

Art to adorn downtown Orlando high-rise's garage



CitiTower developers to install 60-foot art panels on parking garage



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Orlando Sentinel

MARCH 5, 2018, 3:45 PM | ORLANDO

The parking garage at downtown Orlando's newest apartment high-rise is about to be embellished with 60-foot-tall art panels costing as much as two mid-priced Orlando houses.

Developers have spent \$500,000 for the garage-wall works by Venezuelan artist Israel Guevara because of a city requirement that downtown projects have artwork. This week, streets are scheduled to be blocked as cranes install the metal mesh panels onto the garage of CitiTower.

osts in a tower where studios lease for about Lake Eola go for more than \$4,000.

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South Florida architect/designer Marlene Weiss helped develop CitiTower with her husband, architect Albert Socol. She said Orlando is somewhat unusual in requiring public art on garages, a rule strengthened as recently as last year with calls for longer-lasting materials.

In addition to requiring art on downtown parking garages, Orlando's Appearance Review Board insists on artworks by credentialed artists for any downtown projects that push the limits on density, which includes most developments.

"We never got hit with anything like this," said Weiss, adding that the city's garage-art requirement did not dictate price or costs. "We did the largest office building in Naples for Fifth Third Bank, and they have no requirements for art."

Downtown is special, said Orlando Urban Planner Douglas Metzger, who coordinates the city's Appearance Review Board. He applauded the CitiTower developers for raising the standards of public art in the core of Orlando.

"There is the expectation that when you develop in downtown that it will have higher standards and complement the surrounding community and neighborhoods," he said. "We are picky about our parking garages."

For the CitiTower garage, NW Sign Industries fabricated the perforated metal panels with 11 applications of a type of paint engineered to withstand Florida's sunlight, humidity and wind, according to Miami's Virginia Miller Galleries, which represents Guevara.

Bold geometric patterns of blues, yellows and blacks fill the panels. In front of the apartment building is a 4-foot-tall sculpture of a blue man walking his blue dog. The lobby has art reflective of the garage panels, and the elevator lobby at each resident's floor features art of Frank Lloyd Wright's Florida Southern campus.

Integrating art throughout the project added costs that have to be passed along, but raising rents in Orlando has proved challenging because the market is generally more affordable than in some other Florida metro areas, Weiss said.

Standing outside the Wine and Corks shop that faces CitiTower, store general manager Raymond Ramos said his wife opened the business more than a year ago in hopes that CitiTower would fill quickly with millennials and other professionals patronizing the shop. That has not happened in the six months that the project has been open. Ramos, a Rollins College business doctoral student, blamed high rents.

"The rent is too high for this community. I could buy a house for that," Ramos added. "Right now they're out of touch."

Orlando is the nation's 30th-priciest rental market, with midpoint rents of \$1,320 for a two-bedroom unit, a price that has grown 15 percent during the past year, according to apartment analytics site Zumper. Another group, Rentonomics, reported Metro Orlando rents rose about 7 percent during the year.

By either measure, Central Florida's wages rose at less than half the rate of spiking rents.

Jill Rose, vice president with BishopBeale commercial real estate group, said Orlando's efforts to drive the aesthetics of downtown are admirable, but it is important to note that the developers are forced to pay a price that gets passed along to renters.

"If they knew about it beforehand, they typically try to pass that cost through to the end user, whether it's an apartment resident paying a little bit more for their apartment or a retail tenant paying a little bit more per square foot for their space," she said.

Weiss said about half of the CitiTower apartments are leased.

Orlando rents are lower than those in Tampa and Miami, she said, making it challenging for developers to recoup their investment.

But, she added, her husband is "dead set" on doing another project in Orlando because of the vibrancy and dynamics of the city.

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