



BRICK UNDERGROUND

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5 features that make a ground-floor apartment desirable—and not a dealbreaker

Ground-floor apartments tend to get a bad rap in the city, and not without good reason—often, living on the lower level of a building means less privacy (if your windows are facing the street), closer proximity to noises and smells, potential pest problems, security concerns, and a lack of all-important natural light. (There's a *reason* you'll usually see ground-floor units listed at a lower price than comparable apartments on higher floors).

Of course, there are perennial reasons why residents might be *more* interested in a lower level unit—they're much easier if you're elderly, have small children, or walk a dog multiple times a day—and landlords often will go the extra mile to make them more appealing, planting greenery in front of the windows to add extra privacy, installing reverse blinds for the same purpose, and in some cases, beefing up the unit's security system.

Still, not all first-floor apartments are created equal, and some come with features that not only override the stigma, but make them more preferable than one a few floors above.

Below, five reasons a ground-floor apartment isn't just livable, but downright luxurious:

Location, location, location

Given that some of the chief complaints of ground-floor apartments have to do with their proximity to the street (and all its attendant fracas and stench), an apartment's actual location in the building can make a world of difference. If you're situated toward the back of the building, for instance, you'll have much more peace and quiet (and maybe even a backyard—more on that later). A more secluded location can also protect you from the noise of the building's lobby, stairwell, or elevator, as the case may be.

"I saw a ground floor apartment recently that was at the end of the hallway all the way at the back, so nobody actually passes in front of it," says Kobi Lahav of Mdrn Residential. "And in that case, the back part of the building was a little elevated, so you feel like you're on a higher floor...so nobody's bothering you."

For this reason, in new developments or recent renovations, you'll often see developers make an effort to put ground-floor units toward the rear, or at least ensure that the

bedrooms aren't facing the street, the better to maintain some relative quiet. "Any smart developer is going to put the living room in the front and the bedroom in the back," adds Mdrn's Nick Sanni.

Similarly, many of these apartments are oriented so that the main entertaining spaces (think kitchens and living rooms) are facing large back windows into the backyards, the better to avoid street noise *and* let in more natural light.

Bottom line: You may still not get all the light you want, but if noise is your primary concern, don't necessarily rule out a lower-level unit—the right location could mitigate those concerns almost entirely.

You'll have a backyard to call your own

One of the most common perks to offset a ground-floor apartment is the all-important backyard, a coveted amenity in a city with precious little outdoor space. "Especially in Brooklyn, I feel like everybody with a dog is coming to see that apartment right away if it has a backyard," says Win Brown of CORE.

In some cases, landlords may be inclined to renovate the space to make it more enticing (though if not, we've got tips here). "I'm working with a developer who's going to have a ground-floor unit for sale, and I told him to put an outdoor kitchen in the backyard," says Sanni. "And landlords can have the outdoor space landscaped to add value. It's something so rare and it's not that expensive to add on."

If you're hoping for outdoor space but don't want to overspend, you may be able to score a deal by looking in the colder months. "We just closed on a condo conversion with a backyard, it was on the market for almost six months, and then spring came along, and by the end of March a client said, 'I have to have it'," says Brown. "The same thing happened with a listing in Williamsburg. It was facing the street, which would be considered a drawback, but had an eight-foot set back, so it had a deep terrace facing the sidewalk, elevated by a few feet. That one was on the market for four or five months over the winter, but as soon as the nicer weather hit and we had an open house when it was 65 degrees, it sold immediately."

Bottom line: A terrace or backyard might not seem especially enticing in the doldrums of February, but if you snap it up ahead of time, you've got a good chance at avoiding more stiff competition.

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The lower level comes with extra space—and storage

Particularly in apartments that are located on the ground floor of a townhouse or brownstone, there's a good chance you'll get access to the building's basement, which could mean extra storage and even your own laundry room.

"You have your own private entrance, under the stoop, and get a sort of mudroom via that common hallway that leads down to the basement, but that nobody really uses," says Brown. "And besides the backyard, owners will usually give tenant access to the basement for laundry and extra storage, which means more space overall."

Even in newer developments, you may expect to see the space below-grade (in other words, below the sidewalk) re-jiggered as amenity space, rather than a glorified darkroom. "With one property we're working with, on the lower level, we created a wet bar down there, and a full laundry room—it feels like a house," says CORE's Emily Beare. "That also comes with tons of storage, and huge closets."

Bottom line: Pack rats, consider this a potential solution if you don't feel like springing for a storage unit.



An example of a new development maisonette, this \$5.95 million condo in Tribeca features a main "great room" with 17-foot high ceilings, as well as grand cast-iron columns, and multiple private entrances.

It's a maisonette with multiple floors (and a private entrance)

If you've got a bigger budget to play around with, developers are increasingly turning ground-floor units into elaborate, townhouse-style maisonette duplexes or triplexes, with high ceilings, multiple floors, and luxury finishes. (Indeed, this trend has been on the rise for a few years now.)

"[These are ideal] for the buyer who wants a townhouse lifestyle and more square feet, but doesn't necessarily want to be responsible for shoveling snow," says Beare. "You have the townhouse feel, but the beauty and convenience of being part of a building—you have a doorman, your own private entrance from the street, [and an entrance from the lobby]."

The high ceilings in these newer maisonettes also generally come with tall windows, solving the problem of natural light. In a recent development on West 82nd Street, says developer Miki Naftali of the Naftali Group, each maisonette unit was a triplex with high ceilings. "There was space in the back, and an entry from the street as well as a private entrance through the building," Naftali explains. "It's a nice setup for potential buyers who are looking to maybe buy a townhouse but would like to have the security and amenities of a full-service building."

Bottom line: Architecture is everything. Just because it's on the ground floor of a building doesn't mean it can't feel like a house.

The price is right

High-design maisonettes are all well and good, but if your budget is more down-to-earth, then consider first-floor apartments an opportunity for savings—or haggling.

"I recently had two listings in the same building that were both two-bedrooms, one on the first floor, and one on the second floor," says Sanni. "We valued the one on the ground floor at \$3,200/month, and the one on the 2nd floor at \$3,400/month, for two identical apartments."

There's no rule of thumb for how much you might save on a ground floor—it will depend on a variety of factors including light, location, and outdoor space. That said, Lahav notes that a first-floor unit can be, on average, 15 percent cheaper than something comparable on a higher floor—more if the apartment's less than ideal. "If it's really close to the lobby and facing the front, that could be 20 percent less," says Lahav. "If it's facing the back and quiet but there's no light, maybe 10 or 15 percent less."

"I just saw an apartment on the Upper West Side, where the exact same apartment sold for \$1.55 million on the second floor, and on the ground floor facing the back, that apartment sold for \$1.35 million," adds Lahav. If the ground-floor unit had been facing the front, he says, the price may well have been knocked down further to \$1.2 or \$1.25 million. "The front is really a dealbreaker for a lot of people," he tells us. "And if it's something where the window is directly facing a bus station or something, that's going to be a 25 percent discount."

Ultimately, it's all about sussing out the units with potential, and knowing what your dealbreakers are, as in the rest of the apartment hunt. "There are things to watch out for, but if the landlord is smart and makes certain upgrades, garden apartments can work great for a lot of people," adds Sanni.

Bottom line: You get more for less money—and that, for many, is definitely luxurious.