

## Showing showdown: Resi brokers split on apartment tours amid pandemic

While some argue “moral imperative” to stop showings, others say brokers should simply take precautions like donning booties and gloves

TRD NEW YORK / By [E.B. Solomont](#), [Sylvia Varnham O'Regan](#) and [Erin Hudson](#)

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From left: Leonard Steinberg, Donna Olshan, Heather McDonough, Fred Peters and Bess Freedman

Should brokers be showing homes in person right now?

It's a question that's dividing the real estate industry as agents across the city grapple with complicated professional and personal decisions in the grip of a fast-moving pandemic.

Over the weekend, Leonard Steinberg, Compass' chief evangelist, called for a moratorium on in-person showings, describing it as a “moral imperative” for agents to help slow the spread of the [coronavirus](#).

Likewise, the New York Residential Agent Continuum's executive board — of which Steinberg is a member — called for a suspension of open houses and in-person showings for two weeks.

“We need to make sure we are taking steps so as not to contribute to the problem,” the board wrote in a letter sent to members on Saturday night. “Getting this virus under control should be the single most important priority.” Others disagreed sharply.

Writing in *Forbes* on Monday, Warburg Realty's Frederick Peters said the business of buying and selling real estate would go on, coronavirus or no coronavirus.

“Closing the New York City public schools was a moral imperative,” he wrote. “Prohibiting gatherings of more than 20 or 25 people seems like a moral imperative.” But he said agents can show apartments responsibly by donning booties and gloves, wiping down door knobs with alcohol and washing hands before and after showings.

Those calling for a temporary halt to in-person showings share the concerns of health and other officials who have pushed for schools, restaurants and other non-essential businesses to close in order to promote “social distancing” and slow the spread of COVID-19.

On Sunday, New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson called for the city to shut down nonessential services, and Mayor Bill de Blasio later announced that the city's public schools would close until at least April 20.

“We are in a state of emergency and we must move quickly to mitigate the impact of coronavirus/COVID-19 on our city,” Johnson said in a comment posted on Twitter.

At least one real estate attorney put home showings in the nonessential bucket.

"I can't see a situation where a real estate showing would be deemed essential," said Michael Romer, managing partner and co-founder of Romer Debbas, LLP.

On Friday, Douglas Elliman Development Marketing [closed](#) its on-site sales office at new development projects nationwide, while its New York-based rival Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group said it would be conducting all showings via virtual tour. **"Show responsibly"**

Peters of Warburg Realty argued that in-person showings, when conducted safely, should continue.

"Real estate agents both want and need to work," he wrote in Forbes. "Agents can show responsibly under these conditions, and many continue to do so on behalf of buyers who believe they may have opportunity now, or sellers who cannot wait weeks or months to resume their sales plans."

In response, Donna Olshan, president of Olshan Realty, said it was "completely irresponsible for any head of any brokerage to encourage showings and open houses."

"Every contact is a risk. Every surface is a risk," she said. "To encourage people to continue on is irresponsible beyond belief." Agents with boots on the ground seemed to agree.

There was a 38 percent drop in scheduled open houses this past weekend, according to Halstead's Fritz Frigan, who tracks open house attendance. He said there were 3,927 open houses scheduled this past weekend, down from 5,486 a week prior. "I guarantee you, there were less than that," he said. "There was such a slew of last-minute cancellations."

Jed Garfield, managing partner at Leslie J. Garfield, which specializes in luxury townhouse sales, told *The Real Deal* last week that he had asked his team to work from home, because he didn't think the job was worth them getting sick. He added, "some of the owners I've spoken with would rather not have strangers in their house."

Sotheby's International Realty's Nikki Field said her team discontinued showings last week. "We believe it is our role and responsibility during this time to prioritize protecting the health and well-being of our colleagues and clients," she wrote in an email to buyers and sellers. "With this all said, we are recommending to all our clients (buyers and sellers) that we put all our showings on hold for the next two weeks, to be reviewed on a regular basis."

But she also cited uncertainty, which has crippled the market in recent days and weeks.

"Buyers and Sellers do not want to make big decisions when they do not know what tomorrow will bring," she wrote. "Currently many customers have either fled the city or self-quarantined in place. We are patiently watching to see how the real estate market is impacted."

Some landlords have put the kibosh on showing occupied rental units.

Brooke Baker, co-founder of Urbane Brokerage, was the recipient of a hostile email from one tenant who was less-than-pleased to learn Baker needed to take photos of the unit for an upcoming listing.

"We are not going to step out of the apartment or vacate for you to show it," the tenant wrote.

"You and your team wearing latex gloves does not provide much protection. Consider it fortunate I'm even allowing you to enter to photograph because this already poses a health risk."

Jordan Sachs, CEO of Bold New York, said his team was getting the [infrastructure](#) in place to go completely virtual, which he estimated would be achieved in the next 24 hours.

For now, he said he was advising agents to follow CDC guidelines and act responsibly. The only units they were showing in person were unoccupied, he said, adding that "it's a day-by-day conversation as to how these procedures will change."

Compass' Sean McKenzie said he convened an all-hands meeting for his team on Sunday evening, to decide together how to approach showings and open houses. The consensus was to do both remote and individual, in-person showings on a limited basis. "No open houses at all as we do not want multiple people in a space at one time," he wrote in an email.

McKenzie said the team, which is working remotely, has also restricted itself to working with clients who want to move in by April 1.

## **“Sparsely attended”**

Peters said demand hasn't shut down, though he conceded that Warburg's Sunday open houses were “sparsely attended,” especially those which hadn't switched to “by appointment only” — which would limit how many people are in the apartment at one time.

In addition to safety concerns discussed by agents, there are also practical issues at play.

“People are going to move unless the government says, ‘No one move,’” said Andrew Kalish at Localize.city, adding that he was personally going to move on Wednesday. “Agents realize that they have inventory, and they want to get paid.”

Mark Chin, CEO of Keller Williams New York City, said the underlying reasons why someone needs to buy, sell or rent hasn't changed, despite the pandemic.

“It's just pushed off to a later date,” he said. “So I'm encouraging the agents to take a hard look at expenses... [Their] income may be delayed due to market inactivity while the market seizes up a little bit.”

On Monday, the National Association of Realtors updated its guide for agents during the pandemic. It stopped short of saying “yay” or “nay” with regard to open houses, but urged members to “assess the risk based on your specific location” and the severity of risk. “If you do hold an open house, consider requiring all visitors to disinfect their hands upon entering the home, limiting the amount of people in the home and providing alcohol-based hand sanitizers at the entryway,” NAR said.

In a fast-moving environment, where things are changing every day, Bold's Jordan Sachs said the questions around showings could ultimately become redundant.

“My take is that in the very foreseeable future, we're going to be on lockdown,” he said.

“I don't think the option of showing anyone in person is going to be available.”