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Why Some Say 'No Thanks' to a Doorman

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

NEW YORK is in the midst of an epidemic of new buildings that promise to deliver every service known to man, woman, child or pet. Central to all of that, of course, is a doorman.

But to some people, the presence of a doorman is seen as a negative, not a benefit. Yes, a doorman can put the newspaper outside your door, walk your dog when you're sick, make you feel important, keep an eye on your children (or your babysitter) and haul your shopping bags to the curb. But he is also privy to some of the most intimate details — and moments — of your life.

"Doormen know everything," said Stephen C. Brandman, 42, the chief operating officer of Thompson Hotels, a luxury boutique hotel chain. Until recently, he lived in a doorman building on Park Avenue, and he lived full- and part-time in his hotels that had doormen before and after his marriage.

"The challenge becomes when you have overnight guests; sometimes the doormen share their thoughts about that," said Mr. Brandman, referring to unsolicited remarks garnered during his bachelor life. "Sometimes they wanted to know why ex-girlfriends had come back into the picture, so there would be running commentary."

Even while married and living on Park Avenue, he chafed at the extra sets of eyeballs.

Returning from the gym, "I would be drenched and I didn't want to see a soul," he recalled. "I didn't want to face the doorman and elevator operator. When you're not at your best, that's the time you wish you could just sneak in and disappear."

No one understands this better than a doorman. In fact, most doormen would apparently rather live without a doorman even if they could afford it, according to Peter Bearman, a [Columbia University](#) sociology professor and author of "Doormen" (University of Chicago Press, 2005), a study of the profession. They perceive the insular, elitist boundaries created by their presence as unnatural, Professor Bearman said in an e-mail message, and they are loath to jeopardize their privacy.

"Doormen know how much they know about tenants and would prefer not to have someone know that about them," he said.

To doorman detractors, deliveries are a doorman's sole raison d'être.

"The biggest utility of having a doorman is that there's someone to accept the packages," said Andrew Rosenblatt, 33, a bankruptcy lawyer at Chadbourne & Park. Several years ago, he and his wife, Courtney, left a full-service theater district high-rise for a nondoorman co-op on the Upper West Side, with a live-in superintendent to handle most deliveries.

He much preferred the new arrangement. "We just felt like they really didn't do anything for us," Mr. Rosenblatt

said of the doormen. "If anything, you sort of feel obligated to engage in idle chitchat. And the whole tipping thing presents another moment of tension. Our doormen weren't too helpful, but if you were carrying a bag you wanted to take yourself, and they'd come and take it, did you tip them?"

Holiday tipping is an exacerbated exercise in misery for those already ambivalent about their doorman. And for others, the need to make conversation is so annoying that it alone is enough to drive them into nondoorman buildings.

"I had one young guy who moved from a fancy condo doorman building in California where he had a very cheery doorman," said Hy Rosen, a senior vice president at Bellmarc Realty. "He wanted a building without a doorman, and his biggest reason seemed to be he didn't want to have to say hello to someone twice a day."

Michele Golden, another broker for Bellmarc, lived in two luxury buildings before buying a Chelsea loft that came with just a full-time superintendent. She doesn't miss the constant socializing, which she found cloying. "It's like a really good restaurant — the lower key the service, the more I like it," she said. "When they're fawning all over me, I'm not enjoying that. I don't want service to be intrusive in my life."

According to the conventional wisdom, doormen make buildings safer. Many people believe that to go without is practically an invitation to being menaced — or even dispatched — on one's very doorstep. And isn't it a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman would sooner give up her colorist than her doorman?

Sort of, said Edward Herson, a vice president at Halstead Property. "If they come in from out of town, from anywhere west of the Hudson River, they definitely want a doorman," he said. But once they live here for a while, "if they are price conscious they want to give it up, because they feel safer in the city."

In fact, "Doormen" reports that while doormen and residents emphatically cite security as a major benefit, few could recall any security incidents at their buildings. (Of course, as the book points out, it is possible that the mere presence of a doorman deters miscreants before trouble breaks out.)

Able defenders or not, doormen add as much as 10 to 15 percent to the value of an apartment, according to Miller Samuel, a [Manhattan](#) appraisal firm. But the annual cost — around \$80,000 per doorman (\$37,315 in salary, plus overtime, benefits, training and other expenses), according to the Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ — can put a disproportionate burden on smaller buildings, which have fewer units to share the expense.

Last year, after his divorce, Mr. Brandman moved into a new six-unit condominium building in Chelsea, which he found with the help of Anna Shagalov, an associate broker at Halstead. The modestly sized building's original plans called for a doorman. But with only five other owners to share the cost, Mr. Brandman and his new neighbors decided to do without. They put in a security system, and arranged for a neighboring business to accept deliveries. His only regret now, he said, is having to be home for Fresh Direct.

No one is saying that the doorman's day is done, and certainly not developers of larger-scale properties, for whom luxury and doormen go together like glass and steel. But some smaller developers are sensing a happy convergence of technology with a shift in the doorman zeitgeist.

Mick Walsdorf, a principal of the Manhattan-based design and development firm Flank, said that he and his

partner conducted a "dinner party survey" before hiring [Virtualservice.net](#) to install a virtual doorman system in Novare, an eight-unit condo conversion of a church near Washington Square Park.

"Everybody was just kind of ready to pass on the doorman concept," Mr. Walsdorf said. "If you consider all the intrusions into your personal life these days, whether at work or in the city in general, you start to understand why people feel like they may not necessarily want to talk to somebody every time they come into the building. In a smaller building like ours, it's a no-brainer."

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