

Empty nesters fly the suburbs for urban environments

BY JESSICA ROYER OCKEN

The McCartys never planned to move into Chicago. Neither did the Alberdings.

After living in the suburbs and beyond for years—Rockford and Lake Bluff, respectively—both couples were empty nesters with a healthy network of friends and activities and a very firm grasp on what they wanted from life. “I used to tell people we’d never move into Chicago because I didn’t think we could be within walking distance of Michigan Avenue and have parking,” says Christine McCarty. “I wanted to be near a grocery store, some shopping, and a church.”

Yet when one of the couple’s seven children—then a real estate attorney—called to tell her parents she’d found them the perfect loft, they started to consider an urban move a bit more seriously. “We have always spent a lot of time in the city,” says Christine. “We have lots of friends there,” adds her husband David. After looking around, in 2000 the McCartys bid on a loft at Kingsbury and Grand “just to see,” Christine recalls. Then their offer was accepted.

All of Christine’s fears about parking and access to amenities were eased. “This place couldn’t fit better,” she says. “We can walk all over; there are restaurants and shopping galore; we can walk to the cathedral or another church, and we’ve got two parking spaces.”

Because David still practices as a surgeon, and they have numerous other commitments in Rockford, the couple maintains their stately Tudor home there. For now, the loft is a weekend getaway spot, or a place for family—five of their children live in the city—and friends to visit. When David retires, they will sell the house and make the move complete.

This flexibility and “phasing in,” as Christine puts it, has afforded the McCartys an opportunity to start anew with this urban living space. “I didn’t want to duplicate where we’re living now,” David explains. They worked with Chicago architect Elissa Scrafano and interior designer Jonathan Wells of Greg Jordan Inc., New York, to customize their loft into a modern space that is still comfortable and inviting.

To achieve this warmth and personalize the space, the McCartys replaced spiral stairs with a wider, much-less-twisty staircase, divided the open upper level, and added banquettes, among other things. “The whole place has been remodeled except for the kitchen cabinets,” David says. “We gave [the architect, designer and builder] a lot of freedom, and they turned it into a very comfortable space,” adds Christine.

They enjoy remodeling their homes—in fact, they’re renovating the Rockford home now, despite their plans to sell in the not-so-distant future. Christine doesn’t rule out moving into a different space and transforming it either. “We might look for a bigger space,” she says, “but this certainly suits our needs now.”

FAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Russ and Pat Alberding, too, insisted that they would never leave their turn-of-the-century Lake Bluff home or the proximity to the lake or their friends. Then health problems, including a stroke that hit Russ, rendered it a bit much to manage. “We lived there 25 years, and we hated to leave, but the children really wanted us to,” Pat explains. Then, like the McCartys, they were connected with the perfect place.

A friend in real estate directed the couple to a two-bedroom co-op on north State Street, which they liked immediately because of its 1930s vintage. Before making a decision, they checked out a variety of other spaces, including new construction. “They just weren’t us,” Pat says. “We would have to get all new furniture, and some of them had trapezoidal living rooms,” she recalls with a laugh. “Where do you put the sofa?”

Ultimately, the space on north State fit the bill, and the Alberdings were thrilled that their traditional furniture and decor—artwork and photographs gathered on trips all over the world—seemed instantly at home. So did they when they moved in 2004. “The pictures on the wall and books on the shelves reflect our interests and activities,” explains Russ. “The painting over the fireplace was done by a good friend of ours. Everything is very personal.”

Keeping their well-loved possessions close by helped tremendously in the transition. "People come in and say, 'This looks like Lake Bluff!'" Pat says. Thanks to renovations by previous owners, it took nothing more than a coat of paint to make the space ready for the Alberdings.

And despite their initial hesitation, they know they're where they belong. When she is feeling energetic, Pat walks to the Art Institute, and they enjoy nearby theaters and shopping. "We're city people," Pat explains. "We were driving in twice a week anyway."

EASTERLY MIGRATION

The Alberdings and McCartys are just two examples of a Chicago housing trend, report developers, architects, and real estate agents. "Baby boomers are a little older now, and they don't need three or five bedrooms," explains Andy Sokol, managing broker and president of The Sokol Group, a real estate brokerage and development firm. Once the kids are gone, they sell off the house that's paid for (hopefully) and move into the city to play.

Such buyers have a very particular playground in mind. "These are not urban pioneers going to fringe neighborhoods," notes Scrafano of Scrafano Architects, who designed the McCartys' space. Most head for Michigan Avenue to be close to established shopping and entertainment venues.

Practically speaking, such older buyers may want an elevator rather than stairs or a residence that's all on one floor. An on-site pool or exercise area can be an added bonus, and many prefer the security of a doorman and inside parking. Many couples migrating east from spacious single-family homes on large lots are not much interested in suddenly hearing their neighbors, Sokol says. "Look for concrete buildings if noise is a concern," he adds. But whatever the description of the dream residence, it can be found in Chicago, where town homes, loft living, two- or three-flat buildings, and freshly constructed high-rise towers abound.

LR Development was well aware of the empty-nester demographic in 2003 when it began co-developing 340 on the Park, located within Lakeshore East—a 28-acre Magellan Development Group community of high-rise condominiums, apartments, retail shops and abundant green space—according to Ann Thompson, senior vice president of LR's Synthesis Architecture and Design division.

It was The Lancaster, a 29-story condominium building at Lakeshore East, where Bill and Shelley Brazee found the city-living spot they'd been looking for—or at least that one of them had been looking for. "Left to my own devices, if I had a fishing line and some salt water, I'd be very happy," Bill confesses. After growing up near New York City, he never envisioned returning to urban life. "But my wife always had a dream of living in a livable city," he says. And Chicago is just that.

After running frequent Kildeer-to-Chicago shuttles for shopping and cultural activities while their three daughters grew up, the Brazees stumbled on The Lancaster in 2004 and decided it was time. The building's location near Michigan Avenue, the lake, Millennium Park, Navy Pier, and everything else that area has to offer was enticing, as was the thought of a fabulous cityscape just beyond their windows. Because the building was still under construction, the Brazees were able to choose just the two-bedroom corner unit they wanted and customize it to their desires—including removing a kitchen wall to provide a view of the skyline.

Like the McCartys, the Brazees are using this move—and the accompanying downsize from 3,000-square-foot home to 1,400-square-foot condo—as a chance to reinvent their style. "The opportunity to get uncluttered is very refreshing," Bill notes. "We're going to a minimalist decorating scheme." They're also paying rental on a storage space, stuffed with their Lake County belongings.

A small fee for all Chicago has to offer. MH

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