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# A Brooklyn Apartment Beckons

By [JOYCE COHEN](#)

AS a born-and-bred Manhattanite, Kirsten Abrams never considered living in any other borough. She and her partner, Jane Bishop, who is from Long Island, lived for the last four years at Le Rivage, an Art Deco rental building on West Street, just north of Battery Park. They paid \$2,500 a month.

When they moved there from the Upper East Side, the area was still recovering from the 9/11 terrorist attacks. “You had to watch where you stepped and there was disruption in the street,” Ms. Bishop said. Few stores and services were available.

In their 40s and both special education teachers, the women met while attending graduate school at the Bank Street College of Education, and were married last year in Connecticut. Their apartment in Le Rivage was small — too small, as it turned out: a little more than 600 square feet. They put their baby grand piano “in the corner where most people would have a dining table,” Ms. Bishop said, and their dining table against a wall “where most people would put a couch.” It was a drop-leaf table, so when friends came to dinner, they flipped up the leaf and moved the table to a more central spot. Still, if one person wanted to leave the table, someone else had to move.

Not that friends visited all that often. The apartment was right off the West Side Highway, and it was not easy to feel a sense of community, Ms. Abrams said. They had a sensation of “getting on trains all the time” to visit others. About a year ago, the couple decided it was time to buy a place. They had a budget of around \$500,000 for a one-bedroom. They wanted something large enough “to entertain people in our home in a comfortable way without having to move the furniture around,” Ms. Bishop said.

What [Manhattan](#) neighborhood would work? Because they sing in the Stonewall Chorale, a gay and lesbian chorus that rehearses in Greenwich Village, the Village was ideal. But prices there were beyond reach. They did see a unit in a prewar walk-up building with a kitchen so poorly laid out that “you couldn’t open the stove unless you opened the refrigerator,” Ms. Bishop said.

Ms. Abrams and Ms. Bishop decided they weren’t averse to staying downtown. “Nine months out of the year, we were in love with the weather and the water,” Ms. Abrams said. Early on in the search, they came close to buying at the Regatta, a condo building on South End Avenue in Battery Park City. The apartments there with views of the Statue of Liberty were too expensive. But an 850-square-foot one-bedroom with a terrace appealed to them, despite the fact that the tub in the master bathroom had been removed, leaving only a shower. When they saw the place, the price was \$495,000.

But the common charge and taxes amounted to more than \$2,200 a month. Examining the numbers, they realized they couldn’t afford it. (That unit is now in contract for \$445,000.) They considered the 1929 Greenwich Club on Greenwich Street, another Art Deco skyscraper, converted in 2000 to rentals and in 2007 to condos. But units in their price range were around 600 square feet, hardly bigger than their rental.

Other downtown condo conversions had so much interior space that they were dark inside, and “we knew they would never brighten up,” Ms. Bishop said.

Ms. Bishop had previously lived in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn, and Astoria, Queens, so she argued for expanding the hunt beyond Manhattan. “I was thinking, if we move off the grid of Manhattan into Brooklyn, there are many neighborhoods,” she said. “Why not Brooklyn?” Ms. Abrams was torn. “I am willing to live in a closet in order to live in a great neighborhood,” she said, “and Jane would rather have a lot of space.” A friend suggested they look at BellTel Lofts, the 1930 building that was once home to the New York Telephone Company, so off they went to downtown Brooklyn.

The building had the Art Deco beauty they loved. “There is something very warm and spacious about an Art Deco building,” Ms. Bishop said. “The ceilings are very high. I feel that high ceilings bring lofty ideas.” When they visited their apartment, she recalled, “it said, ‘here I am,’ and we pretty much knew right away.” Late last summer, the couple bought a 1,050-square-foot condo, technically a studio with a home office because the bedroom has no window. Ms. Abrams prefers it that way. When she has a migraine, she would rather be in the dark.

The listing price was \$572,000; the couple paid \$565,000. Because the building takes advantage of the J-51 tax abatement, monthly charges are now around \$350. Ms. Bishop, a public school teacher, says her salary will rise over time, so “as we have to start paying taxes, I would have more of an income to do so.” A carpenter friend added floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the living room, which took up just enough room to make the piano seem too large for the space. So the couple donated it to the church next door, the Oratory Church of St. Boniface, which granted them playing privileges. “They were thrilled,” Ms. Bishop said. “And we were thrilled the piano would have a loving home.”

There is now plenty of room for visiting friends. “This apartment invites celebrating and cooking,” Ms. Abrams said. “It is a place to enjoy people and treat them to lunch and dinner.” When they first moved, she feared encountering the same isolation they had felt on West Street, but so many subway lines converge in downtown Brooklyn that friends don’t mind making the trip. Ms. Abrams and Ms. Bishop have, for the first time, walked across the Brooklyn Bridge, and are expanding their Brooklyn horizons. “In two minutes we are in Brooklyn Heights or in different sections of Brooklyn that are very different from one another,” Ms. Abrams said.

“For me, Manhattan gave me the feeling that I always had to be moving. I was always programmed to be wearing a watch and getting somewhere all the time.” But now, she said, “I don’t need to be constantly looking at my watch because I’m not hearing traffic all the time. I have a different sense of the pace I need to keep, so that is a huge change that I never would have expected.”