

The Romance of Real Estate

Brokers learn a lot about their clients in a very short time, and occasionally the relationship lasts long after the deal gets signed.



"Sometimes you meet people and there is instant ease," said Gabriella Winter, an associate broker at the Corcoran Group, with her husband, Doug Stone, a former client. Credit for all photos: Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Gabriella Winter was the listing broker for a two-bedroom apartment on Bedford Street when it came on the market in 1996. Eager, of course, to spread the word about the property, she sent out a promotional mailing, and soon got a call from one Doug Stone.

A few days later, Mr. Stone came by, although he did seem a good bit more interested in checking out the broker than in checking out the condo. "He said it wasn't quite what he wanted, but then he asked if he could keep looking with me for a place," Ms. Winter recalled.

Over the next few months, the two went out once a week to view the inventory. "The meetings were very pleasant. It was easy chatting," said Ms. Winter, 58, an associate broker with the Corcoran Group. "There was chemistry, but it didn't concern me. I was single. He was single."

She did, however, become just a little bit concerned when Mr. Stone invited her out for dinner. She didn't go out with clients, she told him. She didn't believe in mixing business with pleasure.

"And he said, 'I tell you what, if you have dinner with me, I promise I will never buy an apartment from you.'"

Mr. Stone, the owner of an online marketing company, proved to be nothing if not a man of his word. He and his former broker will celebrate their 22nd wedding anniversary this year (he proposed in front of the building where they met), and he has yet to buy an apartment from her.

Ms. Winter is hardly the first in the business to meet

her mate in such a rom-com-ready way. And there is a certain logic to relationships that move from real estate to romance, however prosaic the opening topics: square footage, common charges, comparables and mortgages.

"If you're a good broker, you don't just talk real estate to clients. You get deep into who they are and what makes them tick," said Kathy Braddock, a managing director of William Raveis New York City. "You're having conversations that get you very intimate very quickly."

A few minutes after "how do you do," house hunters are laying bare their finances, and in many instances their domestic situation ("My wife and I just separated, and I need three bedrooms because I have the kids every weekend"), their emotional state (see: "My wife and I just separated"), their quirks ("I could never live on the 13th floor") and their very specific needs ("I play golf on the weekend, so I can't be more than a block from my garage").

"It becomes an interesting dynamic for two people who are available," Ms. Braddock said. Not to mention an effective screening tool. "You may think, 'That client is cute, all right, but wait a minute, he's got 18 years of alimony payments ahead.'"

While psychotherapists are ethically bound to forswear romantic entanglements with clients, real estate brokers must rely on their own moral compass. In fact, Douglas Elliman, Corcoran, Warburg Realty and Halstead Property, among other real estate agencies, have no rules governing the dating habits of their agents (who, in any case, aren't employees, but rather independent contractors). Still, there is general agreement that it's not smart to get involved with a client until the business part of the relationship is done.

"To be a good real estate broker, you have to have very good judgment, and if you have good judgment, this is something you don't do," said **Barbara Fox**, the president of **Fox Residential Group**.

"I met a lot of lovely clients when I was single," **Ms. Fox** continued. "Sometimes a guy I was showing an apartment to in the late afternoon would say, 'Let's go have a drink,' and I would always decline. Or a guy I was dating would say, 'If you ever see an apartment that has X, Y and Z, keep a lookout for me.' And I would always say, 'Sure, I will.' But I didn't, because I didn't want to mix things."

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"I had never gone out with a client before," said Joanna Mayfield Marks, an associate broker at Halstead Property, who made an exception for the man who became her husband, Josh Marks.

But what's the harm once the lease is signed or the closing over and done? No harm, and the most natural thing in the world, said Gary Malin, the president of the residential real estate brokerage Citi Habitats.

"Most people who are looking for a home — it's not a two-second transaction. If you're purchasing, from first meeting to closing could be a year," he said.

In many cases, Mr. Malin added, clients might be coming to New York for the first time and might not have a social network. Then the real estate agent who is their first contact in the city could easily become more than the person who found them a place to hang their hat.

"I like to say that being in the real estate business is like being in the hospitality business," Mr. Malin continued. An agent might introduce a client to a neighborhood, suggest restaurants and become a resource, he said. The next step might involve inviting the client out to dinner as a gift after the deal has been completed, or inviting the client to a party the agent is having.

"You've spent a lot of time together," he said. "You've shared a lot of information. And all of a sudden you realize you have a lot of things in common, and one thing leads to another."

Sometimes, the thing it leads to is a breakup.

It had been a late night for Joanna Mayfield Marks, an associate broker at Halstead Property. At 11 p.m. or so, she accepted her boyfriend's marriage proposal. That's why she was half an hour late for an appointment the next day to show several Manhattan apartments to an artist who was relocating from Buffalo.

"I could tell pretty soon that he wasn't going to want to rent from me, because he kept talking about wanting to live in Brooklyn, where all the artists lived," said Ms. Marks, who is now 43. Despite the fact that the morning had been a bust, she was suddenly feeling butterflies (but she had just gotten engaged), and all because of this cute guy (did we mention that she had just gotten engaged?).

Ms. Marks, the sort who reflexively puts it all out there, put it all out there within 20 minutes of meeting this new client, the artist.

"I think I made a terrible mistake," she announced to him. "I got engaged last night." He listened without comment.

Ms. Marks, also the sort who keeps in touch with clients, however briefly they were clients, stayed in touch with the artist. "I found him interesting, but I took it as a bad sign for my engagement that I was attracted to him. And he wouldn't get within 10 feet of me," she said. "Anytime we went anywhere together, he had a friend with him."

A few months after their first meeting, the artist asked Ms. Marks to his birthday party. Soon after, she broke her engagement, and invited her former client, Josh Marks, to the Broadway revival of "The Music Man."

At their wedding, 14 years ago, Ms. Marks sang Mr. Marks a song from the show: "Till There Was You."



"I didn't know if it was ethical to go out with a client," said Ryan Garson, an associate broker at Halstead, who met his wife, Carola Fernandez, at an open house.

Even if dating a client doesn't break a rule — although, of course, it can break a heart — "some agents are still hesitant about it," said Beth Readlinger, 42, a merchandising executive turned saleswoman for Citi Habitats.

Ms. Readlinger should know. She met her live-in boyfriend, Rory Bolger, an associate broker at Citi Habitats,

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in 2007, when Mr. Bolger found a condo in the financial district for Ms. Readlinger and her boyfriend. The deal was scotched partly because of the shaky market and partly because of the couple's shaky relationship, which ended soon after.

But broker and client stayed in touch — he subsequently helped her find a series of rentals — and they became buddies. Still, even though Ms. Readlinger thought Mr. Bolger was cute, and Mr. Bolger thought Ms. Readlinger was cuter, it was a while before the friendship became something different.

“When we did first get involved, I don't think Rory wanted people to know he was dating a client, so we kept it quiet until we got more established,” said Ms. Readlinger, who switched careers to join Mr. Bolger in the real estate business.

Caution makes sense, for sure. After all, who's to say your real estate agent isn't a serial client-dater? (Mr. Bolger pleads previous guilt on this charge.) But consider the agent who is falsely accused.

Jamie Stoner, 23, a broker at Spaces, a residential and commercial brokerage in Chicago, met her former boyfriend last Valentine's Day, when she was showing him several one-bedroom rentals.

“We had a really good conversation, like about traveling, and we had a lot in common,” Ms. Stoner said. “We were texting throughout the process, and right after he signed the lease he asked me out.”

For a while, things went well. “But then I realized he wasn't very supportive of my career,” she said. “I take out a lot of clients my age to show them apartments, and I think my boyfriend was jealous because that's how he met me. There were other issues, but I always had to be reassuring him that these other clients weren't romantic interests.”

Ms. Stoner ended things after three months.

Clearly, when romance is part of the equation, things can get sticky. Four years ago, when Ryan Garson met his future wife, Carola Fernandez, an emergency room doctor, he was a fledgling real estate agent unsure of the rules.

Was it O.K. to be smitten? He was. Was it O.K. to flirt a little? They did. But despite all that bantering, or maybe because of it, the scene was awkward when it came time for Dr. Fernandez to sign a lease on the apartment Mr. Garson had found for her.

And then there was the check she had to write for the broker's fee. “I really felt bad taking money from her,” he said. “But she said it was the best money she ever spent.”



When Lisa P. Rollins, an agent with Page Taft Christie's International Real Estate, got the listing for Jeffrey Johnson's house in Madison, Conn., and sold it in three days, at the full asking price, “Jeffrey was very impressed,” she said. The two married in March of 2017.

It was the desire to avoid such complications that, for years, kept Lisa P. Rollins from getting involved with a client. That and the fact that she had a fiancé. Even after the relationship ended, Ms. Rollins, a real estate sales agent with Page Taft Christie's International Real Estate, in Madison, Conn., saw no reason to operate differently.

In the spring of 2015, she was asked to do a comparative cost analysis on an antique house that was about to come on the market. Accordingly, Ms. Rollins, now 52, showed up with a colleague and did the walk-around with the owner, Jeffrey Johnson, the mid-sixtyish co-founder of the home-care service Visiting Angels, who gave the pair the listing.

“As we were leaving, my co-worker said, ‘Oh, he's into you. Did you see the way he looked at you?’ Ms. Rollins recalled. “I said, ‘Stop it. He's too old for me.’”

Mr. Johnson thought otherwise. He asked her to dinner. She didn't go out with clients, she told him, but perhaps they could revisit the matter after the closing. They did, dating for two months before realizing the time wasn't right for either of them.

Four months later, Mr. Johnson sent Ms. Rollins a text asking if she was married yet. No, she answered, but now she was game. They tied the knot in March of 2017, and now live in a house on the water in Westbrook, Conn. Guess who was the agent in the transaction.

“My mother always told me that the only way I would meet someone was if it was a client, because, she told me, ‘The only thing you do is work,’” Ms. Rollins said. “I would laugh, but as you can see Mom is always right.”