How to *Read* a Project

Floor plans, areas and views, read the way a professional reads them, so the brochure never decides your purchase for you.

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What This Guide Covers

CHAPTER ONE

The Brochure Is Not the Building

A render is a sales tool. The floor plan is the document that tells you the truth. Learn to read the second, not the first.

CHAPTER 01 · RENDERS SELL, PLANS TELL

Why the Marketing Is Not the Evidence

Every off-plan launch opens with the same thing: a beautiful render. Golden light, a wide sofa, a skyline through floor-to-ceiling glass. It is designed to make you feel something, and it works. But a render is a mood, not a measurement, and it is the one document in the pack you should trust least.

The evidence sits elsewhere: in the floor plan, the area schedule, the orientation, the floor level, the payment plan and the projected service charge. These are the documents that tell you what you are actually buying, how well it will live, and what it will cost you to hold. A professional spends two minutes on the render and an hour on the plans. This guide teaches you to do the same.

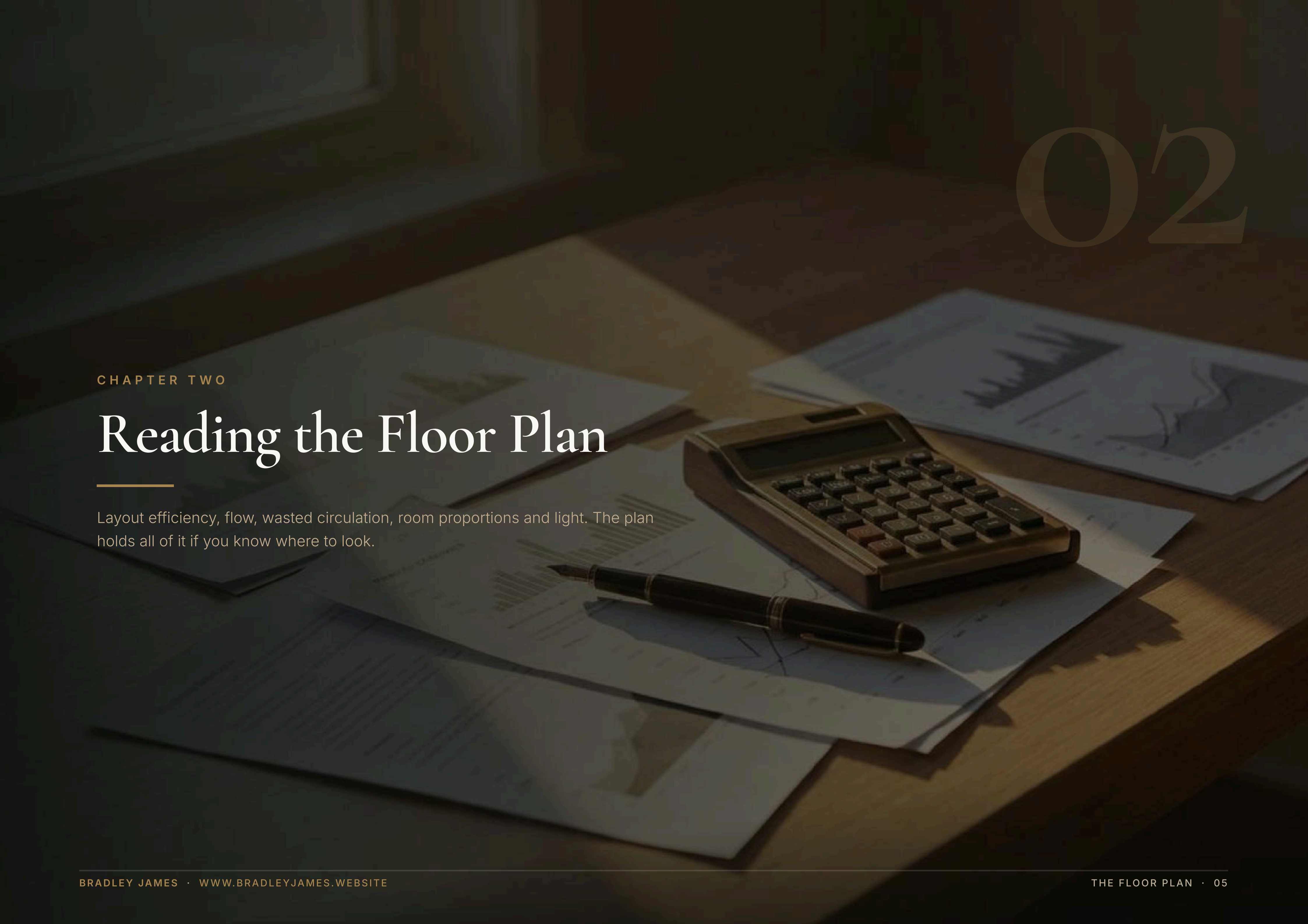
The good news is that reading a project is a skill, not a talent. There are perhaps a dozen things worth checking, and once you know them you will look at any brochure and see straight through it to the building underneath. That is the difference between buying what you were sold and buying what you chose.

WHAT ACTUALLY DECIDES THE DEAL

- The floor plan, how the space is laid out and how efficiently.
- The area basis, built-up versus net, because it changes the true price per square foot.
- Orientation and floor level, which fix light, heat, view and noise.
- The projected service charge, which quietly sets your net yield for life.
- The developer's delivery record and the project's registration.

THE POINT

"The render is what they want you to feel. The plan is what you are actually buying. Spend your time on the second."



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CHAPTER TWO

Reading the Floor Plan

Layout efficiency, flow, wasted circulation, room proportions and light. The plan holds all of it if you know where to look.

CHAPTER 02 · WHAT THE PLAN TELLS YOU

How a Unit Actually Lives

Start with efficiency. A good plan turns most of its area into rooms you use and very little into corridor. Look for long internal hallways, awkward dead corners and a bedroom you can only reach by walking through the living space. Circulation is area you pay for and never furnish, so the less of it the better. As a rough professional habit, the more of the plan that reads as usable room rather than passage, the better the unit lives.

Then the flow. Trace the walk from the front door to the kitchen with shopping, from the bedroom to the bathroom at night, from the living room to the balcony. Good plans make those journeys short and natural. Check the proportions too: a room measured in square feet can still be unusable if it is long and narrow, because furniture needs width, not just area. A 4 metre by 3 metre bedroom lives far better than a 6 by 2 of the same size.

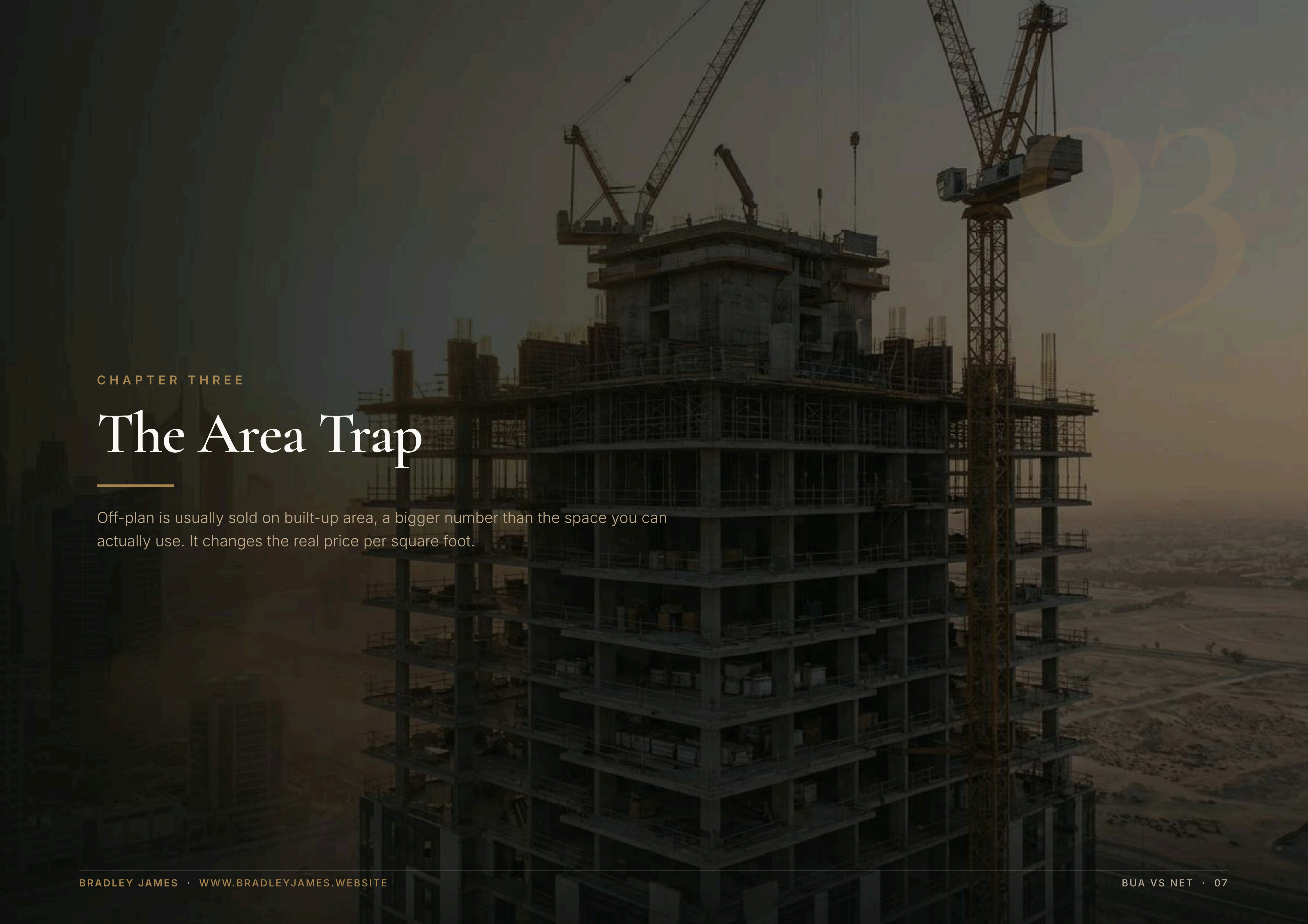
Finally, light. Note where the windows are and which way they face, then picture the sun crossing the unit through the day. A single-aspect unit, with all its glass on one wall, gets light from one direction only. A dual-aspect unit, with windows on two sides, is brighter, cross-ventilates and almost always lives better. It is one of the most reliable quality signals on any plan.

◆ SINGLE-ASPECT VS DUAL-ASPECT

Single-aspect means every window faces one direction, so light and air come from one side only. Dual-aspect means windows on two sides: brighter rooms, natural cross-flow and, usually, a better resale story. When two units cost the same, the dual-aspect one is normally the stronger buy.

◆ A HABIT WORTH KEEPING

"Walk the plan in your head before you ever walk the show unit. If the journeys feel awkward on paper, they will feel awkward for years."



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CHAPTER THREE

The Area Trap

Off-plan is usually sold on built-up area, a bigger number than the space you can actually use. It changes the real price per square foot.

The Number That Is Not What It Seems

This is the single most useful thing in the guide, and the one most buyers never check. Two units can quote the same square footage and give you very different amounts of usable space, because they are measured on different bases.

Built-up area, the BUA, is the total constructed area of the unit including the thickness of the internal walls and a share of common and circulation areas. **Suite, or net internal area**, is the usable internal floor area only, the space you can actually stand and furnish. The plot area is a third thing again, the land parcel for a villa. Off-plan in Dubai is frequently sold on the BUA, which is the larger, more flattering number.

The consequence is direct. A price per square foot calculated on BUA is **not comparable** to one calculated on net or suite area, because the BUA figure spreads your money across space you cannot use. Always confirm which basis a quoted area and a quoted price per square foot are on before you compare two units, and never let a broker compare a BUA figure on one against a net figure on another. It is the most common way a weaker unit is made to look like the better deal.

BUA

BUILT-UP: INCLUDES WALL THICKNESS PLUS A SHARE OF COMMON AREA

Off-plan glossary

Net

SUITE / NET INTERNAL: THE USABLE FLOOR AREA ONLY

Off-plan glossary

Confirm

ALWAYS ASK WHICH BASIS THE PRICE PER SQ FT USES

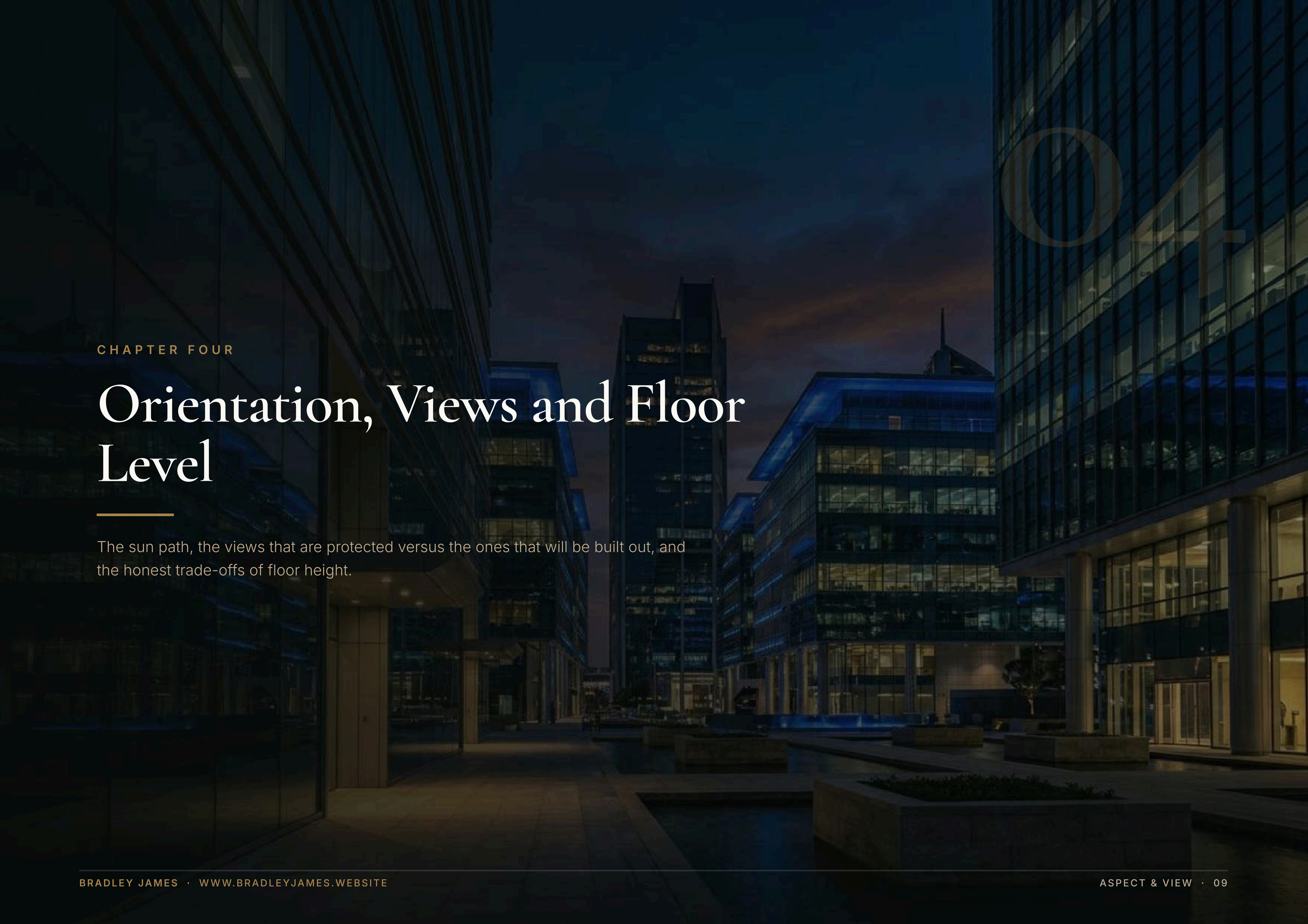
Buyer due diligence

◆ HOW TO USE IT

Ask one question of every unit: is this area, and this price per square foot, on built-up or on net internal area? Then compare like with like. Service charges are usually billed on the BUA, so the larger number costs you twice, once at purchase and again every year you hold.

◆ THE RULE

"A bigger square-foot number is not more space. Confirm the basis, then compare. Everything else about the unit flows from getting this right."



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CHAPTER FOUR

Orientation, Views and Floor Level

The sun path, the views that are protected versus the ones that will be built out, and the honest trade-offs of floor height.

CHAPTER 04 · WHICH WAY AND HOW HIGH

Sun, View and the Floor You Choose

Orientation matters more in Dubai than in a cooler climate, because the sun is a heat source for most of the year. A wall of unshaded west-facing glass takes the full afternoon sun and can make a room hot and expensive to cool. North-facing rooms give the softest, most even light and the least solar gain. There is no single correct aspect, but you should know which way the main glass faces and picture the sun on it before you decide, not after you move in.

Then the view, and the harder question behind it: is it protected or will it be built out? A view across a park, a canal, the sea or an established low-rise district is likely to last. A view across an empty plot or a low building is a view on borrowed time, because the next tower can take it. Ask what is zoned for the plots in your sightline. A premium paid for a view that disappears in three years is a premium lost.

Floor level is a set of trade-offs, not a simple higher-is-better. A podium or low floor is closer to amenities and the street, cheaper, but can be overlooked and noisier. A mid floor often balances outlook, light and price. A high floor buys the view and the quiet but usually costs more per square foot and can sit above the podium noise of pools and terraces. Match the floor to what you actually value, and remember that noise from a road, a flight path or a podium deck is easiest to judge on site, so visit if you can.

◆ THE VIEW QUESTION

- What is on the plots between your window and the horizon?
- Are those plots zoned for towers, or protected as park, water or low-rise?
- Which way does the main glass face, and how hard is the afternoon sun?
- Is there podium, road or flight-path noise at this level?

◆ THE HONEST LINE

"Pay for a view that is protected by a park, a canal or the sea. Be cautious paying for one that an empty plot can take away."

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Building and the Developer

Finish quality, the amenities that add value versus the ones that just add service charge, and the developer's delivery record.

Spec, Amenities and Who Is Building It

A good unit in a poor building is still a poor buy. Read the specification: the finish schedule, the brand of kitchen and bathroom fittings, the flooring, the glazing, the ceiling heights. Developers vary widely, and the words 'premium' and 'luxury' in a brochure mean nothing until you see the actual schedule. Where you can, compare the spec against a completed building by the same developer, because delivered quality is the only quality that counts.

Amenities need a colder eye than they usually get. A pool, a gym and a lobby are expected. But every amenity is built, cleaned, staffed and maintained, and that cost flows into your annual service charge, which is billed per square foot for as long as you own. Amenities that genuinely lift value and rent are worth the charge; a long list of lightly-used facilities is a recurring cost dressed up as a benefit. Ask which amenities will still matter to a tenant in five years, and treat the rest as an expense.

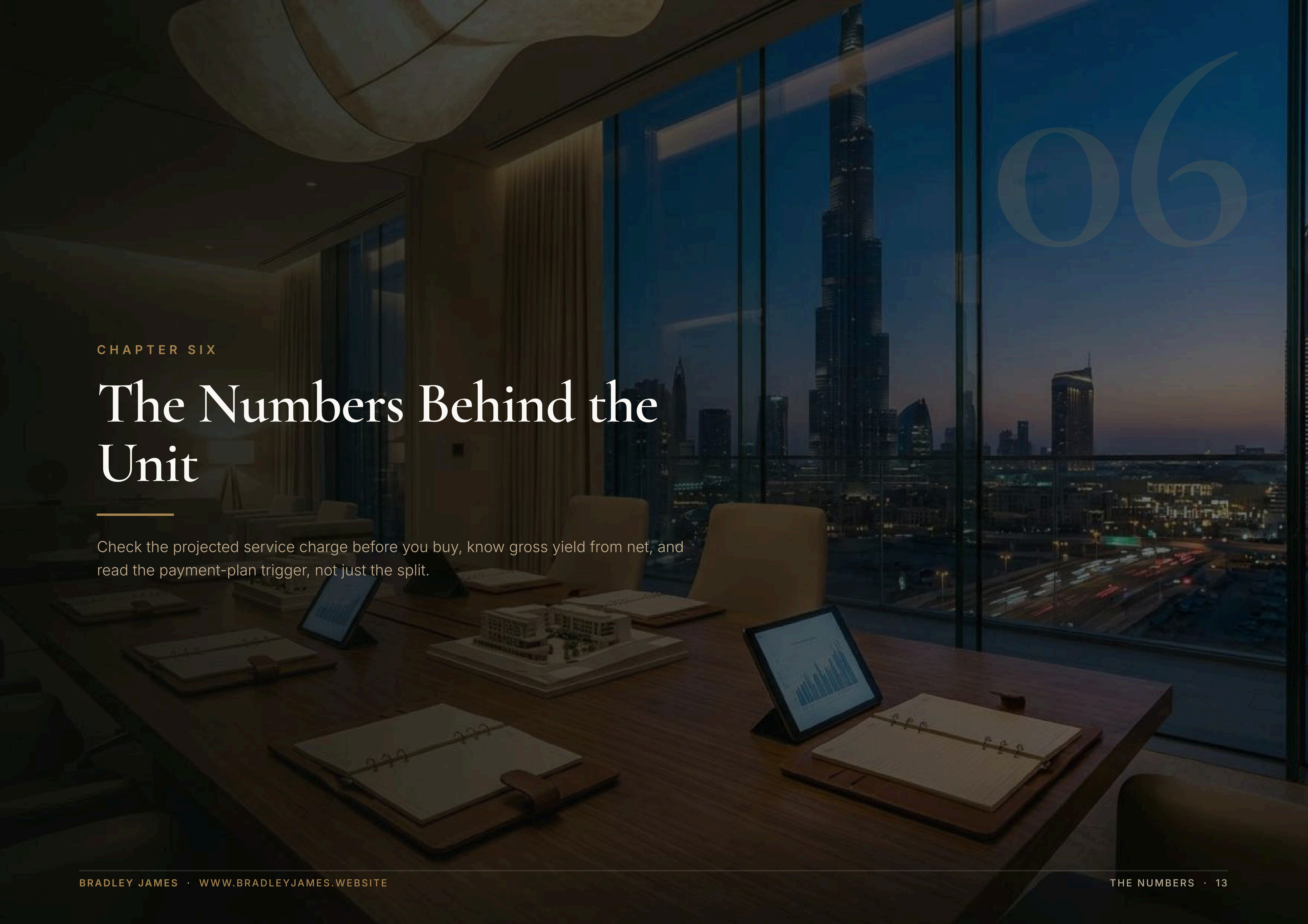
Finally, the developer's delivery record, which is the closest thing to a guarantee you will get. Have they completed projects, and did those hand over on time and to the promised quality? A developer with a long, clean record of delivery is worth paying for. This is exactly the ground a Developer Scorecard covers, and it belongs in your reading of any project, because the unit is only as good as the company that finishes it.

◆ **VALUE VS SERVICE CHARGE**

Sort every amenity into two piles: things that raise rent and resale, and things that only raise the service charge. A rooftop pool and a real gym earn their keep. A cinema room, a golf simulator and four extra lounges usually just add to the per-square-foot bill you pay every year.

◆ **THE DELIVERY TEST**

"A brochure is a promise. A completed building you can walk through is evidence. Judge a developer on what they have handed over, not what they have drawn."



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CHAPTER SIX

The Numbers Behind the Unit

Check the projected service charge before you buy, know gross yield from net, and read the payment-plan trigger, not just the split.

CHAPTER 06 · SERVICE CHARGE AND YIELD

The Costs That Set Your Real Return

A unit's numbers decide whether it is an investment or just a purchase. Start with the **service charge**, the annual per-square-foot fee for the upkeep of the building and shared areas. It is set by the owners' association budget, approved by RERA, published on the DLD **Service Charge Index** and billed through the **Mollak** system, so it is checkable before you buy, not a surprise after. Charges vary widely by building, and a high one quietly eats your net yield every single year you hold. Pull the figure for the specific building and put it into your sums before you commit.

	AFFORDABLE	MID-MARKET	PRIME / BRANDED
Service charge, AED per sq ft per year (indicative bands)	6 to 10	10 to 18	20 to 35+

Indicative bands only, from the verified cost pack; the city-wide median sits around 17 dirhams per square foot. Always read the exact figure for a named building on the DLD Service Charge Index before buying, since it is billed on the built-up area for as long as you own.

Then know your yields apart. **Gross yield** is annual rent divided by purchase price, before any costs. **Net yield** is what is left after the service charge, cooling, management, maintenance and a vacancy allowance, on a cost base that includes the fees to buy. Service charges alone typically take a meaningful slice of gross rent, so net always sits below gross. A marketing 'yield' is almost always the gross figure, and it is not the number you live on. Do the net sum yourself.

◆ CHECK THIS BEFORE YOU BUY

The service charge is on a public index. There is no excuse for being surprised by it. Read the building's figure, multiply by the built-up area, and subtract it from your rent before you call any yield attractive.

◆ GROSS IS NOT NET

"A headline yield is a gross yield. Subtract the service charge, cooling, management and voids, and judge the number that is actually left."

Read the Trigger, Not Just the Split

If the unit is off-plan, the payment plan is part of the unit, and its structure matters as much as its headline. Instalments are triggered one of two ways. A **construction-linked, or milestone,** plan releases each payment when a real building stage is verified, so your money follows the concrete and aligns with the escrow releases. A **time-linked** plan sets payments to fixed calendar dates regardless of progress, which means you can be paying ahead of a slow build. Milestone-linked is the more protective structure for a buyer.

So read the trigger, not only the split. An 80/20 or 60/40 headline tells you the shape of the plan but nothing about the risk inside it. Ask how each instalment is called. And a reminder from the financing side: off-plan mortgage financing is typically capped near 50% of value, and that cap is set by the Central Bank and revised from time to time, so confirm the current figure with your bank before you assume the low-cash route the plan seems to offer.

◆ ONE QUESTION TO ASK

A 60/40 plan sounds generous, but if the 60% is tied to calendar dates rather than milestones you can be paying ahead of a slow build. Ask how each instalment is triggered, then judge the plan.

◆ THE FINANCING NOTE

"Off-plan financing is usually capped near 50%, per the Central Bank. Confirm the live figure with your bank before you count on it."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Red-Flags Checklist

Run this before you sign anything. Any one of these is a reason to slow down and ask a harder question.

The Warning Signs Worth Stopping For

1. **The area basis is not stated, or mixes BUA and net.**
If a broker will not tell you whether the square footage and price per square foot are built-up or net internal, treat that as the answer and press until it is clear.

2. **The view sits over an empty or low plot.**
A view is only worth paying for if it is protected. Ask what is zoned for the plots in your sightline before you pay a view premium.

3. **The floor plan is all corridor and dead corners.**
Long internal hallways and rooms you reach through other rooms are wasted area you pay for and never use.

4. **The amenity list is long and lightly used.**
Every facility is a recurring service charge. If most of the list will not matter to a tenant, it is a cost dressed as a benefit.

5. **The developer's delivery record is thin or unclear.**
Ask what they have completed, on time and to spec. A brochure is a promise; a handed-over building is evidence.

6. **The projected service charge is vague or missing.**
It is on the DLD Service Charge Index. If nobody will give you the figure, assume it is high and check the index yourself.

7. **The project's registration or escrow cannot be shown.**
A registered off-plan project has a DLD and RERA registration and a named escrow account, verifiable on Dubai REST. If it cannot be shown, stop.

8. **The payment plan is time-linked, not milestone-linked.**
Fixed calendar dates can put your money ahead of the build. Ask how each instalment is triggered before you sign.

◆ HOW TO USE THE LIST

None of these on its own means walk away. Each one means slow down and ask a harder question. A strong project answers all of them cleanly. A weak one starts to get evasive, and the evasion is the information.

◆ THE DISCIPLINE

"The buyers who never get caught are not smarter. They just refuse to sign until every one of these has a clear answer."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Straight Answers

The questions buyers actually ask when they sit down to read a project properly for the first time.

The Questions Buyers Actually Ask

Q. What is the single most important thing to check on a plan?

The area basis. Confirm whether the square footage and the price per square foot are quoted on built-up area or on net internal (suite) area, because off-plan is usually sold on the larger built-up number, and a price per square foot on BUA is not comparable to one on net. Get that right and every other comparison you make is honest.

Q. Is a higher floor always better?

No. A high floor buys view and quiet but usually costs more per square foot and can sit above podium noise. A mid floor often balances outlook, light and price, and a low floor is cheaper and closer to amenities. Match the floor to what you actually value rather than assuming higher wins.

Q. How do I know if a view will last?

Ask what is on the plots between your window and the horizon, and whether they are zoned for towers or protected as park, water or low-rise. A view across a park, a canal or the sea is likely to last. A view across an empty plot is on borrowed time, so be cautious paying a premium for it.

Q. Why does the service charge matter so much?

Because it is an annual per-square-foot cost for as long as you own, and it comes straight off your rent. It is set by the owners' association budget, approved by RERA, published on the DLD Service Charge Index and billed through Mollak, so you can and should check the specific building's figure before you buy and put it into your net-yield sum.

Q. What is the difference between gross and net yield?

Gross yield is annual rent divided by purchase price, before costs. Net yield is what is left after the service charge, cooling, management, maintenance and a vacancy allowance, on a cost base that includes the fees to buy. Marketing quotes the gross figure; you live on the net one, which is always lower.

Q. Does the payment plan really matter, or just the price?

It matters. Read the trigger, not only the split. A milestone-linked plan releases each payment against verified building progress, so your money follows the concrete. A time-linked plan pays on fixed dates regardless of the build, which can put you ahead of a slow project. Ask how each instalment is called before you judge the plan.

Q. How do I check a project is genuine before I pay anything?

A registered off-plan project has a DLD and RERA registration and a named, ring-fenced escrow account, and you can verify both yourself on the Dubai REST app before you pay a dirham. If a seller cannot show you the registration and the escrow account, that is your answer.

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Every Figure, Sourced

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WORK WITH BRADLEY JAMES

Read It Before You Believe It.

◆ ABOUT BRADLEY

Not a broker, an advisor. I built a business in the UK and spent more than a decade advising people from all walks of life, before moving to Dubai and joining M&M Real Estate to work at a higher strategic level than the typical transactional broker. I specialise exclusively in off-plan investment for overseas and high-net-worth clients, I put my own capital into the projects I recommend, and my business is more than 80% referral-driven, because every client came through someone who trusted me first.

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