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Inside the open houses of Prospect Heights

By Abby Luby

Neighborhood that traditionally draws Park Slope runoff sees demand soften



Construction at 330 Park Place finished at the end of May.

Prospect Heights has traditionally been a more affordable alternative to neighboring Park Slope. And now, as the Brooklyn market softens, apartment prices in Prospect Heights are dropping with it.

Sofia Kim, vice president of research at StreetEasy, said median prices in Prospect Heights — which is loosely bound by Flatbush Avenue, Atlantic Avenue, Eastern Parkway and Washington Avenue — declined by 4.8 percent from \$619,000 to \$589,000 between the second quarters of last year and this year, the most recent data on record.

The numbers reflect what Kim described as a "softening, but not a bubble bursting" in the neighborhood. Like other areas of Brooklyn, sales activity has slowed, and both buyers and sellers are making more conservative decisions, Kim said.

Meanwhile, according to StreetEasy, the median price per square foot in Prospect Heights dropped slightly by 1.5 percent, from \$594 to \$585 between the second quarter of 2007 and the second quarter of 2008. (Park Slope has increased by 1.8 percent from \$684 to \$696 during that same time.)

Despite that, broker Doug Bowen, who handles Prospect Heights for Core Realty, said he hasn't seen prices declining. "Prices in Prospect Heights seem to have stabilized, and I don't see any downward pressure at this point," he said, noting that the townhouse market is especially strong.

He also said per-square-foot costs in new developments east of Vanderbilt Avenue — the main commercial drag and home to restaurants, cafés and bars serving \$10 martinis — are averaging between \$600 and \$750.

During a tour through several open houses in Prospect Heights on a sweltering day last month, traffic was light and some brokers closed shop before their two-hour windows were even up.

At the Washington Condominium at 35 Underhill Avenue between Dean Street and Pacific Avenue, only two couples showed up during the first hour of the open house.

The new construction, 39-unit, four-floor building was completed last year. The second-floor apartment — a three-bedroom, two-bath condo that measured 1,474 square feet — was on the market for \$899,000 with maintenance of \$282. It was purchased a year ago by a couple with two children for \$669,000.

The building had a small athletic center on the first floor with a sauna, treadmill, elliptical machine, bike, weights and kickboxing bag.

Corcoran agent Judah Domke said the owners put the apartment on the market in late May because they were upgrading to a house.

While they were only living there for a short while, they installed an entertainment wall between the kitchen and living room and new wood cabinets in the kitchen.

The apartment had hardwood floors in all rooms except the master bedroom and the children's bedroom, which were carpeted. The master bathroom had marble counters, floor and walls, as well as a Jacuzzi and a separate shower. In addition, the living room looked out on the building's common garden, replete with water wall, bamboo accents and small Japanese maple trees.

Potential buyers William Zhang and Yang Lee were on hand. They were looking in both

Prospect Heights and Park Slope. Zhang lives in Queens, while Lee lives in New Jersey. Both work on Wall Street.

"The apartment itself is a decent size, very roomy actually, and it's in our price range," Zhang said.

But he ruled it out, noting that "it seems a little far from the subways," and that there weren't enough shops around. "The area could be more developed," he said.

The apartment was about eight blocks from Prospect Park, the Brooklyn Museum, the Botanical Gardens and the Brooklyn Public Library; the nearby side streets are mostly tree-lined blocks with two- and three-story homes.

Three blocks from the Underhill property was 330 Park Place. Construction on the five-story building was finished at the end of May, and the building has five two- and three-bedroom condo apartments. Prices range from \$715,000 to \$899,000 with common monthly charges ranging from \$162 to \$346.

The units in the building were put on the market the first week of June, said agent Mary Goodson of Aguayo & Huebener.

"We are seeing many people who rent in Park Slope now looking to buy," she said.

Goodson said the previous house was torn down. In its place the 25-foot wide building, which seems to fit in with the adjacent brownstones on Park Place, was erected.

"It took about two years to build here, and for many people living on the block, this is the first time they can come and see what it looks like inside," Goodson said.

The building's five units include three duplexes. The first-floor unit, which was 1,671 square feet, was on the market for \$899,000 with common charges of \$346 a month.

The two-bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom apartment had shared access to the common backyard and a basement set up as a recreation room.

Meanwhile, the second-floor unit, a 1,216-square-foot simplex, was listed at \$845,000 with monthly fees of \$304.

All of the apartments in the building have granite countertops, stainless steel kitchen appliances, light hardwood floors, recessed lighting and washer/dryer hookups.

Again, traffic was light, but a couple expecting their first child stopped in to check out the first-floor duplex. They currently rent in Astoria and said they are ready to buy.

"We're looking for a child-friendly apartment," said Alana Martell, 31. "So far, features like the washer/dryer and the central air are all good."

Martell's husband, Sam Martell, 28, works at the United Nations as a researcher and asked about the closest subway, which is the B/Q about a block away.

"We've been looking for about a year, and we started looking in this neighborhood only a few months ago," he said.

Another prospective buyer, Michelle Tepper, 38, said she was renting an apartment nearby in Prospect Heights.

"I've been looking for the last year or so," she said. "I live in a rent-stabilized apartment now, but this might be the right time to buy because it seems slower, less frantic, more relaxed."

Tepper, a designer, said the neighborhood has all the conveniences she needs, like shops and cafés on nearby Vanderbilt Avenue. And, she wants to stay nearby so that she can be near her friends and family.

Closer to Grand Army Plaza, an 800-square-foot unit at 60 Plaza East near St. Johns Place, on the border between Prospect Heights and Park Slope, was on the market for the second time. The price had been reduced to \$395,000, according to Corcoran broker Jorge Murillo. He declined to say what the previous price was, or why the first sale fell through. He did say, however, that the price was lowered when the unit was put back on the market last month because it had been on the market for a while and needed some work.

The location was the main selling feature for the one-bedroom, second-floor co-op. The pre-war, doorman building was a stone's throw from Prospect Park.

On the day of the open house, the apartment saw little activity. Murillo chalked it up to the extreme heat. During the last hour of the open house, no buyers showed.

"But last week," he said, "about 10 couples checked out this apartment. They were mostly from Park Slope and some were from the Upper West Side."

The apartment had hardwood floors, two arched doorways, some original molding, ample closet space and good light. But, kitchen fixtures were dated, as was the lobby.

According to Murillo, the co-op board is planning to redecorate the lobby, which has furniture dating back to the 1980s.