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INSIDE THE MINIATURE WORLD OF ARCHITECTURAL MODEL MAKERS



The model of 252 East 57th Street. Photo by Will Femia.

In photos pinned up on the walls of his workshop and office, Richard Tenguerian stands like a giant among some of New York's most famous buildings. He leans into Yankee Stadium. He looks up at towers, which reflect his image. He bears hugs skyscrapers, lifting them off of their bases. Tenguerian, of course, is a normal-sized man, and the King Kong imagery is merely a

byproduct of his profession: architectural model making. But the photos hold symbolic value as well, as Tenguerian is one of New York's most well-respected model makers—a giant in the field, you could say.

Tenguerian certainly isn't the only one to find success in the small and wondrous industry of model making.

Roughly four to five model-making firms dominate in New York City, which in turn makes them some of the best in the world; each has done international work, receiving commissions to build models for Israel, Monaco, Canada, and Singapore, among others. In this unlikely renaissance for the craft—an era in which “starchitecture” and the booming luxury real estate market coincide with 3D-printing technology and the digitization of, well, everything—firms like Radii Inc. and Kennedy Fabrications have become well-recognized names in the architecture and design realms, if only through word-of-mouth communication.

Model making involves handiwork, engineering, and broader “problem solving” as well—and this is what they say is lacking in the young workforce. For Ed Wood and Leszek Stefanski, co-owners of Radii Inc. the basic foundation of model making lies in skills such as sketching on paper and knowing how to operate a saw. On top of that, you have to be able to envision



The model for 252 East 57th Street, as seen in the sales office. The model was made by Kennedy Fabrications and stands over eight feet tall, without its base. Photo by Will Femia.

how the model looks when it’s finished, how it comes together, how it fits into its space and display—all before you even begin to work on it. If the model needs to be transported on an elevator, for instance, and it’s too small or narrow to fit the complete model, it might have to be made in pieces and assembled on site. If a model has to be shipped across the country, arrangements have to be discussed way ahead of time.

Michael Kennedy, owner and managing director of Kennedy Fabrications, the firm behind the models for

new condo buildings 500 West 21st Street and 252 East 57th Street, has done away with the architectural background requirement altogether in his search for new apprentices. While the other firms still tend to pull from the pool of recent arch-school graduates, Kennedy said only about a quarter of his firm has an architectural degree. The rest are composed of industrial designers, sculptors, painters, furniture designers, or someone who simply expressed interest and a willingness to learn. Kennedy prefers that they learn the skills and craft through him, anyway. “We’re an odd little business,” he said. “We’re like leprechauns.”

“What most people don’t understand,” Stefanski said, “is that a good model is like a good car.” Nowadays, everyone wants models with extremely precise details and special effects of many different types. Most real estate models are wired up so that, at the click of a button or the touch of an iPad, the interested buyer’s chosen unit would light up, while the others either remain or turn off. Most developers and architects request interior models and amenity models, which often require color and material matching that may take weeks of coordination and communication with designers and brainstorming creative ideas for how to replicate everything on a smaller scale.

According to sales agents, these standout details on the models in turn help turn the buyers onto the building. Seeing a physical representation of the building in front of them produces a “visceral” reaction that allows them to really see themselves in the unit. The sales offices are often designed around the model, supplementing its “dollhouse effect” by offering samples of the materials used in the units, room recreations that are decorated by the designers of the buildings, and other features. In the sales office for 252 East 57th Street, the almost 9-foot model, a Kennedy fabrication, stands in its own dedicated room, intended to be viewed from an adjacent seating area so that its scale seems magnificent and not overwhelming.

—Wesley Yiin

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