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A Roll-Up-His-Sleeves Buyer

By **JOYCE COHEN**

Stephen Sullivan was eager to buy a place that he could renovate himself.

For two years, Mr. Sullivan, now 30, had shared a West Village rental with a friend. His tiny room, on the top floor of a five-story walk-up, cost around \$1,250 a month. “I don’t even think it was a legal bedroom,” he said.

He wanted to live within walking distance of his office in Dumbo. But his budget was in the \$200,000s, so pricey Dumbo was out of the question. Mr. Sullivan felt that finding a place in need of a lot of work was “the only way I would be able to afford anything.”

He had some things going for him that would be useful to a do-it-yourselfer. He has a master’s degree in architecture from the University of Colorado, Denver, and is employed at an architectural firm that often renovates row houses in [Brooklyn](#). He knows a lot about construction, having learned from his father, a contractor in [Rhode Island](#), who would be able to contribute tile, trim and other leftover materials to his fixer-upper.

Mr. Sullivan started hunting about a year ago. Early on he saw a studio at [Concord Village](#), a 1,023-unit co-op on Adams Street. The layout included a “little buffer zone before you went into the bathroom,” he said, and a nice separate kitchen. But the building was too close to Brooklyn Bridge traffic.

(Studios there are now selling in the low \$200,000s, with monthly maintenance in the mid \$600s.)

At another co-op building, the 1964 Robert Livingston on Livingston Street in Downtown Brooklyn, studios priced in the high \$200,000s to mid-\$300,000s included a sleeping alcove. The studio he went to see, listed in the low \$200,000s, had a buckling floor. “It’s one thing if it’s ugly trim or something cosmetic,” he said, “but water damage to the floor? You don’t know the extent of that.” And he thought the location was too commercial.

The unit was rear-facing with an interior view, said the listing agent, Deirdre Poe-Sanders of the Corcoran Group. The apartment sold for around \$224,000 after the floor was repaired, she said.

The Remsen, a lovely 1929 co-op building in Brooklyn Heights, had studios in the low \$200,000s, with monthly maintenance in the \$700s. But the kitchens were tiny. “There was nothing you could do about the kitchen,” Mr. Sullivan said. “It was a space constraint.”

His girlfriend, Alexandra Filanowski, would be joining him in his new place. He started reconsidering the kind of home he was after: “I was, like, what am I doing, I am 30 years old, do I want to be living in a studio?” he said. “My girlfriend says no.”

But he didn’t know whether he could afford a larger place. “I felt maybe I had unreal expectations,” he said.

Ms. Filanowski, 26, was reluctant even to look at studios. “It’s one thing to live in a studio if you’re living by yourself,” she said. “But for a couple, if you ever want to have people over, it helps to have a separate space. It’s nice to be able to be reading in the bedroom with one of us watching TV in the living room.”

Both were drawn to [Cobble Hill Towers](#), a group of nine six-story buildings that went up in 1879 as model housing for workers. The units were red-brick walk-ups, with decorative ironwork and lovely exterior stairwells. At the complex, a conversion to condos from rentals, units are being sold renovated or “as is.” Mr. Sullivan, of course, wanted one of the latter.

He bought an unrenovated second-floor one-bedroom of almost 500 square feet, for \$290,000. If it had been renovated, the price would have been about \$336,000. Fees and taxes are almost \$600 a month.

Cobble Hill Towers is now about 40 percent sold, said Haley Magnett of the Corcoran Group, the selling agent.

The purchase took much longer than Mr. Sullivan expected. When his lease expired, he crashed with Ms. Filanowski and her roommates on the Upper East Side. Someone was already lined up to take her place, so the couple moved into Cobble Hill Towers ahead of schedule. “We had to live in this dumpy apartment that hadn’t been renovated,” Mr. Sullivan said.

Living through the project was dreadful, he said. The couple crammed all of their stuff into the bedroom. Dust settled everywhere. With no kitchen, they ate out every night, “which was kind of expensive and exhausting after a while,” Mr. Sullivan said. “You just want to make something simple like mac and cheese, and you can’t do it because you don’t have a microwave or a kitchen.”

Some mornings “we would have to do a turnaround to make sure we didn’t have dust all over our jackets before we left for work,” said Ms. Filanowski, who works in sales for a garment manufacturer.

The renovation isn’t quite complete. The bathroom remains to be done. “When I see a construction project happening at work,” Mr. Sullivan said, “things progress every day and week to week. When it’s just me doing the work on the weekends and at night, things didn’t progress fast at all.” His father has helped occasionally and provided materials.

The couple were concerned about the proximity of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. “Who’s to say what it will be like when we have to open the windows during the summer?” Ms. Filanowski said. But at this time they are not bothered by noise.

The renovation is turning out better than they had anticipated. Mr. Sullivan was even able to add a dishwasher to the expanded kitchen.

“Every month when I write my mortgage check,” he said, “I feel like I am writing a check to myself, so that’s kind of cool.”

They are at last eating in. “We are hoping we don’t have to go out to eat for a long time,” Ms. Filanowski said.

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