

Why Roosevelt Island is making major real estate waves



There's something to be said for living in a neighborhood where the morning commute feels like a chilled-out fun ride in Coney Island.

Officially in Manhattan, surrounded by water, loaded with parks and without a single traffic light, two-mile-long Roosevelt Island has turned into a refuge for city dwellers seeking breathing room and relative affordability. Yet they still get to live just one 90-second F train stop — or a picturesque tram-car ride — away from the Upper East Side.

Starbucks recently opened on the island, plus a big-box pharmacy, sushi restaurant and art gallery called Riva have all opened in the past few years. David Kramer, a principal with real estate development firm Hudson Companies, gushes, “This is not your grandmother’s Roosevelt Island anymore. And it didn’t hurt that Hillary kicked off her presidential campaign here.”



With 326 units of luxury residential rentals and condos soon hitting the market, Roosevelt Island is becoming increasingly alluring for disillusioned Manhattanites and arrivistes to the city. It just might be the new “It” neighborhood for people looking to boost quality of life without going broke.

“We looked in Manhattan, but it was just too busy for us,” says Jonna Birgans, a 43-year-old media executive who recently relocated here, with her family, from Los Angeles. Now living in a two-bedroom, two-bath apartment in Riverwalk Crossing (a luxury rental building completed in 2008, located at 405 Main Street), she feels as if she has found the perfect place.

“We have a dog and a 10-year-old daughter and want her to be able to go downstairs and skateboard without the risk of being hit by a New York cab. Living on Roosevelt Island is like living in a sports park with good schools.”

Indeed, there is a sense that residents here want to have it both ways — perching in the city while enjoying suburban upsides. Curving streets with slow-moving cars, smatterings of pedestrians and expanses of green all lend a non-urban vibe to the island — where some 14,000 residents live in 13 apartment buildings. Notable services and civic amenities are also key Roosevelt Island lures — such as Cornell University’s Cornell Tech Campus, a \$2 billion/30 year project, the new 4-acre Four Freedoms Park, or even the tasty cones at Main Street Sweets, where the New York Mets seem to be an obsession.

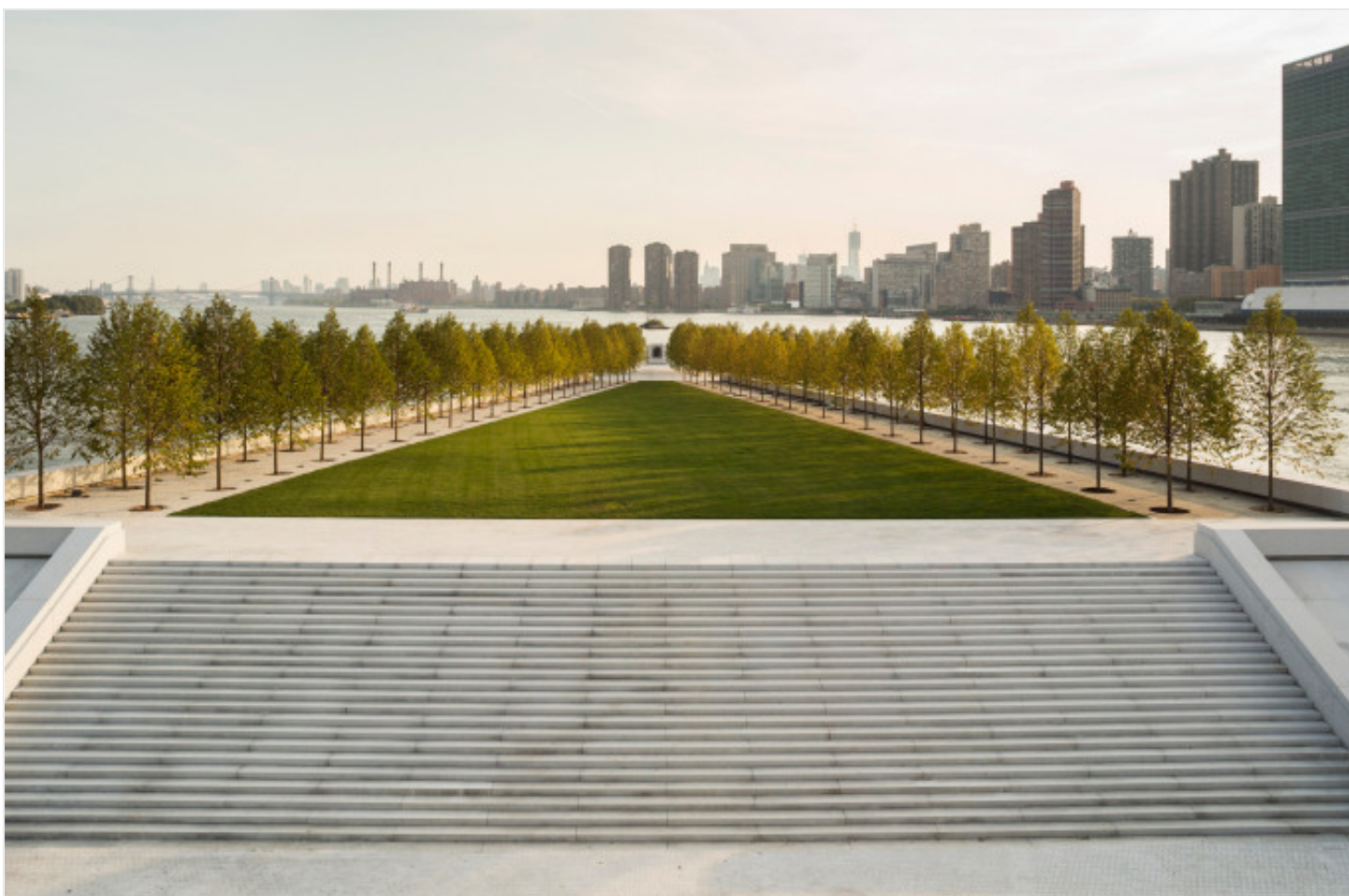


Roosevelt Islander Jonna Birgans at home in her rental at Riverwalk Crossing. Photo: Brian Zak/NY Post

In a city where once “outer” areas like Long Island City, Park Slope and Dumbo are beyond most buyers, Roosevelt Island has turned into an appealing option.

“Roosevelt Island is closer to Midtown than those areas,” says Corcoran Group’s Deanna Kory, sales director for Island House, three interconnected buildings located at 551, 555 and 575 Main Street being marketed as a co-op. An 803-square-foot one-bedroom there sells for \$575,000 and a three-bedroom, at nearly twice the size, is on the market for \$1.3-million.

“Considering what is going on here, with Cornell Tech coming in and so many other neighborhoods are now out of sight, people feel that these are really good investments in terms of putting your money into a place to live.”



The new Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Park. Photo: Paul Warchol

While Island House prices are far from cheap, finishes there are top shelf — Viking appliances, recessed panel cabinetry, gorgeous wooden floors. Plus, adds Kory, “We have floor-to-ceiling windows and an embarrassment of riches when it comes to views. Six months before the building converted to co-ops there were people wanting to buy in.”

In fact, Island House broker Lynn Nguyen, also of Corcoran, recalls a Rhode Island couple with friends living on the Island who couldn’t wait to join them. “They were calling us before we opened the sales office,” she says. “And they were among

the 100 people who showed up on opening day.”



A recently renovated unit at the co-op conversion project, Island House. Photo: Robert Socha

Slightly complicated in terms of the conversion — which is being handled by IH Preservation Partners — Island House started in the 1970s as a Mitchell Lama project designed to provide affordable housing for middle class tenants. It has three interconnected buildings, two standing 19 stories and one that is three stories. So far, 21 units have been gut-renovated and put on the market; 19 of them are sold. Of the 399 apartments in the complex, 160 will ultimately be purchased by outsiders; remaining units are being sold at insider prices to existing tenants or will stay as rentals.

Meanwhile, Roosevelt Island’s rental building of the moment is Riverwalk Point, located at 480 Main St. and the seventh building in a community of residential high-rises known overall as Riverwalk. Developed in a partnership between Hudson and Related Companies and targeted at luxury-minded folks — who can afford up to \$6,000 per month for a tricked-out 3-bedroom apartment — the 22 story, 266-unit building offers floor-to-ceiling windows, luxurious finishes and a state-of-the-art fitness center. There’s a concierge downstairs and a new playground across the street. People are responding. Forty percent of Riverwalk Point’s 266 units are rented. Meanwhile, move-ins just began.



FOR RENT: 480 Main St., #14D, \$5,025 per month — 1,050-square-foot corner unit with East River views, windowed

kitchen opens to living/dining room, two bedrooms and custom closets complete the package. Contact: Related Rentals, 212-292-2807. Photo: Steve Freihon

Kramer leads the way through sister-building Riverwalk Crossing, where the amenities mirror those slated for Riverwalk Point. He shows off a well-equipped kids' playroom, a swanky lounge with a pool table and a gorgeously finished roof-deck. Kramer revels in the landscaping, gestures toward the gas grills and watches a boat chugging across the East River. "This is where we close our deals," he says. "The views here are as nice as those of any luxury rental building in Manhattan — but the prices are discounted by about 30 percent."

Maybe in an effort to eventually narrow that margin, and to make Roosevelt Island feel more like Manhattan, Hudson and Related have partnered up to manage commercial rentals on Main Street. Working together to bring in cool commerce, they have already landed the gourmet food retailer Wholesome Factory, the appropriately monikered Island Wine & Spirits and, for nights when residents want to keep dinner fast and easy, Subway. "Our retail vision is like Main Street USA," says Kramer, carefully underscoring the overall sensibility that Roosevelt Island is striving for. "One of everything."

And residents like Jonna Birgans clearly want Roosevelt Island to stay that way. "People don't realize you can live like this in New York," she says, "without being a millionaire."

By Michael Kaplan

July 22, 2015