansion architect. "We weren't constrained by the punched-out windows of lower floors. We used a lot of glass to bring in light. On the exterior, we used a metallic cladding and a modern expression for contrast with the older masonry."

Among the four units that are still for sale is the southernmost penthouse unit, listed at \$1.395 million, which has a commanding eagle's perch: a large terrace overlooking the Chinatown portion of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway.

At the other extreme is the Commonwealth Avenue penthouse, just a short walk from the Public Garden. Unapologetically traditional, it boasts a working fireplace, mahogany millwork, marble floors, and custom hidden cabinets that open with a touch of a paneled wall. Oversize living room windows facing south open to the terrace. The building's ornate original entry hall staircase, made obsolete by an elevator, connects the floors of the duplex.

Yet like the word itself, this penthouse space has undergone a transformation.

"When the building was built in the 1870s, this was the space for the poor Irish maid," said Campion, the R.M. Bradley broker. "The ceilings were really low. But they completely gutted the building and played with the ceiling heights. Now you have the expansive spaces that people in this price range demand."

The iconic commercial building at 360 Newbury St. that towers over Mass. Ave is being remade to include residential condos. Curtis Kemeny, president of Boston Residential Group, said the building will include 10 duplex penthouses, priced from \$1 million to \$3 million, tucked beneath the roof canopy, part of Frank Gehry and Schwartz/Silver Architects's mid-'80s refurbishment of the building.

"When you're at the top of the building," Kemeny said, "you feel like you're on top of the world."