

Will Call

Grown-up Billyburg Becomes Option No. 1

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Bethany Nagy thought she only wanted to buy in Manhattan, but she spent one day in Williamsburg and fell in love with this condo at 125 N. 10th St.

When Bethany Nagy first decided she was ready to become a homeowner, the only option for her was Manhattan.

“I was one of those New Yorkers who thought that Manhattan was the end all,” says Nagy, who’d lived on the island for about 15 of the past 18 years, the remainder of which she’d spent in Minneapolis.

But Nagy quickly realized that what she could afford in Manhattan amounted to “about 500 square feet.” She was frustrated and communicated as much to her broker, Ildiko Gugan of Citi Habitats. Gugan offered a solution, but it required Nagy to take a leap of faith — and spend a day in Williamsburg.

Though Nagy, 39, had been to the Brooklyn neighborhood once or twice before, she knew very little about it.

“I didn’t know what the Bedford stop was,” Nagy says as proof of her ignorance.

But that one day was all it took. Nagy was sold on the neighborhood, and specifically a 780-square-foot one-bedroom with a 450-square-foot terrace in 125 N. 10th St., a new 86-unit development not far from McCarren Park. Nagy purchased the unit for \$620,000, moved into the building in January and has never looked back.

Yes, prime Williamsburg (now sometimes called North Williamsburg as opposed to South Williamsburg, which has emerged as its own artsy area) is still the land of indie rock and Bedford Avenue boutiques, but it also has more fancy new developments than you can shake a hipster at. And the area has been turning

Manhattan residents into Brooklyn converts faster than you can say changing urban landscape.

“Over the last six weeks or so, 70 percent of our traffic has been from Manhattan,” says Jason Halpern of JMH Development, which developed 184 Kent, a conversion of a historic building on the Williamsburg waterfront into 340 rental units.

And we’re not talking about young, hip and just out of college — but all kinds of Manhattanites, established Manhattanites, those with serious cash. At 184 Kent, two of the penthouses are being combined and rented together for \$10,000.

Numerous other buildings are also relying on or hoping for customers that are more moneyed than the typical hipster.

“A lot of people think Williamsburg is about the hipster community that’s out there, [but] they’re not buying” apartments, says David Maundrell, president of aptsandlofts.com, which is selling the Residences at the Williamsburg.

That development, at 135 N. 11th St., with units priced about \$775 per square foot, has 57 condos in two towers with access to the amenities of an accompanying hotel. (In a nod to the pre-2008 boom, this building is being sold pre-construction in the hopes that buyers will have faith in the floor plans.)

“We thought the average age would be 25. That has not been the case,” says Robert Scaglione, senior managing director of residential marketing at Rose Associates, which is working on 184 Kent and 34 Berry, a new-construction rental priced from \$1,940 to \$5,195 a month for studios to terraced two-bedrooms.

“Our renters have been a much older and more established crowd. There are older couples, singles, plenty of people in their 40s and 50s. I think they like the [area’s] young vibe.”

This was the case for Mike Nocera and Paula Chester. The couple, now both retired, lived in the West Village for 28 years before recently deciding they wanted to lower their monthly expenses. Problem was, they couldn’t find anything in Manhattan that could live up to their lifestyle: large quarters in a hip neighborhood.

Enter Williamsburg. They were turned on to the neighborhood by their son, a musician who often performs in the area. There, they found Northside Piers, with its water views, large space and proximity to a youthful, happening scene.

“It’s young there and there is a lot of energy,” says Nocera, 64.

He and Chester, 63, purchased two units, which they plan to combine.

“It reminds us of the way the Village used to be when it was a much more diverse community, from people who were not wealthy at all to people who are very wealthy,” Nocera adds.

According to Sarah Burke, executive vice president and director of the Williamsburg office at Prudential Douglas Elliman, new development in the neighborhood is fetching from \$700 to \$775 a square foot, on average. That's high for Brooklyn (South Williamsburg is about \$650 to \$675 per square foot), but it's still significantly cheaper than most of Manhattan. Units at 125 N. 10th St., for example, are closing at about \$725 a square foot.

"To put that in a dollars-and-cents perspective, you put this same project on the L train in the East Village. Instead of paying \$700 a foot, you're paying \$1,100 a foot in Union Square," says Doug Bowen, vice president of **Core**, of 125 N. 10th St., for which he acts as the sales and marketing director.

Prices at nearby 80 Metropolitan, with 122 units including nine townhouses, range from \$385,000 to \$1.575 million for the highest priced three-story, 2,100 square foot townhouse.

That said, Williamsburg's rental prices aren't necessarily a deal when compared with Manhattan.

"Right now, our price points compare to some of the higher-end rentals in Manhattan," says Halpern of 184 Kent, where studios start at \$2,250 for 500 square feet. One-bedrooms in the 700-square-foot range start at \$2,650, while two-bedrooms in the 900-square-foot range start at \$3,775. The building is offering one month of free rent on a one-year lease.

And it is renting fast, with 220 units leased since January. Over at 34 Berry, rental activity is similarly brisk. After four months of leasing, only about a dozen of the 142 units remain.

It looks like many former Manhattanites are not choosing rentals in Williamsburg to save a buck, but because they actually prefer to be there.

"What I notice now is people are picking Williamsburg as their first destination to live," Burke says. "They are choosing to live here."