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Feeling Settled? Must Be Time to Move

By **TERI KARUSH ROGERS**

GIVEN the choice, many people refuse to submit to the agonies of moving until boxed in by romantic, reproductive or professional circumstances. But the opposite is true for serial movers, who eagerly hop back on the open-house circuit even before the aroma of fresh paint and polyurethane begins to fade — that is, if they ever stopped looking in the first place.

Rachel Natalie Klein, 34, has lived in seven apartments in the five years since she arrived in Manhattan. Her most recent move, last June, was to a newly renovated \$1,500-a-month, 1,000-square-foot walk-up in East Harlem, on 127th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Previously, she lived on the Upper West Side, in the East Village and in Midtown East.

While able to point to economics, romance or apartment-related annoyances as a justification for each move, she recognizes that her constant shifting makes her unusual in a city where finding even one decent dwelling is considered a victory worth savoring, not tossing aside.

"This last man I dated, he said he thought I was searching," said Ms. Klein, who agreed that her journey is a process of exploration.

Moving around "is about seeing what fits and what doesn't," said Ms. Klein, a broadcast director at the public relations firm Kellen Communications, who often surfs real estate Web sites to unwind and indulge her curiosity about what's available and how other people live. She has even started chronicling her adventures in real estate and in her new neighborhood, East Harlem, in her blog, Bagel in Harlem (www.bagelinharlem.blogspot.com).

"When I move, I just feel like I'm going to attack a new neighborhood — going to meet more people, going to find the new restaurants, find out what's going on," she said.

Among those who uproot infrequently, moving as a means of exploration is a foreign concept. They are more likely to equate transience with arrested development or a shiftiness a step away from check-kiting schemes.

It is certainly true, said Nancy J. Crown, a Manhattan clinical psychologist, that cookie-cutter explanations don't exist.

"It would always have to be understood within the context of the particular person and their unique history," Ms. Crown said. "So you really couldn't say that moving a lot means the same thing for everyone. There are some people who — either because of a lack of sense of who they are, or some feeling of inadequacy — may want to redo themselves in one way or another again and again. Something new is like anything is possible — you can sort of imagine yourself to be the person that you'd like to be."

Lots of moving could also signal a fear of commitment and a consequent fear of closing off opportunities. Or, like procrastination, it can be a way to avoid failure. "If it's constantly in process, you're never being judged for the finished product," said Ms. Crown, who also warned against overpathologizing the behavior. "Not only does the same behavior mean different things to different people, but something one person might find intolerable, another person might really thrive from."

Such benefits might include an outlet for creativity, or channeling a desire for upheaval in a less destructive way than, say, job- or bed-hopping.

Serial movers seem motivated by everything from a desire for exploration, to the perpetuation of habit born in childhood, to a hunger for drama and excitement, to a fondness for extreme housekeeping. And these days, such appetites are stoked by a smorgasbord of aggressively marketed new buildings engaging in a constant battle of one-upmanship.

"With the renters, I think it's about, where can I live that's going to be a little cooler," said Diane M. Ramirez, president of Halstead Property. "I had a doorman and now I want a doorman and a gym, now I want a pool in the building. It's not that you can't stand the place you're living."

Sabrina Seidner, managing director of the Upper West Side office of Nest Seekers International, observed, "Really fancy rental buildings that have every imaginable amenity are becoming the norm."

Whereas the rule of thumb for changing apartments used to be every seven years, Ms. Seidner said it seems to have shrunk to something like two years among a larger swath of clientele, resembling a fashion trend.

Indeed, most of those interviewed wore their transience as a badge of honor. "Moving to me is a symbol of independence and open-mindedness, of not being afraid to let go of things in your life, of being grounded by the right things and not by objects," said Bige Z. Doruk, 38, chief executive and president of Gaia Power Technologies, an energy storage and backup company. Ms. Doruk and her husband, Ib I. Olsen, 43, have moved four times within Lower Manhattan since they married in 2000.

Their current apartment — the first they have owned — is an 1,100-square-foot TriBeCa condo they bought for \$665,000 in September 2003. They renovated it and, in January, put it on the market for \$1.295 million.

Though they stand to pocket a sizable profit and have already found a bigger apartment, for \$1.1 million, in the financial district, Ms. Doruk emphasized that for them, moving has never been about the money.

"I don't think we ever look at anything as our permanent home," she said, while acknowledging that the eventual schooling of her son, Kai, 2, might cut into the couple's mobility. "That's our mentality — we don't like getting complacent and too routine."

Still, said Ms. Doruk, who was born in Turkey and moved often while growing up, "to us it's important to really keep an open mind and not be one of these 60-year-olds who have done things the same way so long that they can't travel 200 miles to get somewhere. We see that people who don't move are more close-minded and have a tendency to get too fixated on things in their life."

Like Ms. Doruk, many frequent movers experienced mobile childhoods. Therapists point out that any stress-inducing childhood event can be essentially re-enacted in adulthood without conscious intent or even recognition. Without commenting on Ms. Doruk specifically, Ms. Crown explained, "If something happens to somebody that overwhelms them at a vulnerable time, any particular behavior pattern can become a way of trying to take that overwhelming experience and turn it into something you can have control over."

Lauren May, 23, a public relations account executive, said she moved every two to three years as a child. On her own since graduating from college, she has upped the ante, moving three times in Manhattan in her two postgraduate years. "If you're new to New York, it's extremely hard to find an apartment you like without going through a few duds first," she said, echoing the observations of real estate brokers and other frequent movers.

Nevertheless, she worries that her moves herald a troubling pattern. "You grow up in a constantly volatile

living situation, always picking up and going," she said. "So when things settle down and get boring in your own life, you can always pick up and move. If something doesn't work, moving seems like an easier solution."

Peripatetic upbringing or not, the chronic urge to move often seems less a permanent lifestyle choice than an outgrowth of a particular phase of life, during which a person either feels too settled (romantically, professionally or both) or is preoccupied with forging a new identity. The latter group, brokers say, typically includes the young-and-the-restless segment in their 20's and 30's, or people at the opposite end of the spectrum, who have finished raising their children. (Those still raising children, brokers say, are more likely to be prostrated into one place by the tangled roots of domesticity and a commensurate lack of energy.)

Wendy J. Sarasohn, a senior vice president at the Corcoran Group, said her most mobile clients tend to be female empty-nesters. "They've produced their children successfully, their kids are well launched, and then they need to address what's next for them," she said. "And for many of the women, it will be to create a new home. It's beyond decorating."

A certain subset set out to alter their bodies as well as their living arrangements in what becomes an escalating and intertwined addiction to change, Ms. Sarasohn said.

"I think some of the serial movers are the same as plastic surgery junkies — people who look outside themselves for change and excitement," she said of the overlap that she has observed in some clients. "First, someone starts with Botox, and then their eyes, and then the first home that they renovate, sell and make a profit, and then they get their neck done."

For others, the urge to move coincides with the beginning of a committed relationship. It's as if they replace the drama and excitement of searching for a new partner with the drama and excitement of searching for — and often renovating — a new dwelling.

Herb Seilberger, 48, worked in the travel industry and lived a relatively rooted life before he met his partner, John-Alec Briggs, 40, a dozen years ago. Since then, they have moved five times: four in New York (with the help of Linda Gertler, a vice president at Corcoran), and this past September to Palm Springs, Calif.

Although the pair made money in the moving and found it somewhat addictive, Mr. Seilberger said, that didn't fully explain the wandering. The less tangible silver lining, he said, was the way the sense of adventure enlivened his relationship with his partner, who is an interior designer and architect. It also allowed Mr. Seilberger to finally make the break with New York and move to Palm Springs, a long-held dream.

The couple have been renovating their \$750,000 home there, which has 11 palm trees and a pool, and just bought another property to live in temporarily, Mr. Seilberger said. They have also started a business buying and renovating condo units.

Mitchell J. Kassman, 48, has moved 15 times in the decade since he met his wife, Maria, now 41. The onset of his roving ways coincided with the end of a longish bachelorhood, but he steadfastly denied a connection.

"It's like trying to create a house that you really want," he said. "When you fix up a house and you're done, you're looking for something else. It's like a kick or a drug. You keep searching. If you don't have children, you can keep on moving."

Mr. Kassman, a salesman-turned-mortgage broker, started by renovating apartments in Manhattan that he found with the help of Scott Schiller, a senior vice president at the real estate brokerage firm Anchor Associates. Several years ago, Mr. Kassman turned to Long Island, after his father's death precipitated a move there to care for his mother. There, among other real estate adventures, he tried to bring his life full circle.

"When I was a little kid, all the rich kids lived in this area in Woodbury, so we bought this beautiful house in the Gates of Woodbury that I wanted to live in all my life and we fixed it up." He said he sold it in May (after living there for two years) because, it turned out, "I didn't like the rich people."

Mr. Kassman's wife, a bystander who is sanguine about changing homes the way others change slipcovers, put forth her own observations about her spouse's restlessness. "He doesn't know how to settle down," she said. "After he fixes the house, he's happy for a while. It's the honeymoon stage and everybody gives him compliments, and once that passes, he needs to start over."

Many brokers asserted that renters are more restless than owners. Renters not only tend to be younger, with more flux-related issues, but also the transactional costs are less severe, and the end of a lease provides a natural transition. Unlike owners, who can eventually recoup some or all of the cost of gussying up their apartments when they feel the urge to upgrade, "renters don't want to go into their pockets too deeply to improve their apartment," said Kevin M. Kurland, president of Kurland Realty.

Dennis M. Colwell Jr., 31, a Corcoran broker, falls into the serial-renter category. Mr. Colwell has rented five luxury high-rise apartments in three buildings in Jersey City since moving from Houston five years ago.

"Basically, the bottom line is I always want to have the cutting-edge apartment," he said. "I want the latest floor plan, the best view, outdoor space."

Mr. Colwell started out sharing a three-bedroom apartment with two roommates, and moved up by increments of \$200. He now lives in a \$2,800-a-month two-bedroom on the 35th floor of the Liberty Towers complex. It is, he says, the largest apartment in his building and the one with the best view. He estimated that a similar space in Manhattan would rent for about \$6,000.

"People think it's crazy to move all the time, but to me moving is a great opportunity to, like, clean house," Mr. Colwell said. "You don't have to dust under the beds, and you throw out the trash you've accumulated. You usually buy a few new pieces of furniture and paint the walls. So you're also in the latest trends in decorating."

Mr. Colwell sees a blank canvas where others see cookie cutters and enjoys showing off his taste by frequently entertaining co-workers, friends and prospective clients.

Serial movers with fatter bank accounts tend to seek out condos and brownstones, said Kirk Henckels, the director of Stribling Private Brokerage. "Co-ops are looking for stable tenancy," he said. "If someone moved every three years or less, the boards would start asking questions."

Mr. Henckels says his restless clients tend to be men who have made a lot of money on Wall Street and "want to build and enjoy the process."

"Basically, they're frustrated architects or contractors," he said.

But Richard Steinberg, a senior managing director at Warburg Realty, said that in his experience, the older wealthy men swooping in and out of \$10-million-and-up residences shy away from renovations. "I don't think they want to tie themselves up for a year," he said. "These type-A personalities — in the course of 12 months, their tastes can change."

Stephanie Gurland, 62, a senior sales agent at Bellmarc and a self-described perfectionist who has moved about 25 times in 38 years, says that her motivation for moving has changed over the years. Her first 20 moves, mostly within Florida, occurred because "I wasn't happy in my marriage," said Ms. Gurland, who eventually divorced. "I was doing it to try to get happy. I was always looking for a better situation and more comfort in my life."

Now on her fifth apartment in New York since moving here in 1991 — she lives in a doorman studio on Central Park West for which she paid \$379,000 in May — she views her path as part moneymaking venture, part "quest for the best" and "a form of reorganization."

"You have to throw away a lot of stuff and buy new stuff," she said. "I furnish each place from the floor up."

Ms. Klein, the East Harlem renter, said that while she harbored no misgivings about her journey, she was surprised by how upset she was over a recent office move from the 17th floor to the 15th floor of the same Midtown building. "I was not expecting an office move to be emotional," said Ms. Klein, who had been at the old office for five years. "I'm discombobulated. Everything is new — the fixtures are new, the furniture is new, the carpets are new."

Would she adjust better to her new workspace if she had not cycled through so many apartments? Perhaps, she admitted. "It was a bit of an anchor," she said, adding: "The psychological ramifications of moving are vast and very interesting. They can take on a life of their own. There are a lot of boxes in one's life."