

For Starters, the Upper East Side

By JOANNE KAUFMAN

Julie Murray shares an apartment with a friend on 95th Street near First Avenue. The building is respectably maintained, it's true, and the bathroom is a reasonable size. There's an elevator, and Ms. Murray, 22, a college senior hoping to work in the fashion industry, has her own room.

Shoot her. Just shoot her now.

"The Upper East Side is very inconvenient for 20-somethings," Ms. Murray said. "The type of people we want to be with are all downtown." She therefore conducts her social life in and around Union Square, and either waits an hour for the No. 6 train home in the wee hours of the morning or reluctantly ponies up for a cab.

On those rare occasions when she hangs around her own neighborhood, she feels decidedly out of place. "This is a family area," Ms. Murray said. "There are a lot of strollers and double strollers, and women use them as weapons. They're ruthless. They just bulldoze you over. If it weren't so much money, I'd be living in the East Village or on the Lower East Side."

In the 1970s and '80s, the Upper East Side was considered plenty cool enough for young New Yorkers, even those who could afford to live anywhere they wanted. Since then, many of the young and the restless have been drawn downtown and to [Brooklyn](#). And yet, the Upper East Side continues to house a healthy contingent of 20-somethings, thanks to rents that are more affordable than those in catnip neighborhoods.

A brief social history: Thirty and 35 years ago a large cohort of the just-out-of-college, some with trust funds or parents willing to be lease guarantors, eagerly scouted the studios and one-bedroom apartments in walk-ups on the side streets of Yorkville and Lenox Hill or in the postwar high-rises complete with doormen and shiny lobbies on the avenues east of Lexington from the low 70s to the mid-90s. One building, Normandie Court on East 95th Street, was a such a postgrad magnet it was nicknamed Dorm-andie Court.

These happy new arrivals gathered for drinks or dinner at the restaurants and bars that lined Second and Third Avenues: Dorrian's Red Hand, Willy's, Martell's, Cromie's, Mumbles, Kinsale Tavern, the Green Kitchen and Dresner's were all crammed with 20-somethings just like them.

Others, with more anemic bank accounts, looked on the Upper West Side, the Lower East Side, the East Village and — if they were really hurting for funds — in the distant, seamier precincts of Brooklyn. These urban pioneers understood that if they wanted to see their Upper East Side friends, they'd have to be the ones to hop on the train. No one but no one was going to make the long, parlous journey to Williamsburg or Boerum Hill.

Now, of course, thanks to the capricious world of real estate, it's a whole different story. Younger New Yorkers began making the shift away from the Upper East Side almost 20 years ago, according to Kathy Braddock, a founder of Rutenberg Realty. "That's when gentrification came to the East Village, the Lower East Side, ABC Town and Brooklyn, areas that young people wouldn't have previously considered unless they were real adventurers."

Those who have the wherewithal are now reflexively flocking to Brooklyn and the Lower East Side. But rents there have soared, and many downtown wannabes are stunned by how little their money gets them. Ms. Murray, for example, recalled \$2,000-a-month studios without cabinets, stoves or ovens, and with bathrooms that required a perilous climb over the sink to reach the toilet.

Young apartment hunters on the Upper East Side, on the other hand, can expect fully outfitted kitchens, bathrooms that don't require contortions — and comparative bargains. And in many instances they're finding contentment in a neighborhood they had previously associated with old money and old fogies, i.e. people over 35. Others, while bowing to practical considerations, go kicking and screaming all the way uptown, and resign themselves to a social life that involves travel.

"I have friends in the East Village who will not come up here," said Alexandra Perrotta, 27, a recruiter for a law firm who just moved into a studio on 97th Street between Park and Lexington. "I have to go to them."

When Arielle Grabel, 27, who works in public relations, was looking for an apartment three years ago, she firmly stated her terms: nothing above 20th Street. After she saw what was available, she adjusted her demands to "O.K., nothing above 40th Street."

"And then I was saying: 'O.K., if the best I can do is the 50s, that's not *so* high,' and then eventually, 'O.K., 74th Street it is,'" said Ms. Grabel, who, for a monthly figure she characterizes as between \$2,100 and \$2,300 month, has a large studio with glossy floors and marble countertops in an elevator building.

She has two good friends in the neighborhood, but has been unsuccessful in recruiting others, even if it's just to come uptown for drinks and dinner.

"They say there's nothing to do up here," said Ms. Grabel, who herself prefers the night life downtown. But perhaps her sales pitch needs a bit of work. She tells her friends the Upper East Side isn't *that* bad, not *that* far from the action, and the people aren't *that* old.

"Most of my listings are on the Upper East Side, and it's hard to even get certain clients to come up here and look at them," said Eric Rohe, an agent with Citi Habitats. "They want to be on Fulton Street or Water Street or in Brooklyn. They want a studio with exposed brick and just enough closet space, and they want to be near the greatest bars and restaurants. And they want the rent to be somewhere between \$1,400 and \$1,750."

“Where they want to live,” Mr. Rohe added, “the rent for a place like that will be \$2,600. But there are plenty of spacious studios with exposed brick in a much more affordable price range on the Upper East Side.”

If Mr. Rohe can get people to come to his office, he’ll print out every listing on the Upper East Side and every downtown listing in a client’s price range. “Nine times out of 10,” he said, “there will be 30 to 60 listings on the Upper East Side, compared to a handful downtown.”

According to statistics compiled by the appraisal firm Miller Samuel, a studio on the Upper East Side averages about \$2,000 to \$2,225 a month, depending on precise location, and a one-bedroom runs \$2,600 to \$3,100 a month.

Those looking for a studio in the more with-it redoubts can expect to pay more than \$2,300 a month on the Lower East Side, more than \$2,500 in the East Village and more than \$2,700 in Williamsburg. A one-bedroom runs about \$2,827 on the Lower East Side, \$2,861 in the East Village and \$3,300 in Williamsburg.

But living on the Upper East Side doesn’t just mean a smaller monthly outlay; it means more and better room for the money. The reason for the rent differential: supply and demand. The Upper East Side is a thick slice of land with a great density and diversity of housing stock, said Gary Malin, the president of Citi Habitats. “It runs the gamut from entry-level walk-ups to elevator buildings without a doorman to elevator buildings with a part-time doorman to elevator building with a full-time doorman.”

“You don’t have that much inventory and that variety in the more hip, trendy areas downtown,” Mr. Malin added. “But so many young people in their 20s are looking there now, which drives prices up. Everybody in New York has a wish list. If they can’t find it below 23rd Street, they may go to the Upper East Side for the perfect apartment, if not the perfect location.”

“That’s when we decided to go to the Upper East Side,” said Ms. Topper, who lives on the third floor of a walk-up in the 80s near First Avenue. She has her own large bedroom — “it’s bigger than the room I had growing up.”

Still, she says, nights out tend to start and end in the East Village.

Downtown bar and restaurant owners have taken note. “We noticed a lot of people from uptown who would travel downtown to our places,” said Mark Gibson, a co-owner of the gastro pubs [Wren](#) in the East Village and [Wilfie & Nell](#) in the West Village. “We saw the tall buildings on the Upper East Side, and we thought the neighborhood was underserved.”

So Mr. Gibson and his partners recently opened [the Penrose](#) on Second Avenue between 82nd and 83rd. “It’s doing really well,” he said.

Similar observations propelled Michael Chernow, a co-owner of the [Meatball Shop](#), to open an outpost on Second Avenue and 76th Street. “It’s our busiest restaurant to date,” said Mr. Chernow, whose other locations include the Lower East Side and Chelsea. “More and more I’m

hearing from colleagues who have bars and restaurants downtown that the Upper East Side is a great place to open up.”

When Michal Adut and her boyfriend, DeJohn Rose, 26, decided to move in together, they were both living in Williamsburg and wanted to stay there. “We loved the restaurants, we loved our coffee places and we loved the culture,” said Ms. Adut, 27. Their budget hovered at \$2,500 a month. But rent for apartments they deemed livable and well situated started at \$2,900. “There was a point that we got really upset,” she said.

After giving up on Williamsburg, after futile forays to the Gramercy Park area and the East 50s, the couple continued on their way uptown. Their game spirit was fueled by a list of restaurants and bars compiled by a friend as evidence that there was life beyond 70th Street.

Last month they moved into a fully renovated one-bedroom with new appliances on 78th and Lexington. “It’s a block from the subway,” Ms. Adut said. “There’s an elevator and big windows and air-conditioning units. If you’d have asked me a year or two ago, I would have said I never want to live on the Upper East Side. But I’m running into all these people I know who have moved up here for the same reason we did.”

Ms. Adut suspects she and Mr. Rose will still venture to Williamsburg for its restaurants. “But I don’t think we’re going to go there every weekend.”

Ms. Perrotta, who was priced out of TriBeCa and the West Village, has been diligently exploring her new habitat. “There are all these new places catering to a younger, hipper crowd,” she said, enumerating bars like JBird and Jones Wood [Foundry](#). “There are more restaurants here now. There’s more action.”

She said she was trying to sell her downtown friends on moving uptown. “I’ve tried before,” she said. “Let’s see how well I do this time.”