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A (Museum) Mile in Their Shoes

An American couple abroad navigate a successful return to the U.S.

Julie Tucker was apprehensive when her husband Adam Tucker was offered the position of president of Ogilvy & Mather in New York. She loved London, and had a great job as business director at international ad agency TBWA. The couple, both American, lived in a beautiful, terraced house in the picturesque Hampstead area, with plenty of room to raise their three children and their Welsh terrier, Fergus.

Her mood dimmed during her first apartment-hunting trip in New York. She told an agent she wanted four bedrooms, a yard and off-street parking. "They laughed at me," says Ms. Tucker, 44 years old, a native of the Chicago area. Instead, she was led through a series of small, dark rentals asking \$20,000 a month. "I was really depressed."

For nearly a week, she would call her husband at day's end and tell him the move just wouldn't work. Then she suddenly changed her tune.

"She called and said, 'I've found our dream home. We have to buy this now.' We went from renting to buying really quickly," says Mr. Tucker, 45, who hails from St. Louis.

The building that seduced Ms. Tucker is on Fifth Avenue and was designed by architect Robert A. M. Stern. The yard she sought for her three children was all of Central Park, just across the street. It also was a gateway to a stretch of some of New York's finest museums: El Museo del Barrio, the Museum of the City of New York, the Jewish Museum, the Cooper Hewitt, the Guggenheim and the Metropolitan, among others. The building itself was slated to house the Museum for African Art.

One Museum Mile, as the building is called, has its own amenities: a rooftop swimming pool, and outdoor terraces with barbecue grills and granite tables that overlook the park and the Manhattan skyline. The 114 units have access to five impeccably decorated common rooms with TVs and big windows, including a dining/conference room, a living room, and a teen hangout with Wii, Foosball and air hockey. A well-stocked fitness space shares a glass wall with a play area so exercising parents can keep an eye on their children.

Despite all the good points, Ms. Tucker wondered if the neighborhood was a good fit for her young family, or whether she was taking a risk in a city unfamiliar to them. The building, built in 2008 at 109th Street, had been called a poster child for gentrification. Several New

York City Housing Authority projects are located around the corner. Some of East Harlem had an edginess. At the time, in May 2012, there wasn't a supermarket nearby.

Ms. Tucker called her father, Gary Busch, a retired dentist who lives in the Chicago suburbs, for advice. Dr. Busch visited and loved it—especially the people. "Everyone is really friendly," he says.

The Tuckers made an offer for two units in 2012 (just after the building was rebranded from its original name, 1280 Fifth Avenue) for \$2.2 million—paying full price but negotiating for the building to pay \$50,000 in closing costs on condition the savings be used for renovation. The building was 20% sold then; now it is sold out, with one unit going for \$3.6 million, said Tom Postilio, director of sales for the building.

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It feels like an oasis in the city.

—Homeowner Adam Tucker

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The eight-month renovation, finished in May, cost about \$500,000. The studio and two-bedroom were combined into a 2,300-square-foot, three-bedroom home, starting with a Carrara-marble entryway. The wood floor leads to seven-year-old Jack's bedroom and bath, decorated with British flags, and offering a view of train tracks in the distance. (He loves trains.)

The main living room, dining area, kitchen and playroom are open. The couple completely redid the kitchen, putting in a breakfast bar with stools and glass tile walls. The master bedroom is airy, with large windows offering park views. Olivia, 4, and Millie, 2½, share a small pink room with a walk-in closet. "It feels like an oasis in the city," says Mr. Tucker.

The Tuckers met in 1993 in Chicago when both worked at Euro RSCG Worldwide (now Havas Worldwide). They moved to the U.K. in 2001, and after Mr. Taylor became a managing partner of London's largest ad agency, BBDO London, bought a 1,700-square-foot home in Hampstead for about \$1.1 million. When the couple left London eight years later, they sold the home for \$2.2 million.

There are still downsides to the new home. The opening of the African Art museum, planned for the lower floors, has been delayed for years. A 10-by-12-foot storage closet in the building costs \$30,000. (They declined.) The parking garage fits only 23 cars and has no direct access. (You have to go around outside.) The two daughters share a room. A local grocery store has good prices but few specialty items. There is a Dunkin' Donuts but no Starbucks SBUX +1.01% nearby.

Ms. Tucker, now executive director of marketing at the New York Times, NYT -1.28% says she appreciates her neighborhood. Once a week she takes the children to a local food pantry to donate dinner. Duke Ellington Circle, across the street, has a statue of the great jazz musician playing a piano and attracts local musicians. The Lasker swimming pool and ice-skating rink is an easy walk. So is the Harlem Meer, where the family fishes and rides bikes. "There's a vibe here you lose when you go south," she says.