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POSTING

Dial C for Condos

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CELLPHONES have been blamed for all sorts of transgressions: the disappearance of phone booths, the decline of civility in restaurants and movie theaters, even for being potential carcinogens.

But there is at least one point in their favor: they have helped increase the supply of real estate in New York City. As the communications world has gone wireless, Verizon has been selling some of its monolithic “central offices,” once needed to house copper wire for land-line calls but now mostly obsolete. Among the new uses have been business offices, medical research labs and even high-school sports complexes.

One of those Verizon buildings, a 1929 tan-brick Art Deco high-rise at 212 West 18th Street in Chelsea, is being converted into luxury condominiums. The 53-unit project is called Walker Tower for its architect, Ralph Walker, who also designed several other phone company buildings.

The \$200 million project is a venture of JDS Development and the Property Markets Group. The developers say they are sparing no expense in the furnishings and finishes. The 12- to 15-foot-high ceilings will be coffered. Radiant heat will course through French-oak heringbone floors. Washing machines and dryers won't be stacked, as in many buildings, but will sit side by side, in individual laundry rooms.

“It's such a rare perfect storm in New York to have an asset like this, so we're not going to denigrate it,” said Michael Stern, the managing partner at JDS, on a tour of what will become a three-bedroom with a home office.

Prices were set in the condo's offering plan, which was approved last year, but because the residential market has heated up since, the developers are seeking to raise them by 10 percent in an amended plan, he said. When the



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Michael Stern, left, a developer, and Shaun Osher of the Core Group NYC at a Verizon building in Chelsea that is being converted into 53 luxury condos.

sales office opens this spring, condos are likely to cost about \$3,000 a square foot — double the going rate in the neighborhood, brokers say — and as much as \$10,000 a foot for the eight penthouses, said Shaun Osher, the founder of the Core Group NYC, which is handling sales. With an average size of 3,000 square feet, a typical unit might cost \$9 million.

In some ways, Walker Tower's most impressive feat might be even getting built at all. Mr. Stern, who first toured it on Sept. 15, 2008, when Lehman Brothers collapsed, taking down much of the economy with it, had to get permission to take it over from the state's Public Service Commission, because it housed a telecommunications company.

That extra layer of approval meant that it took a relatively long time to close the deal, Mr. Stern said. Further, Verizon didn't want to concede the whole building, so it was divided into two condominiums.

Verizon owns Floors 2 through 7, which contain offices for about a dozen employees who will come to work

through a West 17th Street entryway. Mr. Stern owns the condo that encompasses Floors 8 through 23.

Other major changes included lowering the parapet wall on the tower's many wedding-cake-type setbacks, to one foot from four feet, to improve views from terraces. Similarly, windows were lengthened to 10 feet, from 5, and cut into the eastern wall where none existed before, developers said.

Some elevator shafts in the building, which is supposed to be ready for occupancy in spring 2013, were also removed to gain residential space.

If the project has been difficult, the developers don't seem deterred. In fact, the same team recently started interior demolition on another Walker-designed telephone building it owns, at 435 West 50th Street, which is also envisioned as a condo conversion.

In both, thick walls and floors that were strong enough for crackling switchboards have proved ideal for residential uses, said Mr. Stern, who added, “There are no more solid buildings than these.”