

Intricate models are small but powerful sales tools

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Once little more than paper props, models of proposed buildings or entire developments have evolved into elaborate and painstakingly realistic representations used to help sell properties.

International real estate firm Hines commissioned a lighted,

A handful of companies specialize in creating the models, and most of the Florida companies are clustered around Miami and Orlando, development officials said.

Mel Ako, owner of Melvin Denny Ako Inc. in Newport Beach, Calif., has worked for 30 years producing upscale models for real estate and architectural projects worldwide, such as the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas. His company recently finished a model of a 40,000-square-foot home. It also created a model for San Sebastian Harbor, a major mixed-use project in St. Augustine.

Models must be built to travel around the world for use in multiple presentations, Ako said.

"It crosses communication and language barriers," he said. "If a picture is worth a thousand words, what is a model worth?"

At one time, these reproductions were cut by hand from paper. Today, they're crafted in various materials such as Plexiglas, plastic and foam using computer-assisted design and laser cutting. Pieces are glued firmly,

6-foot-tall model of The St. John, a proposed luxury condominium building that would be the tallest in Northeast Florida. The model includes minute details, including people.

"When people come in the sales center, they're captivated by this 6-foot-tall architectural sculpture," Hines Vice President Walt O'Shea said.

A 6-foot-by-6-foot model of Downtown Jacksonville, also commissioned by Hines, shows potential buyers where they would live in relation to other buildings and gives an idea of how views of the St. Johns River would look from various units.

Ako said a team of eight to 10 people works on a model, making it as detailed and realistic as possible. The company can light up a building or street lamps and add water features. "It's a very artistic approach that we take," Ako said.

Scheiner noted many models become office fixtures kept in Plexiglas cases — a piece of art as well as a sales tool.

Demand is growing, with some models so elaborate they cost six figures.

"The uses expanded from just showing [them to] a client to going into sales and marketing offices, to shows and to museum pieces," Ako

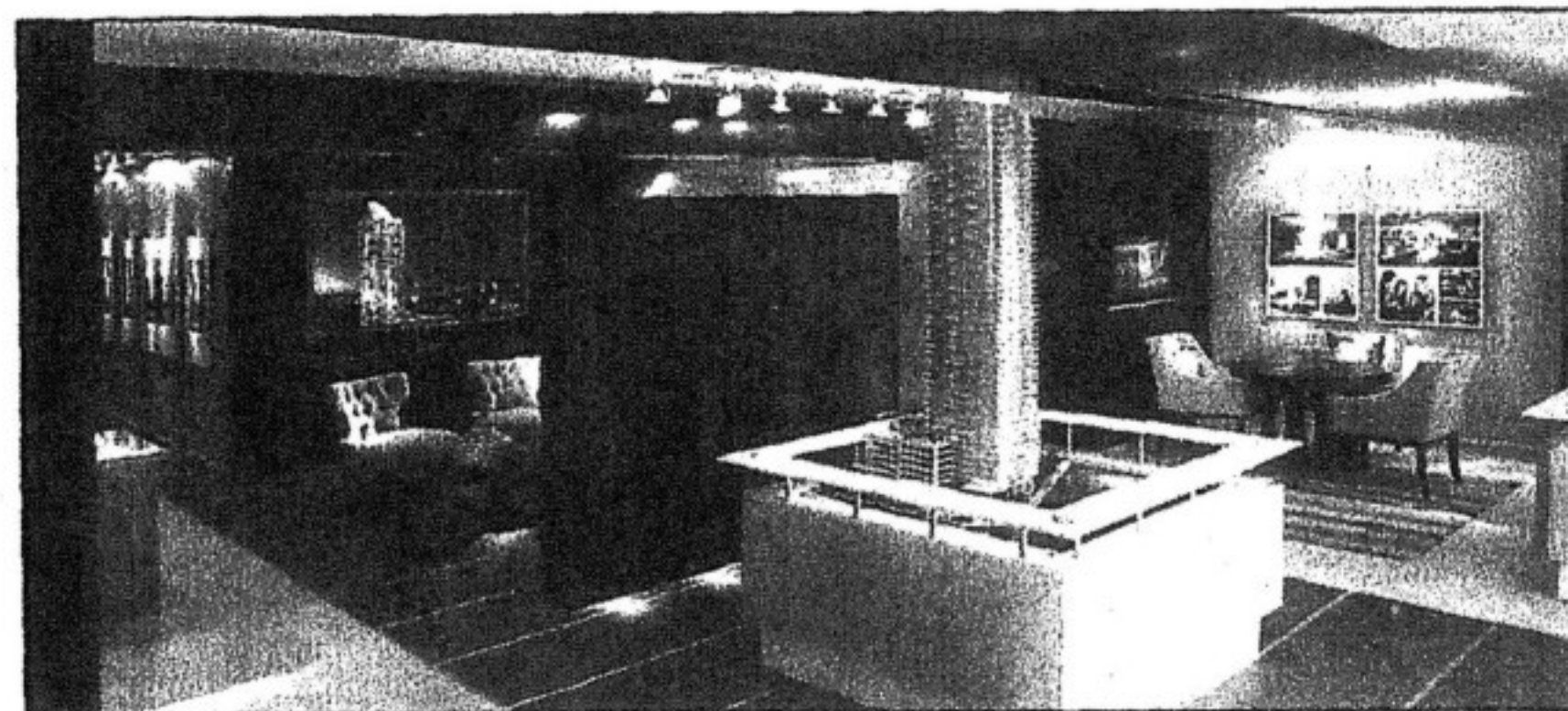
said.

Mike Sullivan, principal with the Jacksonville office of Looney Ricks Kiss Architects Inc., said his company makes models for its use during design, but studios handle the final creations, which can feature flowing water and working lights, used in sales centers.

There's something about being able to touch a physical representation that helps people visualize the finished project, Sullivan and others said.

"It was an important part of the message we wanted to communicate, that this was truly a unique location," O'Shea said about Hines' Downtown model. "It's better than a photograph."

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Hines Vice President Walt O'Shea said people are captivated by the 6-foot tall scale model of The St. John, a proposed luxury condominium building in Downtown Jacksonville.

"People want to see something tangible, and you can't put everybody in a helicopter to look at the property," said Jim Doyle, vice president of sales and marketing for LandMar Group LLC, which is developing the Shipyards in Downtown Jacksonville. The model of the Shipyards lends a dynamic quality to the sales presentation.

Models can be devised to help create a mood a project wants to convey. LandMar commissioned a model of another project in Florida to be set into a large table in the model home's kitchen. The setting helps create a warm atmosphere in which to study the model.

When developer Toney Sleiman wanted Jacksonville residents to understand his vision for The Jacksonville Landing, he commissioned a large model that held a prominent place in the Downtown Jacksonville entertainment and shopping complex until it recently was retired to a storage room.

Computer technology now makes it simple, quick and cheap to create a landscape that includes a proposed building, Sleiman said.

"Now, all you've got to do is take a photograph and superimpose it on another," Sleiman said.

Technology also has made it easier to create three-dimensional computer models.

Yet many people in design, development and sales believe people still warm most to a physical representation.

"Unless I see it, I have a tough time visualizing it," said Wayne Scheiner, senior vice president for Trident Realty Corp., developer of The Waverly at Deerwood Commons.

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