

Doors open – for the real estate elite

Elise Kalles takes busloads of international agents on a road show of Toronto's toniest properties

By CAROLYN IRELAND

The residents of Toronto's most prestigious enclaves are used to seeing real estate agents popping up on their tree-lined streets. They're less accustomed to seeing busloads of agents arriving from around the globe.

On a recent warm fall day, three luxury coaches rolled through the streets of Rosedale, Forest Hill and Moore Park. The agents on board were in town for an international real estate confab and Elise Kalles was keen to usher the visitors through three of her most desirable listings.

There was a small glitch when the first bus couldn't make it down Rosedale's Highland Avenue because so many contractors and landscaping firms had parked their vans on the winding road.

But the agents from New York, Mexico, Europe and Asia were in high spirits as they poured off the bus and set off on foot. Ms. Kalles' driver cruised slowly alongside in case anyone sought respite in her air-conditioned car. There were no takers: the international agents were happy for the short walk past some of the city's most high-priced real estate.

At No. 10, Ms. Kalles was waiting in the two-storey grand entry hall. After 40 years in the business, she is equal parts hostess, tour guide and saleswoman.

"I'm serving at all three," she says of the tour. There would be petits fours in Rosedale, champagne cocktails in Forest Hill and canapes in Moore Park.



Elise Kalles, who used to design maternity wear, says she resisted for years as her husband urged her to obtain a license to sell real estate.
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One of the focal points of the conference was the presentation of a "lifetime achievement award" to Ms. Kalles and her husband, who founded Harvey Kalles Real Estate Ltd. in 1957. Ms. Kalles, the uber saleswoman, saw a marketing opportunity. She pressed the owners of three high-priced properties to open their doors ("and some of them were very hard to persuade" she stresses), then enlisted teams of Harvey Kalles colleagues to spread throughout the multiple levels in each house.

Arriving at 10 Highland Ave., the visitors left their Prada shoes at the entranceway and swathed their feet in paper booties so as not to leave a mark on the marble and oak floors. A popular game was trying to guess the asking price for six bedrooms and 11 bathrooms in 17,000 square feet.

A couple of American agents settled on \$16-million. That turns out to be a fairly good estimate in U.S. currency – the asking price in Canadian dollars is \$22-million.

Current owners Robert and Cheryl McEwen have lived for more than 10 years in the mansion built by Joe Brennan of J F Brennan Design Build Inc. in the 1990s. While the palatial home offers such amenities as a 10-car underground garage and a yew-paneled library, Ms. Kalles stresses how comfortable and family-friendly it is.

"It feels like a family house that's used."

There's a separate in-laws' apartment with a private entrance. Upstairs, the master suite overlooks the extensive gardens with pools and a fountain.

During a walk through the lower level, Ms. Kalles points out the billiards area and wine cellar with tasting room.

"Doesn't it remind you of a private club in London, England?"

Leaving Highland Avenue for the drive to her second open house, Ms. Kalles explains that the buyers of the Rosedale home will likely have children of their own. They could well be foreign buyers.

"Today, money is liquid," she says.

Overseas investors often want a family home but that doesn't mean they're not also interested in making a good investment.

"For buyers from China, the main thing is that their child is going to the right private school," she explains.

Arriving to the zinc-and-glass entrance canopy at 46 Forest Hill Rd., Ms. Kalles ensures everything is in place to showcase the six-bedroom home of Frank Toskan, co-founder of M.A.C. Cosmetics. Uniformed servers offer cocktails but ask guests to kindly remain in the large modern kitchen while they're sipping their Mimosas.

Looking out the windows in the great room, Zahra Joudi, an agent with the New York brokerage Compass, is gazing at the swaying trees, swimming pool and cabana. Ms. Joudi, who often trades

properties on the tony Upper East Side, says such an expanse of land might come with a house on Long Island or in New Jersey, but never Manhattan.

The asking price of \$16.8-million seems reasonable, in her opinion. She's amazed that it's a short drive to the downtown core. "Imagine being 15 minutes from midtown and being able to live in a place like this."

The 17,000-square-foot home is co-listed with Eileen Farrow of Chestnut Park Real Estate Ltd., who chats in the dining room with Ms. Kalles about her early years in the business. As agents flow through, many stop to examine the colourful Venetian figures on backpainted crystal reclaimed from a decommissioned Italian passenger ship.

Ms. Kalles says she resisted for years as her husband urged her to obtain a license to sell real estate. She was an entrepreneur in her own right with a business designing maternity wear for socialites. "I absolutely loved it," she says, because she could be home with her three young children.

When the kids were in school full-time, she began selling houses to some of the same ladies who visited her design salon. Her first property sold for \$88,000.

The family was living near Bayview and York Mills at the time and Ms. Kalles began signing up listings on the surrounding streets of Danville Drive, Chieftain Crescent and Heathcote Avenue. "That was my farm area."

Ms. Kalles has now been in the business for 40 years. She often represents the richest listings in the Bridle Path, Forest Hill, Rosedale and Yorkville. Among independent brokerages, Harvey Kalles Real Estate is ranked first in the Greater Toronto Area for dollar value and number of properties sold through the Multiple Listing Service of the Canadian Real Estate Association.

Two of her three children have joined the family business and now a grandson is studying for his license.

The visitors to the Forest Hill house are taken with the dramatic staircase lined in leather. An American agent with a heavy southern drawl says the modern decor "is not my cup of tea."

"But every house has a buyer," she continues. "Someone will find this exactly right."

Ms. Kalles says her good-byes and slips into the back of the car. On the drive to Moore Park, she is negotiating by phone with an agent representing buyers for one of her listings. They were on the verge of signing a deal when they suddenly began to waver. Ms. Kalles is sure they will go through with the purchase if they see the house one more time. While she waits for a call back from the seller, she arrives at 120 Inglewood Dr. for her third open house of the day.



The living room at 120 Inglewood Dr. has a vaulted ceiling that rises 18-feet high.
THE PRINT MARKET

The house with an asking price of \$14.8-million is described as a "landmark stone mansion" with the grace of a bygone era. Set on 2.4 acres, the house backs onto a ravine.

"Isn't this magnificent?" Ms. Kalles says, leading visitors into the grand living room with a vaulted and beamed ceiling 18-feet high. "This is the reason I never get tired of it," she says of her decades in the business.

Another reason, she says, is the relationships she has formed. She keeps in touch with clients and goes on to sell to their children and grandchildren.

At the real estate conference, Ms. Kalles participated in a round table with other high-powered agents. Each speaker was asked to describe their "magic bullet" for success. Some pointed to their use of social media, but she has never taken to Facebook or Twitter. She was taken aback when she had a small group over to her home for dinner and an agent from Miami posted a photo of her dining room table on Instagram. "I'm so private," Ms. Kalles gasps.

She says she has only one secret weapon, and that's her ability to form relationships. Many agents go to an interview armed with all of their statistics and marketing materials in order to impress the homeowner with their success, she says. Ms. Kalles doesn't spend much time selling herself. Less successful agents often don't spend enough time listening, in her opinion.

"They don't take the time to find out what the client is looking for."

As she winds up her tour and says good-bye to the departing agents, she's preparing to race downtown to meet the buyers with cold feet.

Ms. Kalles says the U.S.-based and overseas agents will return to their home base and, she hopes, mull over the properties on the tour.

"Each one is completely different. That's why I wanted them to see all three."

Ms. Kalles points out that, by some rankings, Toronto is the fourth most livable city in the world. She often takes jaunts to New York and has visited many cities in Europe and Asia but increasingly she's staying close to home. She recently cancelled a trip to Venice so she could be home for the medical school graduation of one of her nine grandchildren.

"I travel," she says. "When I come back, I like my life in Toronto."