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Wanting to Smoke at Home, and Facing Hurdles in Apartment Hunt

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

A few thousand apartments are available for rent in [New York City](#) on any given day, and a search on Craigslist last week revealed a sweeping range of options, from city views and roof decks, to simple studios and walk-ups, all outlined in the Web site's signature Smurf-hued-blue.

One category, however, turned up very lean results: apartments that advertised they allowed smoking with an enthusiastic "welcome" or even a tepid "O.K."

In all five boroughs, there were only four.

"If you're looking for a place that officially allows smoking, your numbers are going to go way, way down," said Mike Salvo, an agent at Citi Habitats. "But I smoke myself, and I'm not going to go get in the elevator every time I want a cigarette."

So smokers like him, Mr. Salvo said, just have to look harder.

Finding an apartment has long been a contact sport in the city, where sacrifices are made and premiums paid, often for the pleasure of living in a broom closet. But for smokers who refuse to put on slippers and head down to the sidewalk every time they have a craving, hunting for a place to live here has become even more of a challenge.

Just last month, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg introduced legislation that would require most residential buildings to adopt a smoking policy and disclose it to potential residents. Mr. Bloomberg said this was not a roundabout way to pressure buildings to ban smoking, but there is already a growing pool of landlords, and even some co-op and condo boards, that are opting to skip the smoke in the vents and tension in the hallways altogether.

"Owners can demand it, and it doesn't affect their ability to fill their vacancies," said Anthony Lolli, the chief executive of Rapid Realty, a brokerage that specializes in rentals. "It's a competitive market out there."

Mr. Lolli has more than just a passing interest in the topic. He is a landlord who had a devastating fire in a building he owned about 13 years ago, and a man who lost his father to emphysema. His company attaches no-smoking — and no-candle — riders to nearly every one of its leases.

“We do 1,500 transactions a month, and maybe once or twice someone will say, ‘Hey, wait a minute,’” Mr. Lolli said. Some of the renters do smoke, he suspects, but just keep their habit to themselves, a practice that is becoming more common these days.

And why might that be?

“It welcomes you like a cloud of disgustingness,” Leonard Steinberg, a managing director at Prudential Douglas Elliman, said of taking a stroll past a smoker. “Hate, hate, hate.”

With that kind of animus in the air, it is not surprising that some smokers demanded anonymity in exchange for their apartment-hunting stories.

“You get judged for being a smoker, so I like to keep it hidden,” said a 28-year-old woman, who declined to reveal herself as a smoker in the newspaper, or to her landlord. “I would like to get my security deposit back.”

While real estate professionals say a balcony or terrace is generally the best way to avoid conflict with nonsmoking neighbors, there are other options. The top floor can help minimize complaints, some suggested, as can a prewar building.

“In newer construction with ventilation between apartments, it becomes more of a problem,” Sarah Rose Katz, an agent at Citi Habitats, said. “As opposed to in a prewar building where you open your window, and that’s your ventilation.”

Finding an apartment for a committed indoor smoker can take a little patience — the closeted 28-year-old smoker estimated that she looked at more than 30 apartments before finding one, on a top floor, that she could afford — but they need not move to the suburbs. Most of the city’s landlords still don’t ask about the habit, brokers say, and there are even a smattering of real estate agents and owners who use smoke-friendliness as a selling point.

“When I post that smoking is allowed, I get more calls, I can tell you that,” said Lori Alvarez, a smoker, a landlord and an agent at Joanne Costa Realty.

Some developers of new projects have been reluctant to join the movement toward smoke-free buildings, worried that it might take a bite out of their bottom line. Angela Pinsky, a senior vice

president at the Real Estate Board of New York, said some of its members had expressed concern that a nonsmoking building could be a turnoff to foreign buyers who were from parts of the world where smoking was more prevalent.

But in general, the crowd appears to be marching in the other direction, away from the dingy walls and sticky smell that can often outlast a smoking resident.

Charles Mathison, for example, posted an advertisement on Craigslist recently, looking for a roommate in his Williamsburg apartment. He said he was willing to live with a smoker. When contacted about this lenience, he seemed confused.

“No, now it has to be a nonsmoker,” Mr. Mathison said. He explained that it was an old advertisement, one he wrote a previous time he was looking for a roommate and then improperly reviewed before reposting it, and that he planned to take the smoking language out.

“I used to smoke, but I quit five months ago,” Mr. Mathison said. “Now, I don’t want to be around it.”



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