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Apartment Hunting With Children in Mind

By TERI KARUSH ROGERS

AS New York City continues to evolve from the city of eight million stories to the city of eight million strollers, the demand for “family friendly” housing has never been more keen.

Buyers out looking for two- and three-bedroom apartments will find that there are more for sale now than there have been in years, and they are taking longer to sell, according to market reports released last week. And although prices for these apartments have dropped across the city since the beginning of the year, buyers might not find those declines in the most coveted neighborhoods, like the Upper East Side and downtown Manhattan.

But beyond the promise of enough square footage to avoid stacking one’s children like Legos (at least while they’re awake), many parents harbor only a vague notion of what family-friendly entails. And without the advice of their brokers — who have grown increasingly fearful of violating fair-housing laws by providing information that could be considered discriminatory — some are not even sure when they have found it.

“There can be a real disconnect between the priorities of unseasoned parents and experienced parents,” said Julie Friedman, an executive vice president of Bellmarc Realty. “Kids do not need toddler yoga classes in the basement, and a washer-dryer in the apartment is uber important, even if you have household help. Also it’s crucially important that the building impart a sense of security and warmth and interest in your child. It takes a village to raise a child, and a building is a microcosm of that village.”

Indeed, there appear to be two major pillars of family friendliness. One involves the tangible physical aspects of the building and the apartment — everything from amenities and location to the layout and the depth of the bathtub.

The other concerns the atmosphere of a building: are children, and their occasionally annoying antics, likely to be embraced by staff members and residents, or barely tolerated?

“Nobody buys million-dollar apartments looking for strife,” Ms. Friedman said. “You don’t want to go into a situation where you will be creating upheaval and uproar. You want to live your life peacefully and calmly. You want to know what you’re getting.”

According to the prevailing wisdom, the more families there are in a building, the better the chance that one’s own brood will be welcomed— which is why many parents understandably focus their due diligence on a building’s demographics. But with more brokers unwilling to provide such information because of fair-housing laws, parents must increasingly rely on their own sleuthing powers. (According to a strict interpretation of federal state and local fair-housing laws, describing a building as “family friendly” is

illegal.)

Fortunately, there are a variety of obvious and not-so-obvious techniques for collecting intelligence about a building's juvenile population.

Potential neighbors are not subject to the same legal constraints as brokers, so asking them can be a fruitful way to begin. So is planting oneself gumshoe-style in the lobby or across the street to observe the human traffic flowing in and out of the building.

There are also a host of circumstantial indicators.

The presence of window guards, for example, means that children lived in the building at some point. If there are the kind of wire storage bins in the basement that you can see into, you can get a more in-depth snapshot of the under-18 segment.

"If the bins have highchairs that violate all the federal safety codes and the cribs look like they can strangle a child," Ms. Friedman said, "you can safely assume that the people in that apartment had kids 45 years ago and may or may not be so friendly to kids."

Likewise, stashed strollers can also double as carbon-dating tools.

"If it's a Peg Perego Roma, then they had babies in the late '90s," Ms. Friedman said. "A Bugaboo means they currently have children. The color of the Bugaboo tells you what period — the brighter and louder, the more current it is. A lime green or hot orange or jazzy pink means they currently have a stroller-age kid."

Just as the presence of cribs and highchairs isn't necessarily a harbinger of a currently youthful population, a playroom doesn't necessarily signal a current contingent of pint-size residents.

"If it's small and dowdy and hasn't been updated in a long time," said Fern Hammond, a senior vice president at Halstead Property, "you can probably surmise that it doesn't get great usage and that there aren't that many younger children still in the building."

She also recommended learning how many two- and three-bedroom units make up the building. "If it's comprised of half or more of the larger-sized units, that's an excellent barometer to gauge the family situation."

Similarly, a building that allows washer-dryers inside apartments is more likely to draw families.

But just because there are a lot of children in the building doesn't necessarily mean they are welcomed. Doorman behavior can be an excellent barometer of child-friendliness, or lack thereof.

"You get a vibe from the doorman," said Danielle Goffin-Vadai, who is looking for a three-bedroom apartment in Murray Hill with the help of Ms. Friedman. In some buildings, she said, "if I had to shush the kids in the lobby, I knew it wasn't the place for us. When I visited the building where I live now, everyone was saying hello to the doorman and the doorman was saying hello back, and I saw lots of strollers."

A doorman who dispenses high-fives to children "sets the tone for the building, because that attitude comes from up above," Ms. Friedman said. "That means the building itself has established that it's O.K. for the

doorman to do this. Some boards say they must not bend down and pet the dog — just open the door and say good morning — so when you see they are nice and accepting and engaging, you know it's sanctioned.”

On the other hand, evidence of a fraught relationship with the younger generation may be gleaned by asking to see a building's written record.

House rules that prohibit in-line skating or bike riding or stroller parking in the hallways indicate the presence of residents who do this, others who don't like it, and a board that comes down on the stricter side. And if the co-op board's minutes document a steady stream of noise complaints, the building may not be eager to welcome children.

As parents on the front lines of child rearing and Manhattan real estate can attest, finding a building that welcomes families is half the battle.

The other half?

“All the silly things I would never care about if I didn't have kids,” said Ajita Abraham, a 36-year-old lawyer at Credit Suisse.

Ms. Abraham and her husband, Reynaldo Geerken, 38, have been searching for a larger apartment for more than a year. With two sons, ages 1 and 3, the couple initially focused on new two-bedroom two-bathroom condominiums with at least 1,300 square feet. But they soon decided that the buildings in their price range weren't as family friendly as they had imagined.

“The newer buildings seem so enticing — they have pools and playrooms and fancy roof decks, but the children's playroom only lasts so long before the kids outgrow it,” she said. “What we really wanted was closet space for kiddy stuff and storage space, and the older buildings have much better closets.”

In addition, Ms. Abraham said, the new two-bedrooms in their price range were ill suited to a family of four. “The bedrooms are completely shaved off, but you have two huge bathrooms,” she said. “What are you going to do in the bathroom? I need an extra bathroom but not a huge one. Also, a lot of the time they have glass instead of a shower curtain, which is really impractical when trying to give a baby a bath.”

Ms. Abraham and her husband have shifted their focus to apartments built in the 1950s and '60s, where they believe their requirements are more likely to be met within their budget.

For stroller convenience, “buildings with stairs are automatically nixed when they don't have a ramp,” she said.

Ms. Abraham says she also looks for a high wall if there is a terrace; a washer-dryer in the apartment; a second bedroom big enough for two children to sleep and play inside; a location in the East 50s or the Upper East Side in walking distance of Central Park, schools, and play centers; an open kitchen to better keep an eye on children during meal preparation; and thick walls and floors that can help muffle sound.

The couple are also seeking a building with a garage underneath.

“Right now, we have a garage next door to us, but if we had one underneath, everyone could go together, which makes a huge difference when it's freezing outside,” Ms. Abraham said. “It sounds silly, but it's the

little things that help you survive. Like it's really nice to have a friendly doorman who comes running out to help us get all of our luggage out of the car or load up the luggage rack or extract a kid from a cab."

Those sorts of details frequently fail to occur to apartment hunters on the cusp of child rearing.

When Ms. Goffin-Vadai and her husband, Eyal, bought an apartment two years ago, they weren't yet parents. Now that they have two daughters, ages 10 weeks and 20 months, they are looking to expand from their two-bedroom two-bath cookie-cutter postwar co-op in Murray Hill — and their wish list is considerably more detailed.

"We're not going to another apartment without a washer-dryer — it's a must for next time," Ms. Goffin-Vadai said. "I wouldn't get a balcony, even if it's childproofed, which is actually very funny because it was a huge bonus for us a few years ago. As for a gym, it's easy enough to go a few blocks more — a washer-dryer is more important."

While a building playroom would be nice, she added, "if we had enough space, it wouldn't be important."

And although she could put up with a couple of stairs outside the building, having enough room to maneuver her double stroller (which she takes to all the apartments she sees) is as non-negotiable as having a doorman.

"A doorman really makes a difference when you've got groceries and a double stroller and a dog," she said.

Ms. Goffin-Vadai and other parents said they prized a family-friendly layout as much as storage space and en suite laundry facilities.

"Most New York apartments, especially in the Upper West Side older buildings, are almost square," said Barbara Segor, a 34-year-old training manager with a year-old son, "so that a typical two-bedroom feels very close and cramped."

Ms. Segor and her husband, Craig, recently closed on a newly converted prewar condo at the Avonova on West 81st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam. The \$2 million two-bedroom two-bath apartment that they chose has an elongated layout — a hallway leads to the rear of the apartment, creating a bedroom wing distinctly separate from the living area.

"Having a little child, it was a big deal that if he does want to run around inside, we won't feel like he's on top of us the whole time," she said.

Dr. Tara Bishop, the mother of two young sons, ages 4 years and 21 months, is another proponent of the proper layout. She and her husband, Joseph, signed a contract in April for a 2,400-square-foot condominium being built at 255 East 74th Street and First Avenue.

"It's so funny because the building marketed itself as family-friendly," offering a gym with baby-sitting services and a playroom run by Equinox, Dr. Bishop said. "Those are nice amenities to have and I hope we use them, but I don't think we had to live in a building with a playroom. It was completely the layout. It's a four-bedroom apartment with a kids' side and an adult side, so on one side the kids have bedrooms and a small little den and the other side has a room to entertain and the master bedroom."

The apartment's 13-by-13-foot children's den was "a genius idea" and a huge selling point as a place to store toys, Dr. Bishop said, especially because the family is on the wait list to buy one of the six storage units that will be offered at \$45,000 apiece.

Besides the generous layout, she said, "the biggest thing for us was location."

"We really limited our search to the East 60s, 70s, 80s and some of the 90s," she said, "because we think it's a great area for raising kids — near the park, playgrounds and museums."

Sleuthing Out Kid-Friendliness

HERE are some ways to help determine whether a building is "family friendly."

¶ Watch how the doormen interact with children. Whether they are helpful with strollers and playful with youngsters — or whether they basically stick to opening and closing the door — can be dictated by the building management.

¶ Ask the neighbors if there are a lot of young families in the building (and watch their facial expressions when they answer).

¶ Observe the residents walking in and out. Prime hours are before school, 7:45 to 8:15 a.m., and after school, 3:20 to 4 p.m.

¶ Ask how many apartments are two- and three-bedrooms. More families are likely to live in a building with more large apartments.

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