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No MetroCard Needed

Bikes Change Your Brooklyn Apartment Hunt

By **MICHELLE HIGGINS** MAY 23, 2014



Jesse Warner-Levine and Hallie Nickelson ride to work in Manhattan from their apartment in the Wallabout neighborhood in Brooklyn. *Credit Michael Appleton for The New York Times.*

It was cheaper rent that initially drew Jesse Warner-Levine, 34, and Hallie Nickelson, 33, to Wallabout, a fairly isolated Brooklyn neighborhood on the fringe of Clinton Hill near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. But it was bicycling that made them stay.

The two-bedroom one-bath walk-up they moved into three years ago for \$1,800 a month had windows on three sides and was cheaper and more charming than previous apartments they had

shared with roommates in other parts of Brooklyn. Yet the closest subway line — the G, which requires a transfer to get to Manhattan — was half a mile away and erratic, turning what should have been a 25-minute commute into 45 minutes or more, depending on when the train showed up. As an alternative, they turned to their bikes, heaving them up and down three flights of stairs each day in exchange for a faster, more reliable commute.

Now, they say, they can't imagine using any other transportation to get around the city.

Last month, they renewed their lease for one more year at \$2,050 a month, in part to keep their rent manageable but also to preserve their biking habit. "We talked about moving," Ms. Nickelson said, "but now it's like we need to live near the bridges because we're so committed to commuting with bikes."



Mr. Warner-Levine and Ms. Nickelson heave their bikes up and down three flights of stairs each day. *Credit Michael Appleton for The New York Times.*

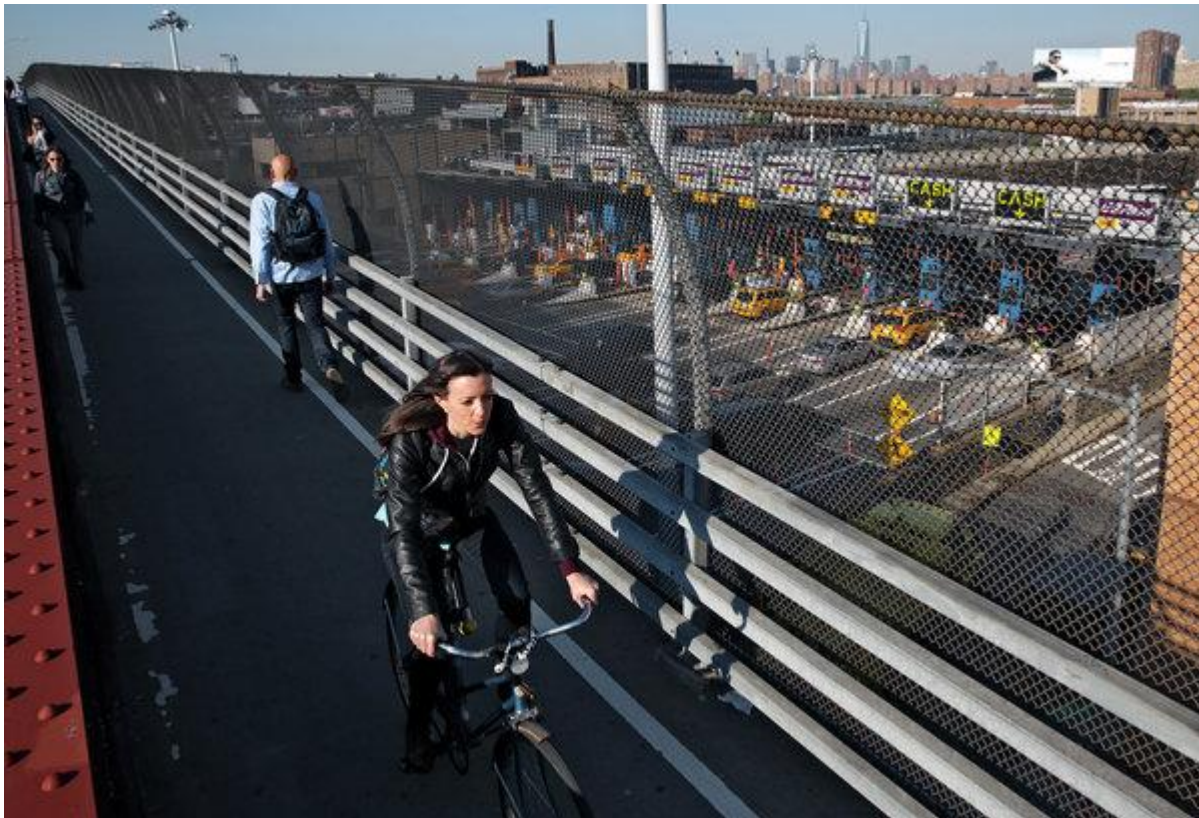
As the search for more affordable real estate in New York City pushes deeper into neighborhoods that were once considered out of the way, bicycle lanes are taking on new importance. Since 2007, the city has carved out more than 350 miles of bike lanes in the five boroughs, according to the Department of Transportation. As a result, the distance from the nearest subway or bus stop has become less of a drawback for the two-wheeled set, particularly in transit-challenged areas of Brooklyn like Red Hook, Greenpoint and parts of Bushwick. In a twist to the real estate catch phrase, location, location, location, brokers say, bicycling is beginning to influence some real estate decisions.

"Your housing options change when you buy a bike and use it," said Lyon Porter, a sales and leasing director of Town Residential, who relied heavily on a fixed-gear Dutch cruiser when living in Williamsburg several years ago and continues to cycle frequently around the city. "People get so much more for their money in this tight, compressed market," when freed from the need to be near a train line, he said. "Your definable boundaries are different on a bike." Without one, he said, "your map changes."

By zipping along Flushing Avenue's bike lanes and across the Manhattan Bridge, Mr. Warner-Levine, a retail wine salesman, found he could make it to his job in Lower Manhattan in 18 minutes flat. His wife, Ms. Nickelson, takes about 30 minutes pedaling up First Avenue to get to United Nations Plaza, where she works in administration for Unicef. He carries his bicycle to the

basement of the wine shop. She chains hers up on the sidewalk outside her office. Apart from work, the couple from Wallabout were soon cruising to SoHo for brunch or Greenpoint for drinks, roughly a 20-minute ride from their apartment in either direction. “Most of my friends use bikes to get around Brooklyn,” Ms. Nickelson said. “It’s the best and most direct way for everyone to meet up at a central point.”

Getting together with friends at a bar in Prospect Heights from Greenpoint, for example, can take nearly an hour by bus or train versus half an hour by bicycle. “I noticed my friends who don’t ride bikes,” she said, “it’s more of a hassle for them.”



To get to work in Manhattan from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, Dana Johns rides her bike to a subway stop in Long Island City, Queens, locks the bike up and then hops on the 7 train for one stop to Grand Central. *Credit Michael Appleton for The New York Times.*

Last month, Dana Johns, a physician assistant, doubled her living space and cut her rent by 20 percent by moving from a two-bedroom in the East Village she shared with a roommate to a two-bedroom, two-bath she also shares at 110 Green Street, a luxury rental building in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, that advertises “bike storage” and “bike-friendly streets” on its website. Ms. Johns has a Bianchi Pista and a Brompton folding bike she stores indoors, but to ease her commute, she bought a vintage ocean coaster at a flea market in Bushwick for \$75. The two locks she uses to tie it up on the street, she said, cost more.

Now, instead of “waiting forever for the G” and transferring in Queens to the E to get to her office on 48th Street in Manhattan, she said, “I take my beater bike in the morning across the Pulaski Bridge and park it at the 7.” By hopping the train one stop to Grand Central, she said, she avoids showing up to work sweaty. With the weather getting nicer, she added, “I’m working toward biking over the Queensboro Bridge to go direct to work.”

Bicycle commuters are still vastly in the minority in New York City, where most people use subways and buses to get around. But their numbers are growing. Since 2000, the ratio of people who biked to work in New York increased from 0.5 percent to 0.8 percent, according to 2008-2012 statistics from the American Community Survey. (The survey did not specify how often a bike was used to commute to work.) Nationally, 0.6 percent bike to work, according to the latest data from the United States Census Bureau.

Of the 27,759 New Yorkers who indicated they use a bicycle to get to work in the 2008-2012 survey, nearly half live in Brooklyn, including districts that encompass the neighborhoods of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill; Greenpoint and Williamsburg; Carroll Gardens and Red Hook; Northern Crown Heights and Prospect Heights; and Bushwick, according to an analysis by Andrew A. Beveridge, a sociology professor at Queens College.

David Ortiz, who opened Dave’s Wear House in Little Italy with partners about three years ago, has seen those statistics reflected in his business, which began primarily as a sneaker store but quickly found a niche serving cyclists after bike sales took off. “We get a lot of customers using bikes as an alternative to mass transit, especially in neighborhoods like Brooklyn Navy Yard and Clinton Hill, where it only takes about 20 minutes to ride to Manhattan and there isn’t a convenient subway option,” he said. “The subway costs about \$5 a day and our bikes cost about \$400, so we tell customers if they ride the bike 80 times, the bike paid for itself.”

As more businesses have moved to fairly sequestered Brooklyn neighborhoods like Dumbo, Gowanus and the Navy Yard, said Victoria Hagman, the broker-owner of the Realty Collective in Brooklyn, she has noticed more people relying on bicycles. “It’s so difficult to get around Brooklyn by train or bus,” she said. “If you work in Dumbo and you’re living in Fort Greene, there’s no point in hopping on the subway. You’re going to be hopping on your bike.” Depending on where you live in Fort Greene, she noted, you can take the C line or a bus to Dumbo in about 20 minutes, if you time it exactly right. Biking cuts that time in half and puts you on your own schedule.

There are also side benefits. Not only is biking eco-conscious, cyclists say, it’s healthy. “From a personal level, it makes my life better,” said Mr. Warner-Levine, the wine salesman. “I’m in a better mood when I arrive to work and I’m certainly in a better mood when I arrive home from work.”

Spotting a way to market neighborhoods often viewed as remote because of transportation limitations, some real estate companies, including StreetEasy.com, AptsandLofts.com and Halstead Property have begun incorporating the location of nearby Citi Bike stations to the list of public transportation options for online real estate listings. Separately, Citi Bike provides an online map that shows how many bikes are checked into each station at a given moment.



Joe Eisman's rowhouse in Red Hook, which he is in the process of gut renovating, is just one block from the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, a planned 14-mile bike route. *Credit Michael Appleton for The New York Times.*

“Many potential buyers and renters place bicycle-related requirements higher and higher on their list of must-haves,” wrote Gene Keyser, an avid bicyclist and a broker at Halstead Property, in a post last year on his blog titled “The Velocipede Effect: Bikes Sway Home Prices.” “Unlike years past, some are choosing to pass on properties purely because bicycle storage is difficult or unavailable.”

At least one broker, Elliot Bogod, the managing director at Broadway Realty, is offering a \$95 annual Citi Bike membership to the buyer of a \$1.295 million penthouse duplex condo for sale in Battery Park City, partly to remind those concerned with its relative isolation at the southern tip of Manhattan that cycling is an easy transit alternative. “Now since the city is so bike friendly,” Mr. Bogod said, people can hop on a Citi Bike from one of four stations in the vicinity and pedal along the Hudson River Park Bikeway, which runs from Battery Place to West 59th Street, where it connects with Riverside Park South. “I just met someone going to Fort Lee from Battery Park City to work,” Mr. Bogod said.

Pedaling along the Hudson on a breezy spring day is one thing. Relying on a bike as your main mode of transportation is another. There is a resoluteness required to ride in the sticky summer heat, in the wet months of spring and as temperatures drop below freezing in winter. Gear —

whether it be fleece-lined bicycling tights or gloves coated with beeswax to make them water-resistant — is important. So is a place to change once you get to work.

Yet die-hard commuters shrug off such discomforts. “In the hottest months it’s a little gross, but most of the year you’re not that sweaty,” said Joe Eisman, 45, a labor union organizer who has commuted five days a week by bike from Brooklyn to Manhattan for seven years, most recently about 65 miles a week to the Flatiron district and back. “I think you get dirtier sitting down in the subway.”

Mr. Eisman bought a Red Hook rowhouse last year, partly for the space his money can buy. “I can afford more, in part, because it hasn’t exploded with the speed of, say, a Williamsburg, because you’re not one stop in on the L,” he said. The approximately \$400 a square foot he paid for the property was half the cost of what he found in his former neighborhood of Prospect Heights.

With the money he saved he is gut-renovating the place. Included in the plans, drawn up by Allison Reeves of ardesign, is a shed with a grass roof specifically for his bike.

But another aspect of the property sweetened the deal: His new abode is just one block from a recently finished section of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, a planned 14-mile bike route — a significant upgrade from his previous route, which involved cycling next to heavy car traffic along Flatbush Avenue each day. “It’s a great commute,” Mr. Eisman said, “I feel the salt air and the sun, and coming home I see the sunset.”