

What Boston-area homebuyers should know about virtual tours

Sight-unseen purchasing has skyrocketed to prominence amid coronavirus—here's what to look for and the questions to ask

By **Tom Acitelli** | @tomacitelli | Apr 8, 2020, 7:21am EDT



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Virtual open houses [have shot to prominence in the Boston area](#) as a way to help stem the spread of the novel coronavirus. Public health officials and elected leaders [have asked that brokers no longer host traditional open houses](#), where several people traipse through the same property around the same time to kick the tires.

So, beyond private showings, where does that leave prospective buyers in terms of viewing potential new homes? What things should they be looking out for and what questions should they be asking?

The first thing to know about virtual open houses—or buying without actually seeing what you're going to buy—is that they're more common in the Boston area than you might think.

“We sold 90 percent of [Seville Boston Harbor](#) without anyone seeing the actual water views,” Tina Bacci, a principal at brokerage [RESIS LLC](#), said in an email. “Buyers saw their views for the first time when they came for their final walkthrough. We also sold 90 percent of [VITA in Jamaica Plain](#) in a construction trailer converted to a sales office—people purchased before there was a unit to go in to see.”

Buying largely or completely sight-unseen, then, is common in the region's market for newly built condos—and that's been a robust market over the last several years, [with thousands of condos going up](#). Buyers basically get in on the ground floor, purchasing units well before the finishing touches are applied or sometimes even before construction starts.

As for the resale market, where most deals happen, buyers need to beware. Ask lots of questions—including for certain docs. Bacci said that buyers in the resale market should ask for something that's a staple of that new-development scene: the specs, or finishes, list.

“A virtual tour or photo might show wood floors, but if you aren't there to see and feel, you may not realize from the video that it's vinyl planking and not real or engineered hardwood,” she said. “That will influence your offer price.”

The finishes lists can also include details on the makes and models of appliances and heating and cooling systems. Bacci also said she ranks such lists and detailed floorplans ahead of any virtual video tours as far as their usefulness to prospective buyers.

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Sarah Mooradian, a vice president with [the Compass team Burbs to Boston](#), echoed the essentiality of specs—particularly when it comes to floorplans. “Definitely check floorplan measurements to get a better sense of the scale of rooms,” she said over email. “Maybe even use a measuring tape at home to compare to room sizes you are currently living in.”

Buyers should also ask about the age and condition of windows, Mooradian said, “because it will be very hard to tell noise levels through a virtual tour,” and, besides, windows are expensive to upgrade or to replace. Single-family buyers should want to know the ceiling heights of any basements, she added, as those are often lower than on other floors.

If buyers are going to lean on virtual tours in their decision-making, then brokers suggest they see as much as possible—not just the main rooms, for instance, and not just the home itself for that matter. Ask to see common, or shared, areas virtually—the hallways in condo buildings can speak to individual units' overall quality, brokers say—and amenity spaces such as fitness centers and parking garages too.

These areas are easy to overlook in virtual tours, according to Antonio Khoury and Brett Derocker of [Derocker & Khoury](#), another Compass team. “If you are looking to

make a decision based on a virtual tour, be sure to cover all areas of the home and do not be afraid to ask your agent to revisit particular areas or features of the home,” they said over email.

Finally, if you are going to lean on virtual tours in your next homebuying decision in the Boston area, query things that would’ve made sense pandemic or not. These include the recent minutes of any homeowners association meetings and the budget for the condo building.

“But,” RESIS’ Bacci said, “hopefully buyers always ask for those before any purchase whether it’s sight unseen or not.”



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