

THEY'RE GOING TO TOWN

By ALISON GREGOR | Published: September 29, 2005 8:00 PM

Town houses in Manhattan had largely gone the way of the flapper and the speakeasy after the stock market crash of 1929 - that is, until recently.

Manhattan row houses enjoyed a reign that began in the late 18th century, but their popularity came cascading down as the Great Depression set in. But after decades of near obsolescence, town houses are back, being built these days as part of condominium complexes, and homebuyers are liking them. "I love living here," said Ellen Flanzig, who purchased a three-bedroom triplex for less than \$1 million last year at a condominium complex at 1400 Fifth Ave. in East Harlem. "I never would have bought a traditional town house. I always wanted the convenience of a condominium."

Besides 1400 Fifth Ave., which still has about eight town houses available at up to \$1.7 million in listings with Griffin Real Estate Group, there are many contemporary Manhattan developments that now include some version of a town home, including 1 Morton Sq., which has six of the units, the last of which sold in May for \$4.25 million, and 255 Hudson with three, two of which are still for sale, for \$2.95 million and \$3.7 million; Blanca Condo on East 73rd Street will have two.

Most of these structures are more appropriately labeled maisonettes, a term popular in Great Britain for a small house occupying two or more floors of a larger building and often having its own entrance.

Some prefer to use the term town house "hybrids" or "blends" - not quite town houses, not quite condominiums - to describe the units, which offer buyers a combination of privacy and community.

Flanzig said her family has found the best of both worlds. As part of a condominium, they receive the services of a doorman and a superintendent, along with the community of neighboring families.

But she, her husband and their two children also enjoy almost 4,000 square feet of space and a basement and private entrance, along with a backyard garden. "You feel like you're in a house," she said. "There's not the feeling, which started to happen in the apartment where we lived before, of the walls closing in on you."

Not your typical brownstone

The new town houses being produced in Manhattan hardly reflect the traditional brownstone and brick architectural style most often seen in the city.

Most, like the five at The Hubert, a complex built at 7 Hubert St. in TriBeCa in 2003, are sleek modern conglomerations of glass and metal with an industrial style appropriate to the neighborhood.

Continued on back



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Unusual about The Hubert is that it actually does include two homes that are similar to traditional Manhattan row houses in that they both have their own roofs and separate entrances, said developer Robert Siegel at Ghent Realty Services.

"The idea to do town houses came out of necessity," Siegel said. "This development was originally designed to have a commercial use on the ground floor, but we decided there really was no market for that in this area." Other property developers say they've stumbled serendipitously upon the idea to do town homes.

"Our town houses really are an outgrowth of the natural characteristics of the site," said Jane Gladstein, principal of Metropolitan Housing Partners, which is doing three maisonettes at 255 Hudson, each with lawns that will be clipped by robotic mowers. "Zoning requirements have brought these developments about."

Architect Adam Kushner said he chose to construct a 25-foot-wide triplex maisonette within the innovative 23-unit condominium complex being built at 123 Baxter St. because it fits into the context of the low-rise Chinatown neighborhood.

Kushner, who recently became a property developer as well, said town houses make sense these days on more than just an aesthetic level. "I proposed the town house to the developer," he said. "With residential real estate selling for \$1,000 a foot and up all over Manhattan, a town house will bring back top dollar."

Traditional row houses in Manhattan can range from about \$900 to \$1,800 a square foot, with smaller ones in downtown Manhattan being the priciest, according to data from the city's largest appraisal firm, Miller Samuel Inc. Real estate brokers say the new town houses are often better deals. Perhaps one reason new town houses are attracting buyers is an intangible one. Plummeting crime rates in New York City since the early 1990s have made street-level living much more desirable.

"Willingness to live on the ground floor is at a much higher level today than it was in the mid-1980s," said Jonathan Miller, president and chief executive officer of Miller Samuel. Because of issues such as these, attempts made to develop town houses as part of larger residential developments in the 1970s and 1980s failed to catch on.

"Twenty years ago, we started to see condominiums incorporate town houses, because it was the most efficient way to use the site," he said. But that didn't mean those types of development found a welcoming market. Ventures included Astor Terrace at 245 E. 93rd St., along with 333 E. 69th St., which has a town house formerly owned by fashion designer Geoffrey Beane that is on the market for \$1.325 million.

Some of these early town house developments have over the years caught the fancy of celebrities, such as the Solow complex at 265 E. 66th St., where music executive Tommy Mottola and entertainer Mariah Carey once lived.

The Solow development has about a dozen town houses of more than 5,000 square feet, completely separate from its apartment building, that rent for as much as \$30,000 a month, said Stephen Kotler, executive vice president with Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate.

Other contemporary town houses are typically sales properties. It remains to be seen if they will weather the test of time as well as their brick and brownstone forebears. Families say once they purchase them, they don't like to look back.

"We need a three-bedroom, and if we could find another one of these that we could afford, it would be our ideal," said Rose de Klerk, who purchased a two-bedroom town house in the Cove Club in Battery Park City for \$615,000 five years ago. "We love having our own roof terrace and pretty much live up there in the summer."

The town house gets a makeover If you thought a New York City town house was a solid structure of brownstone or brick with the architectural flourishes of a bygone era, think again. Contemporary town houses, most of which are actually maisonettes with apartments above them, can have giant windows, glass curtain walls, geometric patterns of steel girders for facades, limestone or textured concrete walls, and recessed or cantilevered balconies, among other exotic touches. The post-modern structures can be a hard sell to the admirer of prewar architecture.

"There are two types of buyers, the prewars and the modern contemporary enthusiasts. These new town houses definitely lend themselves to the latter," said Heather Stein, a sales associate with Brown Harris Stevens who specializes in the Cove Club, which has a handful of these town houses built in 1991. The contemporary condominium town house has its roots in prewar maisonettes, such as those on Fifth and Park avenues, which had a separate entrance on the street but could also be accessed through a lobby. They were built as homes, but many are used as professional offices today. At the time the Park Regis was constructed with four maisonettes in the early 1970s, there may have been fewer than 50 maisonettes in luxury apartment buildings in Manhattan.

Continued on back

Though there has been a relative boom in the construction of condominium town houses, some believe they are a far cry from the traditional. “In essence, they’re not really town houses,” said Shaun Osher, head of Core Group Marketing, who will sell two maisonettes as part of Blanca Condo. “Though they do offer the feel of vertical living.”

Perhaps a use of space is what defines a town house. Architect Adam Kushner, who is designing the offbeat condominium town house at 123 Baxter St., said despite the different design elements and materials in traditional and contemporary town houses, they use space in a way that’s similar. “The ground floor, from the time of the Italianate mansions ... has always been about publicity, and the upper floors about privacy,” he said. “The town house seems to be the best thing we’ve come up with for living collectively together in New York City and still respecting our desires to have differentiation of space.”