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U.S. | NEW YORK

Step by Step, New York City Walk-Ups Climb the Price Ladder

As inventory shrinks, the cost of high-floor walk-up apartments is on the rise, brokers say



When it closes, the penthouse apartment at 541 East 12th St. in Manhattan would be the third highest priced sale for an elevator-free walk-up on the fifth-floor or above in the East Village, according to data from Corcoran. PHOTO: ROBERT GEILS

By *Josh Barbanel*

May 31, 2018 9:00 a.m. ET

While some New Yorkers love soaring glass towers, others prefer the arduous climbs of aging brick East Village walk-ups where artists, poets and novelists once lived.

On East 12th Street, a co-op on the fifth floor of a narrow East Village building in Manhattan, 64 steps above street level, went into contract for more than \$1.9 million in mid-May, after a bidding war with seven offers topping the asking price less than three weeks after it was listed, brokers said.

The master bedroom and a rooftop garden, are accessible by climbing up 14 additional steps on a narrow circular iron staircase, but that didn't deter potential buyers, said Robert Geils, a Corcoran broker, who listed the apartment on April 26 for \$1.79 million with his wife, Maura Geils.

"More and more people are looking past the fact they are climbing stairs," Mr. Geils said.

Real-estate listing site StreetEasy.com identified more than 60 downtown Manhattan sales for more than \$1 million in high floor walk-ups, many in more expensive neighborhoods such as the West Village and Chelsea.

In a building with an elevator, prices tend to rise floor by floor, said appraiser Jonathan Miller, president of Miller Samuel Inc. But in a walk-up it is exactly the opposite, where prices usually peak on the second and third floors, and then fall significantly when you go higher.

Prices may be rising on high-floor apartments, Mr. Miller said, because of the limited inventory.



An apartment building at 541 East 12th St. in the East Village in Manhattan. PHOTO: JOSH BARBANEL/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“You have to look at it as climbing five flights a day is like having a free health club,” he added.

A duplex penthouse beginning on the sixth floor of a walk-up at 211 East 3rd St. in the East Village will test the limits of high-floor walk-ups. Brokers say the unit with four bedrooms, four baths, and an expansive rooftop garden, is set to go on the market for about \$5.5 million.

When it closes, the penthouse apartment at 541 East 12th St. would be the third highest priced sale for an elevator-free walk-up on the fifth-floor or above in the East Village, according to data from Corcoran. It also would be the most expensive sale of a co-op unit, which usually sell at a discount to condos.

Despite the stairs, higher floors often mean more light, less street noise, better views, a chance to keep fit, and a lower price per square foot, brokers say. And those apartments have become more palatable in the age of grocery delivery and e-commerce, as consumers shop more online and don't have to lug items up the stairs.



The expansive rooftop deck of a residential building at 541 East 12th St. in Manhattan's East Village neighborhood. PHOTO: ROBERT GEILS

The East Village, a neighborhood of Eastern European immigrants that was once considered part of the Lower East Side, began in the 1950s attracting artists and writers who were being priced out of the more trendy and expensive Greenwich Village.

Willem de Kooning, the abstract expressionist painter, lived for while on East 10th Street. Allen Ginsberg spent much of his life in the East Village, including 21 years on the fourth floor of a walk-up at 437 East 12th St. down the block from the co-op that recently went into contract.

Norman Mailer, lived in a cold-water flat at 41 First Ave. between 2nd and 3rd streets, where he installed his own bathroom plumbing. When Lillian Hellman, the playwright visited and saw the tub she told him, he later recalled in a letter: “Norman, I am more impressed with that than with ‘the Naked and the Dead.’ ”

The brick building at 541 East 12th St. was boarded up in 1986 when Cydney Pullman and a group of friends who lived in the neighborhood bought it and turned it into a co-op. They paid

\$380,000 for the five-story building and spent about \$600,000 renovating it and moved in.

Ms. Pullman, an economist by training who ran and consults for youth educational programs, bought the top floor and raised two children there, routinely climbing up and down four flights of stairs.

When she moved in, the playground across the street was occupied by homeless people and drug addicts, but became a haven for children after a renovation in the early 1990s. "It was pretty dicey back then," she recalled.



The rooftop terrace at 541 East 12th St. in Manhattan offers views of midtown and downtown towers. PHOTO: JOSH BARBANEL/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The building is 18 feet wide, and the apartment has a fireplace, a large open living room and a kitchen with bare brick walls. The rooftop garden offers views of the tops of midtown and downtown towers.

Ms. Pullman is selling the apartment with her husband, Duff Wilson, an investigative reporter at Reuters. She said they plan to spend more time at a second home they own on Long Island.

On East 12th Street, the buyers already lived in the neighborhood, and were looking for more space, Mr. Geils said.

Write to Josh Barbanel at josh.barbanel@wsj.com

Appeared in the June 1, 2018, print edition as 'Walk-Ups Ascend the Price Ladder.'

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