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The Added Value in a Staircase



Emily Anne Epstein for The New York Times

The owners of a duplex at 69 Fifth Avenue selected their spiral staircase with great care, going for a showpiece. The apartment is listed for \$925,000.

By [VIVIAN S. TOY](#)

OF all the must-have items for a [New York City](#) apartment, stairs generally don't figure very high on the list.

Stairs create separation. Stairs take up space. Stairs mean work.

There are buyers out there, though, who seek a duplex. They like the separation of public and private rooms. They don't mind losing a little space, and a bit of exercise isn't a bad thing, either.

Developers in recent years have added duplexes to their apartment mix, some creating buildings made up entirely of duplexes. Brokers and developers say that duplexes attract certain buyers, and that if anything, their popularity seems to be on the rise.

"There always are going to be people who prefer a larger single-floor unit," said Samantha Sax, the director of Douglas Elliman Developments, "but you're also always going to have people

who only want a duplex.” Having both options gives any new development a competitive advantage, she said, adding that duplex buyers “want the comfort, security and amenities of a condo, but they also want something that feels like a town home within a condo.”

The number of duplexes sold in [Manhattan](#) last year was 453, down from a peak of 648 in 2007, but up from 357 in 2009. Duplexes accounted for 4.1 percent of total sales in 2010, up from 3.6 percent in 2009 and the highest market share in the last five years, according to data provided by Jonathan J. Miller, the president of the appraisal firm Miller Samuel and a market analyst for Prudential Douglas Elliman.

At the lower end of the market, duplexes typically have tight spiral staircases, and property values aren’t necessarily increased beyond the sum of the two parts. But at the high end, in penthouses and apartments with three or more bedrooms, Mr. Miller said, “there’s a definite premium on duplexes, because it’s more like a house, with a real set of stairs.”

A housing analysis that Mr. Miller conducted in 2003 with New York University’s Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy found a slight price penalty of 1.5 percent for duplexes. But Mr. Miller said that appraisers generally attach a 5 percent premium to high-end duplexes, whose staircases are generally wide.

Especially in duplexes whose lower levels are partially or entirely below grade, and can’t legally house bedrooms, the apartments often provide more space than a buyer could otherwise afford, he said.

“But,” Mr. Miller said, “the lower level is worth less per square foot. And if it has a tight, narrow staircase, that can be a consideration for older people or families with young kids.”

In Williamsburg, [Brooklyn](#), Anton Rivera and his fiancée, Jordan Woodard, recently bought a duplex at Warehouse 11, a condo stalled by financial problems in 2009 but reintroduced in early 2010. Mr. Rivera said they looked at two dozen two-bedroom condos in the area before buying the duplex for about \$600,000. It has a large, open room on the basement level that connects to a garden, and an upper floor with living space, a bedroom and a balcony.

“I grew up in a house,” Mr. Rivera said, “so I’m used to stairs, and this had a lot of space to spread out in.” He and Ms. Woodard also looked at a two-bedroom on a higher floor with great views of McCarren Park, but passed it by “because it didn’t have the coziness that this space does,” he said. With a duplex, he added, “if one of us wants to get away and watch TV in a different area, it’s kind of nice that we can do that.”

A look at duplexes recently on the market showed a range in both price and design.

There were ground-floor duplexes in Brooklyn that sold for as little as \$500,000; prewar apartments with double-height living rooms and grand sweeping staircases for \$6.5 million; duplexes created by combining adjoining units; and apartments designed as duplexes in which the stairs were the centerpiece.

The Spiral

A duplex at [69 Fifth Avenue](#) in the Union Square area, listed for \$925,000 by Dan Danielli, a senior vice president of Halstead Property, has a large spiral staircase. The unit is a combination: the owners, Beth and Michael Pollak, united their fourth-floor studio with the fifth-floor studio overhead in 2004.

There wasn't room for anything but a spiral staircase, and Ms. Pollak said it was a challenge finding something sturdy that didn't look like "it was just a means to crawl upstairs." She liked a stairway with a double helix design, but they would have had to use a crane to get it through a window, "because it wouldn't have made the turn through the door." Instead the Pollaks installed a wider-than-usual spiral, with wooden treads and metal railings, that she feels "almost becomes an architectural element in the space."

Mr. Danielli says selling a duplex is no harder than selling a simplex, although he admits that the pool of potential buyers is smaller. Dog owners, for example, generally won't consider one. Several years ago, he said, a prospective buyer showed a duplex he was interested in to his dog. "The dog took one look at the spiral stairs, just stood there and shook its head," he said. "And I lost the deal."

The Sweeping Staircase

Multimillion-dollar duplexes often have staircases that take a step beyond utility with elegant curves and decorative flourishes.

The owners of a \$3.9 million two-bedroom duplex with spectacular views from the 49th and 50th floors of 3 Lincoln Center, [160 West 66th Street](#), recently renovated the apartment and installed new stairs. Their broker, Norah Burden, a vice president of Brown Harris Stevens, said the original stairs "had a boring Sheetrock wall" that made them "very pedestrian." The stairs now have an eye-catching curved banister made of wood, and steel rails with a contemporary geometric design.

Potential buyers have remarked on how beautiful the stairs are, she said, "because a lot of times, stairs are just functional and almost an afterthought."

Maria Torresy, a senior vice president of Brown Harris, is listing her own seven-room duplex at [322 East 57th Street](#) for \$6.5 million. She says a duplex "is not necessarily comfortable to live in; it's up and down and up and down all the time."

The sweeping staircase that connects her kitchen and dining gallery to the rest of the apartment has a gracious brass and wrought-iron banister. She says that other owners in the prewar building, which consists entirely of duplexes, have moved the kitchen to the lower floor and turned the upstairs space into an additional bedroom.

The Ground-Floor Duplex

In many new Brooklyn buildings, a first-floor duplex is almost standard, with either a first-floor or a below-grade level leading to a yard. “These can be very good deals for people who need square footage,” said David Maundrell, the president of aptsandlofts.com, “because the lower floor is usually a big open space.” These apartments often don’t have great views and may not get much light, but often cost less per square foot than units on higher floors.

The entrance to a two-bedroom duplex at [214 Green Street](#), a new 10-unit building in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, is on the second floor.

Living space, a bedroom and a balcony are on this level, and a much larger bedroom is on the lower level, which opens onto a private garden.

The apartment, which overlooks a gas station, has just under 1,000 square feet of space and is listed with aptsandlofts.com for \$515,000.

The Feel of a House

Brokers say that many duplex buyers grew up in the suburbs and like the way a duplex can replicate the feel of a two-story house.

Mark Levine, a senior vice president of the Corcoran Group, says two other types of buyer undaunted by stairs are empty nesters and Europeans. Both groups appreciate the division of space that stairs provide, because they expect to have frequent visitors.

That has been the case at Mr. Levine’s \$899,000 listing at [423 West 22nd Street](#), a one-bedroom duplex with a traditional staircase on the fourth and fifth floors of a converted town house. “People seem to like the fact that it’s not a wobbly, how-am-I-going-to-get-my-luggage-up spiral staircase,” Mr. Levine said.

Phyllis and Jeff Altman live in a duplex on the 19th and 20th floors of [137 East 36th Street](#). While house-hunting five years ago, Mrs. Altman said, the luggage question came up: “We saw an apartment with spiral stairs, but it was just not for me. I equate it to a canopy bed: it looks good initially, but it’s not functional. I thought, ‘What would we do with our suitcases?’ ”

The Altmans had moved from a house in Boston. They liked the way the new duplex had zones for entertaining and for sleeping.

The stairs in the apartment also helped ease their transition to New York City, Mrs. Altman said.

“The two levels reminded me of being in a house and made it homey for me,” she said.

Come to think of it, she added, even though she could take the elevator to the 20th floor and use the upstairs entrance for luggage after a trip, “I use this apartment like a house; I carry my suitcases up the stairs.”

They have recently listed the apartment for \$1.55 million with Julie Perlin, a senior vice president of Stribling & Associates.