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Miami condo baron building on a dare

Sunday, September 27, 2009

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The Record

MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

MIAMI — So you want to buy a Miami condo but are afraid prices will keep falling? Or, maybe you're worried about losing your job or have heard those stories about how hard it is to land a condo loan.

Veteran Miami developer Tibor Hollo is offering at least one salve for would-be buyer anxiety: A no-income, no-assets, no-questions-asked loan for 75 percent of a unit's value, plus a money-back guarantee.

If potential buyers no longer want the condo in three years, he'll release them from their mortgages and refund their down payments. For investors, he'll take it up a notch — leasing a unit back, managing it and covering all carrying costs, while guaranteeing a 3 percent return on investment.

The fine print: Only units in Hollo's Opera Tower near Miami's performing arts center qualify for the interest-only loans, which come due in five years. He's also not budging on unit prices, which average out to just under \$400,000.

Hollo's as-yet-untested solution is the latest strategy to be employed by a developer stuck with unsold condos. Hollo, president and chairman of Florida East Coast Realty, still holds about 398 units in Opera, a 56-story elliptical-shaped tower at 1750 N. Bayshore Drive. Most of them are currently rented.

Hollo's strategy also represents the relative strength of his financial position in an environment where lenders and developers are being felled by losses.

Hollo, 81, one of Miami's most influential developers, is responsible for creating and, at some point, owning some of the city's most notable residential and retail properties. Among them: the Venetia/The Grand and Plaza Venetia in the Omni area.

During his 60-year ride through nine cycles of South Florida's turbulent real estate market, including the last major condo crash of the 1980s, Hollo says he has honed a sixth sense for impending disaster.

That sense may have been sharpened by his own brush with foreclosures in the late 1980s and helped him sidestep the worst of the current downturn. In fact, he appears to be thriving.

"I kind of felt [the market crash] ahead of time, and in 2007 I scuttled certain projects because I felt we were going into another slide, an excessive marketplace," Hollo said.

Some of his recent accomplishments: topping off a six-story rental town-home community, Villa Majorca, in Coral Gables earlier this month and celebrating the grand opening of 2020 Ponce, an office tower also in the Gables. Initial closings are scheduled, according to his company. It also said a company has signed a letter of intent to lease the penthouse.

Earlier this year, Hollo announced a new partnership with hotelier Sonesta Collection for a 252-room hotel with additional office space near the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts. It would be called Sonesta Mikado.

To the amazement of industry watchers, Hollo also acquired a two-tower office complex in Miami's financial district, in a \$33 million cash transaction last July. The price was almost half what the previous owner paid in 2005.

The Hungarian-born Hollo, who was educated as an architect in France and is known for his academic style and impeccable manners, said the health of his 55-year-old company is, in part, his reward for the restraint he showed during the boom years.

His business model: Build one thing at a time and borrow no more than 40 percent of a project's cost. That way, if things turn south, the debt can be serviced by renting out the buildings. The strategy has served him well at Opera Tower, where he recently got an extension and increase on a \$37 million inventory loan to finish building out and to furnish some units so they could be used as rentals.