

How a blimp helps the condo boom

Austin man develops special aerial photography to help condo projects nationwide

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The niche for Gary Lockhart's flying camera service literally spans the globe: the airspace between ground level and 1,000 feet. Lockhart specializes in flying cameras in a "blimp" — technically an aerostat, or tethered balloon — in places where helicopters and airplanes can't go.

He uses standard digital SLR cameras and a custom-made aerial panoramic film camera that he says produces largest file sizes and pixel counts in existence. In recent years, Lockhart's 16-year-old Austin-based Blimp Photo Services has been buoyed locally and nationally by the boom in high-rise condominium construction. He has taken panoramic aerial views of planned residential and commercial buildings in major U.S. cities.

Digital 360-degree panoramics for Web sites are used to show prospective buyers the views from various floors. Murals have been printed as big as 13 feet tall by 41 feet long @ 58427x 17723 pixels, which developers use in their condo sales models

Condo developers hire him to show potential buyers the views that units will have after they are built. This year, lenders are requiring developers to have more of the units in their proposed buildings sold before they will provide the money to launch construction.

Lockhart's business got a boost from the credit crunch that has tightened standards for anyone seeking to borrow money. "Now they need more preconstruction sales; they can't just wing it."

Lockhart said his aerial photography "adds scale, scope and realism" that helps prospective buyers sign on the dotted line. It is what I call a value-added, mainly because everyone wants to know what they're going to see from their condo," he said.

Lockhart has been contacted by representatives of developers who want to build a Manhattan building taller than the Empire State Building and a 70-story Donald Trump tower in New Orleans.

In Austin, he has photographed the viewsheds — the technical name for the views from a particular vantage point — for most of the downtown condominium projects that are under construction



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or are being planned They include the Shore, Spring, the Austonian, the W hotel/condominium project and the Four Seasons Residences, a project that is expected break ground soon next to the Four Seasons Hotel..

Brett Denton, a partner with Ardent Residential, which is developing the luxury Four Seasons high-rise, said Lockhart's photography "has been invaluable in helping our buyers better visualize the views from the various unit locations on different floors of our building."

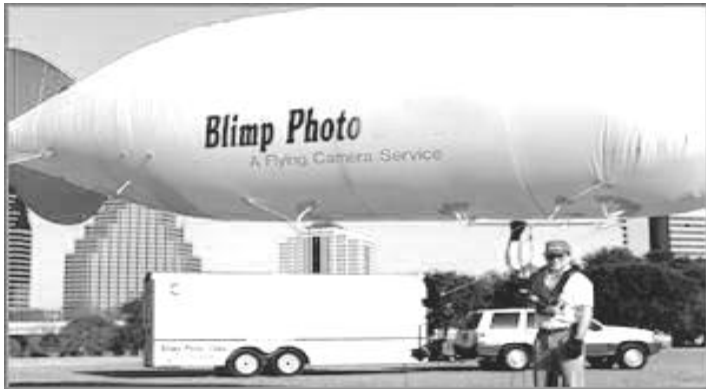
"This technology gives them a lot more confidence in their buying decision because they are able to see today what their view will look like when the building is completed," Denton said.

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Lockhart charges on a project-by-project basis. He said the business is profitable, though he declined to disclose his company's revenue. He said the condominium building boom has accounted for as much as half of his revenue in recent years.

Austin has been a lucrative market because of strong neighborhood groups that can help make or break projects. Though he won't reveal his clients,



Viewshed images are also used for engineering, design and appraisal issues.

developers have hired him to help win neighborhood support by showing that their views won't be obstructed, or at least not to the degree they had feared.

Lockhart developed the concept for his panoramic camera and then hired experts to build it. In all, he has pumped about \$125,000 in developing prototype camera systems, and he jokes that half of his shop is "full of inspirations — prototypes that didn't work."

His camera system can't be used in a plane or helicopter because its expansive 130-degree field of view would capture some of the copter or plane in the image. His "big camera," as he calls it, produces 3.2 gigabyte prints with a resolution of 150 dpi (dots per inch).

"You could take 35 millimeter film and blow it up, but the grain would look like snowflakes," Lockhart said. "Our camera produces detail 15 times the resolution of 35 millimeter camera."

The entire aerial system is wireless, with a video link that lets Lockhart control the camera from the ground and see what it is seeing in the air.

Global positioning satellite technology tells Lockhart longitude and latitude along with sensors for the altitude and direction of the view. He's working on a next-generation camera platform that will include more sensors to compensate for motion.

Lockhart, who must adhere to Federal Aviation Administration requirements, has a stable of loyal workers, some highly trained, others low-tech. For some people he hires, the main requirement is that they be available, often on short notice. Others are highly specialized, such as meteorologists who help forecast all-important wind and weather conditions for projects nationwide.

Knowing the local condo boom won't last forever, Lockhart has expanded nationally. He has consolidated his entire system and packs everything into a half-dozen cartons so he can check it as luggage on airlines.

Erick Beggs Photography



This is a 41' x 13' mural in the Austin W condo model. It is the future 25th floor condo window viewshed looking south. The 3.2 gigabyte file is printed a 130 ppi.

Lockhart says it's a tough line of work and he doesn't know if he'd do it over again. "We deliver almost 1,000 lbs of equipment and supplies for every photo flight. It's been a very difficult experience," he said. "With such a pioneering concept, we've had to do it the hard way."

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