



Features

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Our ideal 'hood

Best design: West Village

There's a reason the West Village is one of the most famous neighborhoods in the world. Thanks to its grid-busting layout, it's a local favorite, too.

By Drew Toal



Photograph: Sophia Wallace

Sure, the West Village's atypical urban planning means that most tourists find it tricky to locate the neighborhood icons recommended in their guidebooks (we know, we've been asked for directions to Magnolia a million times too). But in a mostly grid-bound city, this area stands out, thanks to its idiosyncratic design. "The streets were plotted before the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, which laid out the Manhattan street grid as we know it today," says Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Planning Association. "That means that the West Village has less through traffic than virtually any other area in the borough." Indeed, one can hardly find a more suitable enclave for pedestrian lollygaggers, and it's exactly the kind of sidewalk-culture-friendly layout that Jane Jacobs championed in her seminal treatise, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

"The West Village embodies many of the best principles of healthy urban neighborhoods," adds Ingrid Gould Ellen, codirector of NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy. "[This includes] residential buildings and tree-lined streets that are human-scale while allowing for high density; a good mix of residential and commercial uses; access to the waterfront; and small-scale parks that offer ample community space. And it's highly accessible by public transit." The downside, Ellen explains, is a lack of affordability—that's why she originally voted for Brooklyn Heights. "While nearly half of the rental units [in the West Village] are rent-regulated," she says, "market rents and home-ownership opportunities are far out of reach of the average New Yorker."

But disregard cost of living (or don't, and flip to "Affordability," page 20) and we've got a winner. Even fans of straight lines and numbered streets have to admit that there's a serious allure to the charmingly askew area once known as Little Bohemia—cupcake tourists notwithstanding, of course.

Trout stream Minetta Brook coursed through the area till the 1820s.

RUNNERS-UP



Photograph: Sophia Wallace

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS

"The neighborhood's historic brownstones are harmonious but not totally uniform in style, and

its ample trees provide welcome shade. Access to public transportation is fabulous, and the traffic flows but doesn't overwhelm pedestrians. Finally, the promenade offers access to unparalleled skyline views and provides a wonderful sense of open space."—*Ingrid Gould Ellen, codirector of NYU's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy*

SUNNYSIDE GARDENS, QUEENS

"When it was built in the 1920s, it was something that really changed the world—it was modern architecture but not white walls and flat roofs. Each house has a private garden with a low fence, and that opens to a common garden in the middle. Unlike brownstones in Park Slope, Sunnyside is never going to be gentrified—it doesn't have that kind of cachet. There is still a waiting list with brokers but it's mostly a sign of the success of the Queens middle class."—*William Menking, founder of The Architect's Newspaper*

