

THE HUNT

Down by the Bay, in Brooklyn

A Manhattan transplant finds more serenity and space for his children in the waterfront neighborhood of Red Hook.

By Joyce Cohen

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Eliot Ferguson, who is originally from Florida, arrived in New York as a drummer at the age of 22. He and his older brother bought a building in TriBeCa, gutted and rebuilt it, and opened a recording studio there. He lived on the top floor. Later, Mr. Ferguson bought a two-bedroom condominium in SoHo, where he lived with his wife, and sold the TriBeCa building.

Back then, SoHo felt out of the way. “Most of our friends lived in the East Village, and no one wanted to come see us,” said Mr. Ferguson, now 44.

Still, he thought the family would stay put for the long haul. But then “life happened.” His son was diagnosed with autism. Mr. Ferguson and his wife divorced, sharing custody of their two young children. He ended up in a smaller two-bedroom in the same building.

For three years, the children shared a bedroom when they were with him. And the smaller footprint made a big difference.

“The kids were getting bigger and older, and needed their own rooms,” he said. Kate is now 6 and Owen is 7. “I wanted to give them a backyard.”



The three-story house has four bedrooms and three bathrooms, plus a backyard, roof deck and driveway. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

So he began looking for more space, planning to spend somewhere in the low \$3 million range. He was hoping for a three- or four-bedroom home, preferably with outdoor space for the children and his dog, Biko. He knew that would be hard to find in Manhattan, so he headed to Brooklyn.

Mr. Ferguson liked the feeling of the Williamsburg waterfront. But he knew that driving to and from the West Side of Manhattan, where he picked up and dropped off the children, would be arduous.

He was also intrigued by Red Hook, which had a similar waterfront vibe. He started driving around the neighborhood and visiting open houses. An old maritime village, Red Hook is known these days for its two big retailers, Ikea and Fairway Market. It is a

transit desert, with no subway station. But it had one great advantage for Mr. Ferguson: The nearby Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel (now the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel) made for quick access to the West Side.

One prominent option was 160 Imlay Street, the six-story, 70-unit former New York Dock Company warehouse, dating to 1910, currently undergoing conversion to condominiums.

The location was adjacent to the docks at Atlantic Basin, with views of Governors Island, the Statue of Liberty and Lower Manhattan. But with assorted development and transit plans for the area, which was severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Mr. Ferguson was concerned about enduring years of construction in the area and possibly losing the view.



A new condo development at 160 Imlay Street, near the Atlantic Basin docks, was enticing. But Mr. Ferguson worried about building delays and construction noise.

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Also, the massive building was nowhere near ready for occupancy.

“Eliot was concerned that there were really big delays,” said his agent, Suzun Bennet, a licensed sales associate at Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices New York Properties. “It wasn’t at a stage that we could get a clear idea of what he would be buying.”

He checked out a few of the neighborhood's houses, primarily charming, two-family brick buildings dating to the late 1800s. One on Coffey Street was asking \$2.25 million. He was reluctant, though, to spend so much on a house that needed extensive renovations to make it a single-family home.

"I have done several very large projects and don't have the time or energy to do it again," he said. "I just kind of wanted to find something that was already done." (The Coffey Street house later sold for \$2.15 million.)

Mr. Ferguson also found himself unhappy with flipped houses. "The build quality was an issue," he said.

Then he discovered the King & Sullivan townhomes: 22 single-family houses, each with three stories, four bedrooms and three bathrooms, plus a backyard, roof deck and a driveway. (Three are still for sale.)

"He was relieved to have found something that would work for him," Ms. Bennet said. "This is the best of the brownstone world and the new-development world — a brownstone without all the traditional problems." And it was 2,800 square feet, double the size of his condo.



A townhouse on Coffey Street was asking \$2.25 million. Mr. Ferguson was reluctant to spend so much on a place that needed extensive renovations to turn it into a single-family home.

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

In a flood zone like Red Hook, new buildings must be several feet above grade. Each house also has a drainage system, said the listing agent, Paul Johansen, a licensed associate broker at Stribling & Associates.

“We future-proofed the building by raising the first floor nearly three feet from the ground plane and bringing all mechanical systems above this level,” Mr. Johansen said. (Buyers also need flood insurance.)

Late last spring, Mr. Ferguson bought his house for \$3.3 million. Monthly taxes are in the high \$1,400s.

He hesitated to let go of his old place. “I wanted a lifeboat in case the whole Red Hook thing didn’t work and it was a disaster,” he said. But within a few months he realized how much he liked the neighborhood, so he sold the condo.

Living in a house is both harder and easier, he has discovered. Three floors means a lot of stairs, which he initially gated for the children’s safety. But he doesn’t need to take the dog down and up in an elevator several times a day; Biko just runs outside and back in.

And the children can use the school playground across the street during nonschool hours. “We go there all the time,” Mr. Ferguson said. “A lot of people would not want to live across from a school and hear the sound of kids screaming, but that sounds good to me.”



His house, part of the new King & Sullivan townhomes development, is built to resist flooding, with the first floor and the mechanical systems raised nearly three feet off the ground.
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Otherwise, his new block is quiet and calm. “There is no traffic, there is no honking,” he said. “I can get out on the stoop, and it feels like a much smaller world, which is refreshing.”

As for the children, they still share a bedroom. But they’re afraid of the dark, so they rarely use it.

“Even if I put them in their beds to sleep,” Mr. Ferguson said, “they sleep in my bed.”

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