

PLAYING HOUSE

ARCHITECTURAL
MODELS
PLACE
CONDOS
IN THE
PALM
OF YOUR
HAND



Above: The Montana



Above: Sky Tower

Who among us can't look back upon their childhood with reticent nostalgia, remembering hours and cumulative days and weeks spent engrossed by the magical world of miniatures? Whether your mini toy of choice was a Lego set, a dollhouse, a platoon of little green army men, or a diorama revealing untold worlds of mystery and adventure, tiny objects at one time or another probably held your attention in a very big way.

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Well, let your inner child jump for joy. Perfectly legitimate and grown-up opportunities to take a walk down mini memory lane exist all over Calgary, found in the sales centres of the city's booming condo market.

Handmade, to-scale models are the sales tool of choice for today's condo developers. It's becoming increasingly unusual to walk in to a sales centre and not find at least one of these magnificent replicas. And although admiring them may stir up carefree memories of youth, the time and effort that goes in to building architectural models is anything but child's play.

In fact, model making is big business – while researching this article, an unconfirmed price tag of \$50,000 passed one industry insider's lips. Accurate or not, if that figure falls even somewhere in ballpark of the actual average price, it begs the question: how can something so small cost so much?

Well, for starters, the labour intensive hours upon hours that go into any given model are enough to make even the most disciplined professionals weak in the knees. The team at Replicate Design Inc. put in no less than 2,200 hours painstakingly creating miniature versions of the 10th and 24th floors of The Montana – midtown's new 27-story development set to break ground in 2006. The results are nothing short of amazing. Each of the 11 suites represented is so complete (right down to miniature bed linens and bathroom fixtures) you almost wish you could shrink yourself down and move right on in.

"It really is a labour of love," says Felix Rooke, Production Director at Replicate Design. "More than anything it's an artistic endeavor. A lot of creativity and imagination goes into what we do, right alongside the very technical elements."

The process of model making begins as a correspondence between the model makers and the development's architects and interior designers. First, the physical blueprints for the development, along with the project's 3D CAD (computer aided



Sable Ridge

design) files are sent to the makers for analysis. These complex files are broken down into what are known as “cut files” – individual physical elements that will eventually make up the model’s framework. “We spend countless hours breaking files down,” says Paul Hern, Design Director at Replicate Design, and resident computer expert. “There’s usually a lot of late nights involved.” A typical tower model can have anywhere from 500 to 1,000 individual parts that must be cut, first two-dimensionally, then glued together to create a three-dimensional piece.

Once all the necessary components have been established, it’s time to consider materials. The project architect and designers provide a colour palette, which the model maker is challenged to match – usually with startling accuracy. In the end, if the model doesn’t end up quite looking like the real thing, it isn’t uncommon for the maker to be

brought back to make adjustments – sometimes with paint and a fine brush, other times by removing certain materials altogether and replacing them with more accurate choices.

Deciding on the scale that will be followed is obviously paramount to the entire process. It’s a complicated matter, affected by factors such as the amount of space available in the show room, the method by which the model will be transported and the developer’s overall budget. Harvey Lin of Calgary Architectural Models says experience plays a role in deciding scale as well. “Projects can range from a 1:50 scale to a 1:1000 scale,” he says. If a development is going to take over 200 acres of land, the model will have to be built to a smaller scale. Based on our experience and the information we’re given, we decide what scale we think will suit the

project best, then plot it out on paper to see if it actually works.”

Materials typically used in the construction of a model range from plastics and resins to acrylic, styrene, balsa wood and cork, to list just a few. Many of the materials can be sourced locally (straight from the nearest Home Depot) but others have to be custom ordered – sometimes from out of country, which can drive up costs. “Coloured plexiglass is very expensive,” says Lin, “but it’s often used for windows.”

Attention to detail, however, only begins with a model’s exterior. One look at countless tiny throw pillows perfectly matched to leather-clad sofas, set off by wall-mounted, 1x2 canvass oil paintings is proof enough that creating a detailed interior takes a tremendous amount of effort. Working closely with the development’s interior designer, model makers get a sense of the building’s style and the type of furnishings that work well inside. Then they get busy hand making an endless stream of prototypes for each and every chair, sofa, bed, lamp, cabinet, table, stove, fridge, sink

and toilet. A single prototype can take up to eight hours of thought and construction. Multiply that by the dozen or so copies the prototype will spawn, multiplied again by the total number of furniture pieces required, and you start to get some idea what kind of time investment is involved. A scale of 1:24 is fairly standard for interior replications.

So is it worth it? If you ask a developer, the answer is a definite yes. “They really provide customers with a visual difference,” explains Kendra Milne, Marketing Coordinator at Streetside Developments. “It’s difficult to imagine living in a place that you can’t see. Models allow people to actually see where they will live and gain an understanding of how the building will work in their daily lives. If you can place yourself there, you’ve already in a sense taken ownership.” CL