

# Suburbia in the City

Though more and more New Yorkers are forsaking the proverbial move to Westchester or Jersey to remain city dwellers, they're also embracing the suburban lifestyle—lawn mowers, big dogs and all. (Even if their neighbors think they're crazy.)  
By Annemarie Conte

WASHINGTON



Strangers often stop and stare while Will Riccio mows his West Village lawn.

**O**n a sunny afternoon at the corner of Perry and Washington Streets in the West Village, the air is alive with the sounds of honking taxis, ice-cream truck melodies... and the buzz of a lawn mower. In this setting, where front stoops serve as front “yards,” the distinctly suburban hum is as foreign as a rooster crowing at dawn.

But sure enough, Will Riccio is happily guiding his mower across a 50' x 20' patch of grass in front of a four-story ivy-covered apartment building. “People often stop at the gate to confirm what they are hearing and smelling,” says Will, 27, who works as a decorator for a real-estate development company. “It’s pretty funny when a stranger starts talking to me about their fond childhood memories.” Will and his partner, Curtis, live in one of the former printing factory’s eight apartments, and although lawn care (the dreaded weekend chore of many a suburban dweller) is not a requirement of his co-op, he actually volunteered his gardening skills. In fact, he even sees the Zen in it.

“I grew up in a farmhouse in Cape May, N.J., and would cut the grass with my dad. Here, I appreciate it so much more. It’s a manageable little thing that makes me feel at peace,” says Will.

Like so many others in New York City who refuse to resign themselves to the constraints of city life, Will is living in urban denial. It’s not that these people long for a house in the ‘burbs—most of them want to stay in New York for good—but they refuse to deny themselves the pleasures of suburbia just because of tight living quarters, expense or impracticality. According to U.S. Census data, the number of children under 5 living in Manhattan has increased by more than 32 percent since 2000. This isn’t the result of a baby boom, but because New Yorkers are staying put. With plummeting crime rates—last year there were fewer than 22,000 robberies and 500 murders in the city, both down 78 percent from 1990—more people are deciding to stay put rather than flee to the suburbs in search of perks like square footage and lush lawns.

“In the past the assumption was, once

you reached a certain age—once you got married and had children—you were headed for Westchester or Jersey,” says Kenneth T. Jackson, an urban historian at Columbia University and the editor of *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. “Today people only move to the suburbs because they can’t afford to stay in the city.” And with a push from the Bloomberg administration to have every New Yorker living within a 10-minute walk of a park by 2030, Kenneth says the “suburbanization” of the city will only continue the trend.

Across town from Will’s place, 36-year-old Sasha Evans leaves the East Village apartment she shares with her husband to take their dog for a walk. As she enters the Tompkins Square Park dog run, a man looks up and shouts, “Is that a horse?” After all, the creature in question—Hawkeye, Sasha’s 4-year-old, 180-pound

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Great Dane—stands more than 3½ feet tall. His owner just laughs. She gets this a lot from strangers, along with quips like “Your apartment must be huge!” In fact, her 500-square-foot, two-bedroom pad is anything but. “I researched the breed before I got him and Great Danes are good apartment dogs—they’re pretty inactive and docile,” says Sasha, a marketing director for a health care company. “Hawkeye’s lazy, despite his size.”

Though it sounds like suburban indulgence, Sasha says Hawkeye satisfies her need to have a dog with presence. And life is pretty cushy: Not only is he allowed to drink from the bathtub, he has his own person-size bed. Still, he has had to make sacrifices. “When we moved here from Chicago two years ago, he had to downsize from a double to a twin bed,” Sasha says.

Like Hawkeye, Diane Haines appreciates having her own space in the city. The 26-year-old, who works in special events

for a music company, is thrilled to rent a one-bedroom right across from the Fort Greene Park farmers market. “My fire escape is huge, so I decided to grow vegetables on it,” says Diane. “Having my own space has been empowering—I have an oasis in the city where I can look out the window onto nothing but green.” She also freezes food scraps and brings them to the farmers market to be composted.

Urban denial sufferers are willing to go to great lengths to get their fix. Jim Watson, 28, has to hunch over the bathtub in his Upper East Side one-bedroom apartment to sterilize bottles for his home-brew “Doc Watson” beer—because there’s not enough room in his 8' x 3' kitchen to do it. The brewing process requires buckets, hoses and a fermenter, all of which take up every available flat surface in the kitchen. “My fiancée, Elizabeth, has helped me a few times, but there’s only space in the kitchen for one of us,” says the internal medicine resident at Mount Sinai. Jim, who is from the New Jersey suburbs, doesn’t long for the life he had growing up, but there are a few things he misses. “Home brewing would be a lot easier if I had a basement. The tight space is limiting the expansion of the Doc Watson empire,” he laughs.

But it seems nothing will limit the expansive dreams of Joe Kohl-Riggs, 23, who works for a real-estate developer, and Joe Hasler, 23, an editorial assistant. Instead of letting a lack of workspace stop them from constructing home-improvement projects, the roommates build furniture in their 25' x 30' backyard in Park Slope. “Joe came in one day and said, ‘You want to build a picnic table?’” says Hasler. “We went to the lumberyard and bought, like, 100 feet of wood and had to carry it down Fifth Avenue on one of those baby carriages that gets towed behind a bicycle.”

Kohl-Riggs has also inspired the creation of an 8' boat that they rowed on the Gowanus Canal, and a fire pit, which prompted a visit from their landlord. “When he saw the lumber we had piled in the backyard for a gazebo we were about to build, he wouldn’t let us continue,” Kohl-Riggs moans. “If you know anyone who needs \$200 worth of lumber at a bargain price, have them get in touch with me.”