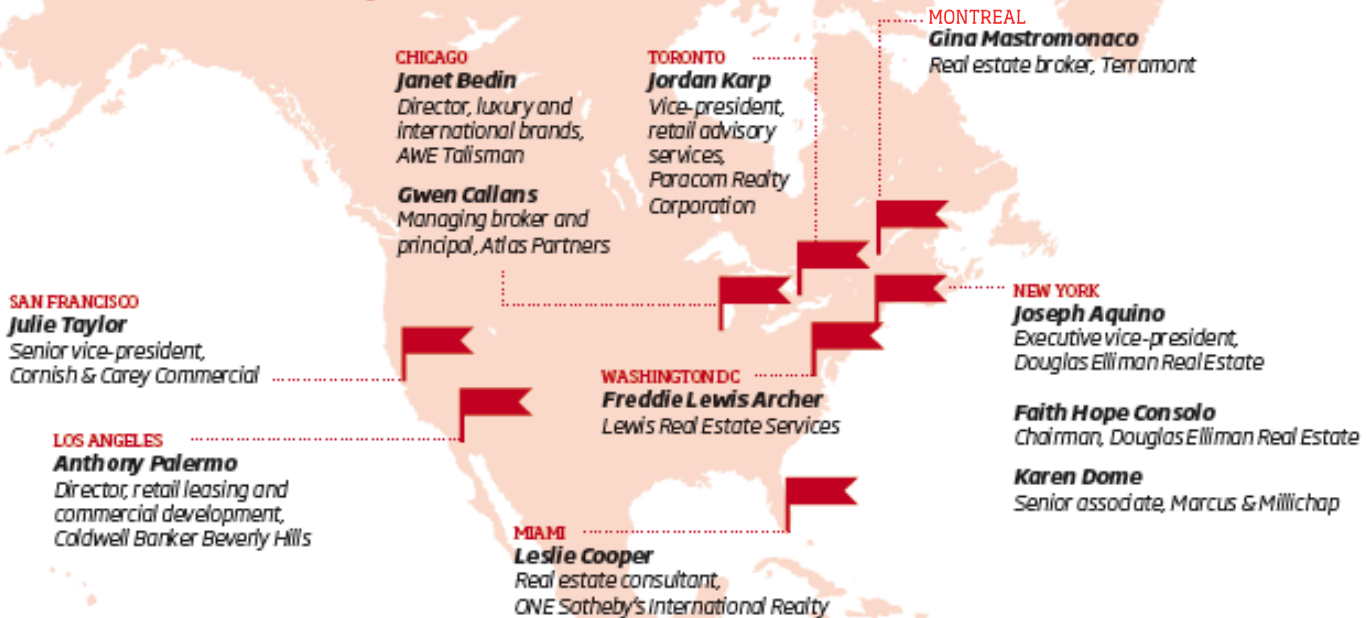


Networking

SECRET AGENTS

Global Secret Brokers' Society 'brotherhood'



It is 5 pm Austrian time and 11 am in New York, and the Secret Brokers' Society is discussing an explosion in Vienna.

No stick of dynamite is in sight, however. The society's New York-based founder, Joseph Aquino, is thankfully referring to the Austrian capital's luxury retail boom.

"Vienna is very hot right now," he says. "Everyone's trying to get in there. I wouldn't have known nearly as much about this before we started the society."

Aquino, who is also executive vice-president at New York-based specialist agency Douglas Elliman Real Estate, is leading a 90-minute conference call between some of the world's top fashion agents, each one a member of the Secret Brokers' Society, or SBS Group.

Wondering how to contend with the monolithic power of global property services firms, Aquino and his business partner, Douglas Elliman chairman Faith Hope Consolo, established this informal clique of surveyors two years ago.

Today, they cover a total of 27 countries and exchange ideas, information and, most importantly, contacts. By the end of the 90-minute phone call, we have learned that the

San Francisco retail market is "soaring", thanks to its ongoing technology boom, that uncertainty over the Italian government's future is the biggest brake on retail growth there, and why high-end fashion brands are more likely to choose Munich over Berlin for their first German outlet.

"It all came about with the globalisation of the larger office leasing firms that have retail leasing departments," says Aquino. "They didn't necessarily have the best people but, by having the highest office count and single branding, they

were taking a larger piece of the independents.

"Most of the members in our group would attest that they feel they are stronger in their markets but the branding from the larger companies was something we have learned to deal with daily.

"Three years back, I had a vision to buy all the best retail brokerage companies but at the end it became unpractical – not least because of a lack of capital to garner 20 to 30 offices at once."

Secret weapon

Instead, Aquino became something of a broker of brokers, handpicking 22 agents himself and creating cross-border relationships between the people in his personal network. The Secret Brokers' Society was born.

"As the founder, I inspire everyone to build relationships within the group," he says.

No formal governance exists, but members are expected to pay one another visits when travelling to an affiliate city.

Most of them also meet in Las Vegas once a year during the spring International Council of Shopping Centers conference.

The "secret" in the title refers to one-to-one deal making between brokers, but the calls are an

'Database means deals'

"I was one of the first members along with Joe Aquino three years ago. He has brokered the most deals because, in general, they are easier to do in America and they broker more deals as a direct result of SBS.

"Personally, I get more from the collaborative database we've put together for sharing information."

Marc-Christian Riebe,
Location Group, Switzerland

The Secret Brokers' Society has opened up a global retail property network to specialist agents. Nick Johnstone reports

LUXEMBOURG
Yves Walravens
Simons Walravens

FRANKFURT
Stephan Jung
Director and Head of retail agency Germany, Savills

VIENNA
Jörg Bitzer
Managing director, EHL Asset Management

ROME
Joseph Benoit
Director, Retail Real Estate Consultants Srl

HONG KONG
Nicholas Bradstreet
Head of retail leasing, Savills (Hong Kong)

Jeffrey Huen
Associate director, Savills Retail

ZURICH
Marc-Christian Riebe
President and chief executive, Location Group

Emma Rossi Bernardi
ERB Real Estate

LONDON
Aisling Cullen
Company director, HCH Retail

Nicholas Marks
Director, retail and leisure, James Andrew International

Harvey Soring
Chairman and CEO, James Andrew International

As the founder, I inspire everyone to build relationships within the group
Joseph Aquino

opportunity to get to know one another and their respective markets, says Aquino.

"I look for honest people who want to share and are not selfish. My creed is that, by belonging, you can make several more deals a year that weren't to be made without this association."

Douglas Elliman, for example, has won and referred instructions from brands such as jeweller Buccellati, French handbag maker Perrin, and Italian children's clothing brand Monnalisa, which wants to open 40 US stores.

London representatives,

James Andrew International director of retail and leisure

Nicholas Marks and chairman and CEO

Harvey Soring are working

for two US retailers that aim to set up in the UK.

"I've known [Joe and Faith] for 15-20 years," says Soring, who is also chairman of Europe for SBS Group. "Faith is the doyenne of New York luxury retail. It started as a fun thing, but it's now getting quite serious. It's informal – there's no documentation. It's like a secret brotherhood."

Now, one of the more exciting developments is the network's access to the insatiable demands of Far Eastern consumers. Western retailers are increasingly using Hong Kong as a springboard to the regions, allowing them to showcase their products to wealthy Chinese buyers doing their shopping there.

"Last week, we

'Overseas opportunities'

"It's good to get world opinions and different economic perspectives on my industry.

"Joe Aquino had a great idea to put everyone together and it has been a very useful source of information.

"SBS has been a great opportunity in sourcing opportunities abroad."

Emma Rossi Bernardi,
ERB Real Estate, Rome

had a client who was looking into Chinese malls, so we called Jeff Huen, our Chinese American colleague in Hong Kong," says Aquino. "He's already put Abercrombie & Fitch on Pedder Street. It's the best way to create brand awareness for the rest of China. In the past, I'd have been limited in my options."

The Secret Brokers' Society may be less of a secret than it was previously, but a "brotherhood" such as this can only be a good thing for a specialist firm operating in a globalised world. ■

