Tenant's Conditional Contract to Sell His Apartment Upon Conversion to Condominium Ownership Does Not Violate "No Assignment" Clause in Standard Lease

Daniel J. Baurkot

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview/vol60/iss2/9

This Recent Development in New York Law is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in St. John's Law Review by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact lasalar@stjohns.edu.
Horn Waterproofing Corp. v. Bushwick Iron & Steel Co. Reversing the lower court determination, the Horn Waterproofing Court held that UCC 1-207 supersedes the common law doctrine of accord and satisfaction in situations involving the tender of negotiable instruments in full satisfaction of disputed debts.

The members of Volume 60 hope that the analysis of the cases contained in The Survey will be of interest and value to the New York bench and bar.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LAW

Tenant's conditional contract to sell his apartment upon conversion to condominium ownership does not violate "no assignment" clause in standard lease

In New York, the ability of a landlord to convert a rental apartment building into a cooperative or condominium is conditioned on various factors. The conversion process involves several steps, including the formation of a corporation, conveyance of real estate to the corporation, and allocation of shares to prospective tenants. A conditional contract to sell the apartment is important in this process. The court held that such a contract does not violate the "no assignment" clause in the standard lease. This ruling is significant because it clarifies the rights and obligations of tenants and landlords during the conversion process.

---

1 See P. Rohan, Real Property § 9.01 at 9-1 (1981). Cooperatives first gained significance in the United States during the housing shortage after World War I. Id. Since then, their popularity has increased dramatically, especially in the bigger cities where it is impractical to build single-family structures due to the scarcity of land. Id.; see also P. Kehoe, Cooperatives and Condominiums 7 (1974)(more efficient land use necessary in metropolitan areas in mid-1950s). In organizing a cooperative, a corporation is formed and a parcel of real estate is conveyed to it. P. Rohan, supra, § 9.04(4)(a) at 9-13. Prospective tenants then purchase shares of stock in the corporation that are allocated to certain apartments. Id. A proprietary lease, and not mere ownership of corporate shares, entitles a stockholder to occupy an apartment. Id. A lessee, however, must possess a specific amount of shares in order to obtain a proprietary lease from the cooperative corporation. P. Rohan, supra, § 9.04(4)(a) at 9-13. A cooperative tenant's proprietary lease is actually "a contract for the 'use' of real property, but not a real property interest itself." Id., § 9.03 at 9-6. A tenant's interest in the cooperative is more appropriately referred to as "personalty". See id. See generally H. Rothenberg, What You Should Know About Condominiums 21 (1974)(corporation holds title to realty; shareholders receive right to exclusive occupancy and must transfer shares to transfer right of occupancy). For a more extensive look at proprietary leases, see P. Kehoe, supra, at 24, and Kamer, Conversion of Rental Housing to Unit Ownership - A Noncrisis, 10 Real Estate L.J. 189 (1982).

2 See 1 P. Rohan & M. Reskin, Condominium Law and Practice § 1.01(1) at 1-1 (1985). A condominium is "a system of separate ownership of individual units in multi-unit projects." Id. Condominiums are a relatively recent phenomenon; through the Horizontal Property Act of 1958, Puerto Rico became the first American legal jurisdiction to authorize them. See P. Kehoe, supra note 1, at 8. By 1969, however, all 50 states had enacted laws specifically authorizing condominiums. See id. In a condominium, the participants have fee simple ownership of their units individually, and of the common elements as tenants in common in undivided percentages. See D. Clurman, F. Jackson & E. Hebard, Condominiums and Cooperatives 1 (2d ed. 1984); P. Rohan, supra note 1, § 9.02(3) at 9-5; H. Rothenberg, supra note 1, at 19-20. The ownership of a condominium unit is very similar to owning an individual home because the unit owner must arrange and pay for the financing of the condominium unit. P. Rohan, supra note 1, § 9.02(3) at 9-5. Along with the real estate...
tioned upon his obtaining a minimum number of written purchase agreements from the tenants. In an effort to attain this statutory minimum, sponsors offer tenants the right to purchase their apartments at a substantial discount as an incentive measure. The existence of this “insider price” has prompted some tenants to seek profits by devising methods to sell at a premium the advantage accorded by such a price. Recently, in Continental Towers Lim-

In Nassau, Rockland and Westchester Counties, a non-eviction plan requires written purchase agreements from at least 15% of the bona fide tenants in occupancy on the date the plan is declared effective. In an offering plan, “tenants in occupancy” are generally offered a price reduction, occasionally as much as 50% of market value, in an effort to induce them to purchase their units, and thereby help the sponsor meet the minimum purchases requirement. In an offering plan, “tenants in occupancy” are generally offered a price reduction, occasionally as much as 50% of market value, in an effort to induce them to purchase their units, and thereby help the sponsor meet the minimum purchases requirement. See id.; supra note 3. The attainment of this minimum is so critical that sponsors occasionally resort to less scrupulous methods of promoting sales. See, e.g., Richards v. Kas- kel, 32 N.Y.2d 524, 533, 300 N.E.2d 388, 391, 347 N.Y.S.2d 1, 6 (1973)(sponsor falsely in- formed tenants that offering plan had “gone over the top” to induce them to purchase their apartments); Gilligan v. Tishman Realty & Constr. Co., 283 App. Div. 157, 163, 126 N.Y.S.2d 813, 818 (1st Dep’t 1953)(sponsor threatened tenants that if they did not purchase their units they would be “sleeping in Central Park”), aff’d, 306 N.Y. 974, 120 N.E.2d 230 (1954).

See, e.g., University Mews Assoc. v. Jeanmarie, 122 Misc. 2d 434, 438, 471 N.Y.S.2d 457, 460 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1983) (prior to closing, tenants contracted to sell apartment shares to third parties subsequent to closing to generate profit equal to difference between insider and outsider price). Much confusion and litigation has arisen in recent years as to who has the right to purchase at an insider price. See, e.g., Consolidated Edison Co. v. 10 W. 68th St. Corp., 61 N.Y.2d 341, 462 N.E.2d 367, 474 N.Y.S.2d 267 (1984)(whether corporate tenant was “tenant in occupancy” entitled to right to purchase apartment at insider price);
the Appellate Term, First Department held that a tenant did not violate a standard lease provision prohibiting the unauthorized assignment of the lease when he conditionally contracted to sell his apartment upon conversion to condominium ownership.\(^7\)

In *Continental*, the plaintiff landlord filed an offering plan with the Attorney General of the State of New York\(^8\) seeking to convert her rent stabilized apartment building to condominium ownership.\(^9\) Prior to the Attorney General’s approval of the conversion plan, the tenants contracted with a non-tenant purchaser to convey their apartment to the “outsider,” contingent upon the tenants’ acquisition of the unit and the implementation of the conversion plan.\(^10\) The contract also provided that the third-party buyer was to advance to the tenant-sellers the funds necessary to purchase the condominium unit at the insider price, along with an additional $25,000 premium, as consideration.\(^11\) The landlord brought an eviction proceeding against the tenants alleging that this contract was a violation of the standard lease clause which prohibited assignments of the lease without prior written consent.\(^12\)

---

---

\(^1\) *Hohenstein v. Hohenstein*, 127 Misc. 2d 53, 485 N.Y.S.2d 170 (Sup. Ct. Queens County 1984) (husband who had separated from wife and moved out of apartment sought to purchase as “tenant in occupancy” upon wife’s death); *Stuart v. One Sherman Square Assn.*, 123 Misc. 2d 414, 473 N.Y.S.2d 669 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1984) (one co-tenant sought to enjoin another co-tenant from purchasing unit upon conversion at insider price); cf. *Freudenstein v. 645 Co.*, 128 Misc. 2d 635, 493 N.Y.S.2d 681 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1985) (whether right of statutory tenant to purchase at insider price passed to estate upon his death); *In re Lipkowitz*, 127 Misc. 2d 77, 485 N.Y.S.2d 466 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1985) (whether executor had right to purchase on behalf of deceased tenant’s estate).


\(^3\) *Id.*

\(^4\) See *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. See generally N.Y. GEN. BUS. LAW § 352-e(1)(a) (McKinney 1984) (“public offering or sale in or from the state of New York of securities constituted of participation interests or investments in real estate” must be registered with attorney general); Goldsmith, *supra* note 4, at 33-34 (language of § 352-e(1)(a) sufficiently broad to include condominiums and cooperatives).

\(^5\) *Id.*

\(^6\) See *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2.

\(^7\) *Id.*

\(^8\) See *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. See generally N.Y. GEN. BUS. LAW § 352-e(1)(a) (McKinney 1984) (“public offering or sale in or from the state of New York of securities constituted of participation interests or investments in real estate” must be registered with attorney general); Goldsmith, *supra* note 4, at 33-34 (language of § 352-e(1)(a) sufficiently broad to include condominiums and cooperatives).

\(^9\) *Id.*

\(^10\) *Id.*

\(^11\) *Id.* In *Continental* the contract stipulated that the $25,000 premium was to be paid in three separate installments: “(i) $5,000 upon execution of [the] agreement; (ii) $3,000 upon seller vacating the apartment unit . . . and, of course, there follows (iii) a balance of $17,000 at time of closing . . . .” Record on Appeal at 39, Continental Towers Ltd. Partnership v. Kratalic, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2 (Sup. Ct. App. T. 1st Dep’t 1985) [hereinafter cited as Record on Appeal].

\(^12\) *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2.
County, dismissed the petition, and the landlord appealed.\(^{13}\)

The Appellate Term, First Department rejected the landlord's contention that the lease was violated, ruling that there had been no actual assignment of the lease.\(^{14}\) In reaching this result, the court noted that the tenants were still in possession of the unit at the time of the trial and had not transferred a right of present occupancy to the non-tenant purchaser.\(^{15}\) The appellate term determined that the contract was not to become effective until the landlord-tenant relationship had been terminated by the respondent's acquisition of his unit subsequent to the conversion of the building.\(^{16}\) The court unanimously concluded that the "conditional agreement" to sell the apartment unit did not constitute a breach of the "no assignment" clause in the lease.\(^{17}\)

It is submitted that the holding in *Continental* did little to clear up the gray area surrounding the transferability of the right to purchase at an insider price. In addressing only the narrow issue of whether the agreement violated the "no assignment" clause in the lease, the court did not reach the broader question of the assignability of the right to purchase at the insider price.\(^{18}\) It is sug-

---

\(^{13}\) *See id.* The landlord's petition was dismissed with prejudice, and possession of the premises was awarded to the tenant. *See Record on Appeal at 2.*

\(^{14}\) *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. *But see Record on Appeal at 75 ("a very close point" as to whether or not contract of sale was assignment).*

\(^{15}\) *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. The court noted that the tenants would have been required to vacate the premises only upon the transfer of ownership to the third-party buyer. *Id.*

\(^{16}\) *Id.; see also Record on Appeal at 75 ("[The purchaser has] never asked [the tenant] for the assignment . . . and he hasn't given it yet. . . . What you've done here is - to put it more formally - he has agreed to give an assignment upon the happening of certain events. They have not taken place yet.") (remarks of Judge Sparks at trial).*

\(^{17}\) *Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. The contract in *Continental* specified that if the purchaser desired an assignment of the tenant's lease term, the written consent of the landlord would be necessary. *Id.* Thus, the tenants specifically contracted to obtain the landlord's approval in the event they wished to assign the lease. *Id.*

\(^{18}\) *See Continental*, N.Y.L.J., July 22, 1985, at 6, col. 2. In a similar case involving conditional sales, another court did reach the merits of the validity of the contract. *See University Mews Assoc. v. Jeannmarie*, 122 Misc. 2d 434, 442, 471 N.Y.S.2d 457, 463 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1983). In *University Mews*, the owner-sponsor of a rent stabilized building filed a cooperative offering plan with the New York State Attorney General. *Id.* at 436, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 459. Several tenants contracted with outsiders to purchase their apartments at the insider price and to resell the apartments to those outsiders at a premium. *Id.* at 438, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 460. Although the facts were almost identical to those underlying *Continental*, the court in *University Mews* ruled on the validity of the contracts, referring to them as "equitable assignments . . . that became legal assignments upon title closing." *Id.* at 442, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 463.

An equitable assignment creates a title in an assignee which will be recognized and
gested that far from clarifying the assignability of this right, the court may have complicated the issue further by inviting landlords to devise lease clauses that can withstand judicial scrutiny and thereby create roadblocks for tenants who wish to indirectly assign their rights in the manner attempted in Continental. In addition to employing such lease clauses, it is submitted that building owners seeking to convert can condition offers to convey at insider prices with language that precludes any possibility of circumvention. However, such language must adequately cover the event in question, or a court may construe the clause narrowly and hold in favor of a tenant-seller. A cooperative or condominium board also has at its disposal the right of first refusal, but the utility of this device is rather limited. In cooperative conversions, the impos-

protected by a court of equity. See Comment, Creation of an Equitable Assignment, 21 St. John's L. Rev. 202, 202 (1947). A court of law, however, will not recognize such an assignment "because either the legal title to the property or fund assigned has not passed or the thing assigned is not in esse at the time." Id. On the other hand "an assignment is an actual or constructive transfer of some species of property, or interest in property with a clear intent at the time to part with all interest in the thing transferred." Id.

19 See De Christoforo v. Shore Ridge Assoc., 126 Misc. 2d 339, 340, 482 N.Y.S.2d 411, 412 (Sup. Ct. Kings County 1984)("sponsor, drafter of the agreement, may condition his offer at an 'insider price' in any manner he chooses, subject to the applicable statute and approval of the Attorney-General [sic]").

20 See University Mews Assoc. v. Jeanmarie, 122 Misc. 2d 434, 471 N.Y.S.2d 457 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1983). In University Mews, the cooperative offering plan included a subscription agreement which stated that the rights under the agreement were not assignable without the consent of the corporation and that an assignment without such consent would be null and void. Id. at 437, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 459. The agreement also provided that the cooperative shares were to be purchased for the tenant's own account and for his personal occupancy. Id. at 437, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 460. The offering plan, however, provided that the tenant could sell and assign his proprietary lease at any time as long as he complied with the provisions of the proprietary lease and the by-laws. Id. The court held that the tenant was free to assign "where the contract to sell is executed before title closing so long as it is effective thereafter following tenant-shareholders' personal occupancy, however brief, of the co-operative apartment and is subject to tenant shareholder's compliance with . . . the proprietary lease." Id. at 443, 471 N.Y.S.2d at 463; see also De Christoforo v. Shore Ridge Assoc., 126 Misc. 2d 339, 340, 482 N.Y.S.2d 411, 413 (Sup. Ct. Kings County 1984)(sponsor's omission of clause in offering plan precluding specific event must be construed against him). But see Sini v. Hyngstrom, 109 App. Div. 2d 671, 671, 486 N.Y.S.2d 253, 254 (1st Dep't 1985)(clause prohibiting assignment of right to purchase under subscription agreement enforceable, even though there was no provision rendering assignment with corporation's consent void).

21 See Bachman v. State Div. of Human Rights, 104 App. Div. 2d 111, 114, 481 N.Y.S.2d 858, 860 (1st Dep't 1984)(cooperative board of directors had "contractual and inherent power" to exercise right of first refusal absent discrimination prohibited by law); P. KENOE, supra note 1, at 47. Upon exercise of the right of first refusal, a cooperative or condominium board is usually required to purchase the unit at the same price that the seller could have received from the rejected buyer. Id. In the long run, the tenant-seller sells the
tion of a "flip tax" in the apartment corporation's by-laws may further discourage transfer schemes of tenants\textsuperscript{22} although the sponsor of a condominium conversion may not be able to avail himself of this weapon.\textsuperscript{23} While the courts have demonstrated some degree of flexibility in permitting purchases at insider prices,\textsuperscript{24} it is submitted that further restriction of a "flip tax" in the apartment corporation's by-laws may further discourage transfer schemes of tenants\textsuperscript{22} - although the sponsor of a condominium conversion may not be able to avail himself of this weapon.\textsuperscript{23}

While the courts have demonstrated some degree of flexibility in permitting purchases at insider prices,\textsuperscript{24} it is submitted that further restriction of a "flip tax" in the apartment corporation's by-laws may further discourage transfer schemes of tenants - although the sponsor of a condominium conversion may not be able to avail himself of this weapon.\textsuperscript{23}
ther judicial or legislative guidance is necessary to define the ability of tenants to transfer the right to make such purchases. It is suggested, however, that future guidelines should not restrict transferability to an extent which might discourage home ownership and the societal benefits which flow therefrom, but rather, should regulate to the degree necessary to resolve the disputes which will undoubtedly arise as both tenants and sponsors struggle to devise more creative means of promoting their respective interests in the transferability issue.

Daniel J. Baurkot

CPL § 190.25(4); The disclosure of grand jury testimony in a subsequent civil action

Since the fourteenth century, grand jury proceedings have been held in secret. In New York, this practice has been codified

469 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. County 1985)(executor had both right and duty to purchase unit for deceased tenant's estate); Hohenstein v. Hohenstein, 127 Misc. 2d 53, 56, 485 N.Y.S.2d 170, 172 (Sup. Ct. Queens County 1984)(husband remained "tenant in occupancy" and was entitled to purchase at insider price after separation from wife even though he could not physically occupy apartment until her death).

25 See Ch. 555, § 1, [1982] N.Y. Laws 2396. "[T]he conversion of residential real estate from rental status to cooperative or condominium ownership is an effective method of preserving, stabilizing and improving neighborhoods and the supply of sound housing accommodations." Id.; see Rohan, "The Model Condominium Code" - A Blueprint for Modernizing Condominium Legislation, 78 COLUM. L. REV. 587, 599 (1978)("occupier-ownership in the form of . . . condominiums offers the best long-range solution to the problem of urban decay").

The condominium form of ownership may provide a lower-income family with its only opportunity to purchase a unit having the same characteristics as the "traditional single-family detached house." Id. In addition to the tax advantages and the ability to share in the management of the condominium, such families would gain a sense of pride and fulfillment in being the owners of the apartment. Id. This pride of ownership cannot exist without the right to profits. Id. at 133.

1 See M. FRANKEL & G. NAFTALIS, THE GRAND JURY 9 (1977). The grand jury dates back to 1166 when King Henry II formed the Assize of Clarendon to serve as an investigatory and law enforcement body. See id. at 6-7. The hearing of testimony in private became a practice of the grand jury during the fourteenth century. See id. at 9. It was not until some 200 years later, however, that the grand jury broadened its role to include the protection of the innocent from unfounded accusation. See id.

The five most frequently cited reasons for maintaining grand jury confidentiality are: