

The New York Times

The Ultimate Amenity: Grandparents



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Melissa Sawyer, Eric Kaplan and their son, Sawyer, with Ms. Sawyer's mother, Anne Villers, walking Carmen, near the apartment the couple rented for her in Jersey City.

By [ROBIN FINN](#)

Published: December 21, 2012 [161 Comments](#)

THE unlikely new custodians of the nuclear family are young, urban and inextricably caught up in their careers: Do not expect them to flee the city for the suburban lawns and balms of their wonder years. They don't want to go home again, not even if or when their lives start to be accessorized by cradles, strollers, pacifiers, pediatrician appointments and nannies. They prefer to customize the complexities of the city to fit their needs, not escape the city for simpler climes.

But sometimes there is a missing link, and repairing it entails not just importing, but sheltering, a key ingredient of the traditional family: the grandparent(s). And sacrificing privacy is not part of the new deal.

“The win-win is to have the grandparents live close, but not live *with*,” said Esther Rein, a Corcoran Group agent, whose client Barbara Yastine just spent \$875,000 for a sun-filled co-op with a terrace in a full-service complex hard by the condo where she lives with her

husband and their 8-year-old twin daughters. The co-op's intended resident is her mother, Ann Yastine.

Its next-door locale, not an accident, ensures that the twins can dash down the sidewalk to visit their grandmother without having to cross a street when she moves in next month; conversely, if grandma wants to pop over for a quick visit, the commute is obstacle-free.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
Ms. Villers, formerly of South Carolina, and her grandson now live just three stops apart.

“This is a way for my mother to be more involved in our life, which I’ve wanted to happen for years,” Barbara Yastine said. “But the notion that she’s staying in our playroom and sleeping on a pullout couch a couple of days every week is not the same as her having her own space. Then it suddenly dawned on me that we had an alternative right next door. She’s not really a city person, but I’m hopeful that moving her into a wonderful building that is part of our block family, where we already knew the doormen, will be a positive for us all.”

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
Ms. Sawyer, Mr. Kaplan and Ms. Villers, prepare brunch in Ms. Villers's kitchen in the Aquablu.

Isabella Nguyen, the leasing director at [Newport](#), a waterfront development in Jersey City, says half a dozen young Manhattanites, primarily daughters shopping for apartments for their mothers, have signed leases in the past few months. “Close, but not *too* close,” she said. “The applications are for the parents, but what we’re seeing is that the guarantors on the paperwork are the children.”

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times
Ms. Villers lives in the Aquablu in Jersey City.

The notion of parents giving their children city apartments — or the down payments that make them possible — is nothing new. But in this new incarnation of ties that bind, there has been a generational flip-flop in the roles of giver and receiver. It is the children — a fiscally solvent generation in their 30s and 40s — supplying urban apartments for their parents.

“In the nicest possible version,” said Joanne Firstenberg, a senior vice president of Douglas Elliman Real Estate, “it is about children who want to be closer to their parents, and also want their parents to enjoy the amenities like elevators and doormen that come with a full-service building.”

She recently represented two brothers in their 30s who helped buy a \$505,000 [Lincoln Towers](#) co-op for their retired parents. The brothers, both married and living on the Upper West Side, wanted their parents nearby as opposed to living in their native Moscow.

Ms. Firstenberg said she looked at 40 apartments before finding the right one: affordable, spacious and with a board amenable to a son's co-signing a co-op package on behalf of his 65-year-old parents. The move-in date is late December, and the family is over the moon.

Securing the parental nest took some doing. "Condos were too expensive; with condos the maintenance was too high," Ms. Firstenberg explained. "And with co-ops the hardest thing was the board process, which was incredibly complex and difficult, because co-ops are used to parents buying for children, but not the reverse."



Enlarge This Image
Benjamin Norman for The New York Times
Luba Vaysman with her grandson, Joshua, in the two-bedroom Upper East Side apartment her daughter and son-in-law provide for her.



Enlarge This Image
Benjamin Norman for The New York Times
Ms. Vaysman and her husband, Gregory, play a cellphone game with Joshua. Their home is about five blocks away from their daughter's. It's not as near as they had hoped, but finding two suitable apartments in the same building can be a challenge, agents say.

Ms. Yastine, the president of Ally Bank, agonized for years about the best way to bridge the interstate gap between herself and her mother, who lived alone in the family house in [New Jersey](#). After her mother broke a hip last year, she convalesced for several months at Ms. Yastine's condo before returning to New Jersey. That's when Ms. Yastine got serious about formulating a plan to give her mother a stronger incentive to come into the city.

"The reality," she said, "is that she doesn't want to leave her home, doesn't want to go into any kind of assisted-living facility, and I want to be there for her as much as possible. But the last thing we have time for is a regular commute to New Jersey. So this is a new chapter.

"Her building," Ms. Yastine continued, "provides all sorts of services, has a diverse range of residents, some of whom are her age and use walkers just like she does, and even has a garage, which I'm going to benefit from. And she'll be able to walk to the grocery store without having to cross a street.

"I wish it was as simple as writing a check and solving a problem; it's not. But I'm hoping this is a happy medium for us."

The catalyst for this specialized (for proximity's sake, the hunt is often limited to a specific building or block), and emotionally fraught (buying a home for parents can be mistaken for an infringement on their independence) real estate transaction is frequently a desire to create an environment where grandparents and grandchildren share more than just holiday face time.

"I call it the 'in with granny, out with nanny' syndrome," said Leslie Lazarus, a certified relocation professional with DJK Residential. "It used to be that we were asked to look for apartments that had an extra room for the nanny. But lately what I'm seeing is young adults who want their parents more integrated into their lives."

When Ms. Lazarus began working with Garin Toren, an owner of Striata, a software company, and his wife, Dr. Tanya Vaysman, an orthodontist, they had already moved her parents from New Jersey into a rented apartment in the Upper East Side building where they own a two-bedroom condominium. The motive: Dr. Vaysman, pregnant with their first child, needed dependable help so that she could resume seeing patients after the baby, Joshua, was born.

Her mother, Luba Vaysman, quit her job at a hospital to become Joshua's full-time caregiver, and two weeks after his birth, Dr. Vaysman returned to her office two blocks away on East 87th Street.

Although she was happy to help her daughter, Mrs. Vaysman said it took slightly over a year before the Upper East Side neighborhood felt like home to her and her husband, Gregory, who works for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

"It was hard to leave our house," she said, "but the family circle comes first. And if my daughter wants to pay me with a nice apartment so that I care for the baby and she never has to hire a stranger, then I am all right with it."

Last year, with thoughts of again expanding their family, Mr. Toren and his wife decided they needed a larger apartment, preferably a penthouse with a terrace. They gave Ms. Lazarus a double assignment: Locate a three-bedroom apartment in their preferred Upper East Side quadrant and find a two-bedroom in the same building for Dr. Vaysman's parents.

She found them a penthouse at 225 East 86th Street, but that building offered no two-bedrooms; ultimately they decided to buy a penthouse at Lexington and 90th Street that had belonged to Star Jones and boasted a knockout terrace. But they held onto their condo at Lexington and 85th for Gregory and Luba Vaysman. The duplicate moves were made in March.

"In a city where family relationships can become fragmented just because everyone is so busy with work," Mr. Toren said, "we are incredibly lucky. I can never put a price on how fortunate we are to have our children raised by a family member."

That the living arrangements are separate constitutes a considerable financial commitment for the givers: this is not about installing a pullout sofa in a spare room and moving Grandma in.

"They don't want to be under the same roof," said Ms. Nguyen of Newport, where rents range from \$2,400 to \$3,400. "But the kids who are doing the buying and lease-signing have a very clear wish list of the type of place they want their parent to live: good views and good security are a must."

Melissa Sawyer, a Manhattan lawyer, hoped to find a rental in Manhattan for her mother, Anne Villers, a retired teacher whose large house in Beaufort, S.C., had become too difficult to manage on her own.

But with an initial monthly budget of \$2,400, Ms. Sawyer and her mother, who actively participated in the late-summer search, saw nothing livable. Ms. Sawyer and her husband, Eric Kaplan, a banker, own the Union Square apartment where they live with their 2-year-old son, Sawyer, but Ms. Villers decided that neighborhood was too noisy in addition to being too expensive. She liked Roosevelt Island for its quiet and water vistas, but the few available apartments were overpriced and undersized.

“We looked everywhere,” Ms. Sawyer said. “My husband and I even considered buying her a place because the rents were so ridiculously high, but my mother wasn’t quite comfortable with that idea. I think she wanted the flexibility of a rental.” She also needed a dog-friendly abode.

On a whim, they took a PATH train to Jersey City and scoped out the leasing office at Newport. To their mutual surprise, they liked a two-bedroom unit, but Ms. Villers had been unable to sell her home, so it was too soon to commit.

In October, the house sold, and Ms. Sawyer leased another unit at [Aquablu](#), Newport’s newest tower, for her mother, at \$3,300 a month sight unseen. “We took a virtual tour,” she said. “It’s a big financial commitment for us, not an easy no-brainer, but we realized we’d rather spend whatever extra money we have on keeping the family close.”

Ms. Villers and her dog, Carmen, a Carolina dingo, have already moved in, and she is enjoying the waterfront views, the boardwalk, the convenient services and the three-stop commute to Union Square. “I wasn’t going to be part of my grandson’s life if I stayed in South Carolina,” she said.

Sachiko T. Goodman, a managing director of Douglas Elliman, was asked by a client who lives at the [Dorchester Towers](#) on the Upper West Side to find an apartment there for his mother, who lived alone in New Jersey. “It’s not so easy to find an apartment when you are limited to looking at one building and looking for a specific size on a specific floor,” Ms. Goodman said. “It took two years. Lots of patience.” It also took \$899,000.

“Usually it’s the other way around, the parent buys for the child,” Ms. Goodman said. “But doing it this way can make the families happy, too.”