

NEW YORK REAL ESTATE

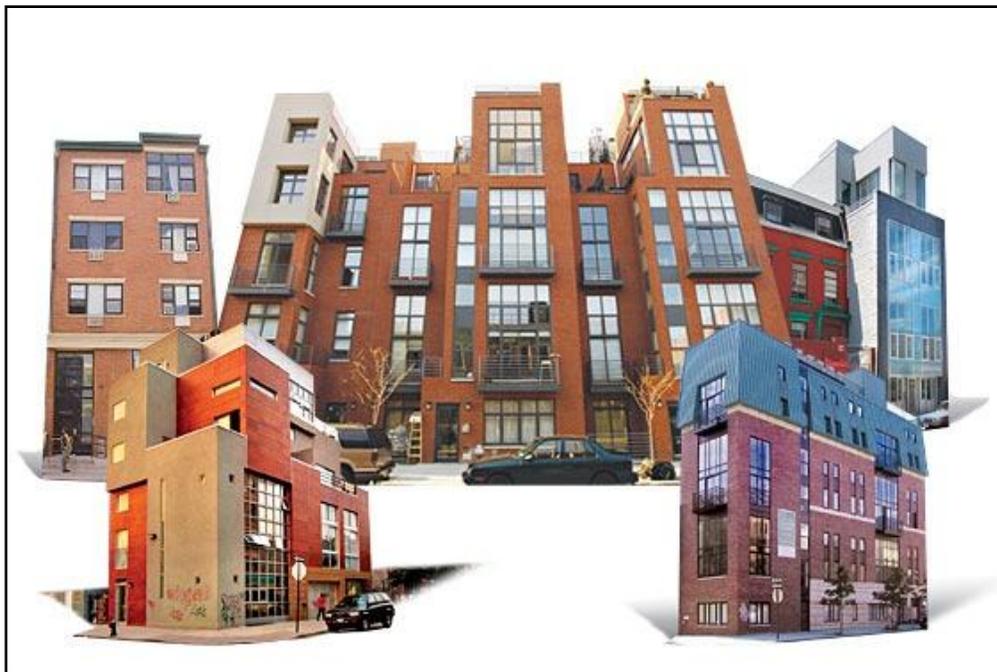
Anxiety in Scarano-Land

The besieged architect Robert Scarano designed thousands of apartments.

What do you do if you bought one?

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(Photo: Clockwise, from top left, Propertyshark.Com; Robert Stolarick/The New York Times/Redux; Public Domain (3))

Brooklyn would look very different today without Robert Scarano. The architect of hundreds of buildings, Scarano was incredibly prolific during the aughts building boom, especially in Williamsburg. He became known as a developer's best partner, a man who could squeeze every salable square foot onto a lot. He's also been widely criticized for his blocky, bulky designs, creative parsing of the building code to get approval for uncommonly large projects, and working with developers who run shoddy construction sites. To a certain kind of context-worshipping New Yorker, Scarano represents everything that's wrong with our architectural culture.

And now he's cooked. Earlier this month, the City Department of Buildings barred Scarano from filing permits and plans because he "repeatedly submitted false documents in an attempt to circumvent the law." Suddenly, the neighbors aren't the only ones wringing their hands: New Yorkers who've bought Scarano apartments—particularly those angling to sell—are grappling with his downfall.

One East Williamsburger who has had her ceiling replastered is fatalistic. “Until the leaks are fixed, I can’t worry about selling this place,” she says. (She and others interviewed for this story requested anonymity for fear of scaring off buyers.) Another North Brooklyn owner says the ductwork in her apartment’s HVAC system doesn’t meet code and adds that the six-story building has no wheelchair access. Others single out “sweaty” windows—possibly a sign of poor insulation—and misrouted cables. Attorney **Adam Leitman Bailey**, who represents disgruntled owners at eight Scarano projects, says some clients had bedrooms that didn’t meet city specifications and therefore were called closets. When your two-bedroom abruptly becomes reclassified as a one-bedroom, the resale value will likely be downsized as well.

Is it right to blame Scarano for all this? It depends on the building. Developers and contractors are equally accountable for shoddy workmanship. One owner (who is, for the record, an architect) notes that she can’t scapegoat Scarano for plumbing woes and cheap door handles. “Sometimes the owner puts the architect in a limited role,” she explains. (A DoB spokesperson recommends that anyone considering a Scarano condo—or any new construction, for that matter—hire an engineer or architect to perform structural due diligence.)

One could argue that Scarano’s projects have been scrutinized so closely that they simply can’t be as bad as their reputation. After he surrendered his right to self-certify—that is, perform his own code and safety inspections—in 2006, the city audited 286 self-certified Scarano jobs and has reviewed another 309 since then. Scarano’s representative, Linda Alexander, says that the firm “is pursuing all avenues available to reverse the erroneous rulings.” Some residents even love his spaces: One artist says her old apartment at 1037 Manhattan Avenue, which the DoB says doesn’t meet zoning regulations, had wonderful high ceilings and huge windows. (She moved only after her rent was hiked.)

If there’s a silver lining for those owners, it’s this: Controversy fades. A scandal can “appear [to have] a devastating impact on value,” notes appraiser Jonathan Miller. “But once it’s resolved, people have other things to worry about.”