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LIVING IN | BERKELEY HEIGHTS, N.J.

Suburbia, but Not the Cookie-Cutter Kind



Aaron Houston for The New York Times

There is architectural variety in Berkeley Heights, even among these new houses on Lillian Court (for which some forest has had to cede ground).

By DAVE CALDWELL Published: June 17, 2011

ADRIENNE NATRILLO and her husband, Javier Gomez, moved to Berkeley Heights, N.J., from Connecticut four years ago because the town was 15 miles from her office in East Hanover and had houses they thought were much better buys than those in nearby communities.

Now Ms. Natrillo, a scientist, and Mr. Gomez, who is in the insurance business, are rediscovering Berkeley Heights, an architecturally eclectic town of 13,000 in western Union County, as they pilot their 4-month-old son's stroller down its rolling, shady streets.

"Unless something happens with our jobs," she said, "I feel like we're going to be here 30 years."

Real estate brokers say Berkeley Heights has been a relatively easy place to sell homes, even in a recession, because it is less than 30 miles from Manhattan, with easy accessibility to a commuter train line and Interstate 78, in the southern part of town.

But Ms. Natrillo and Mr. Gomez, who bought a four-bedroom 1980s colonial for \$700,000, enjoy the place for what is right there: the great outdoors, for one, and residents who say hello.

Berkeley Heights was a sleepy, rural community until the

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A four-bedroom three-and-a-half-bath 1998 colonial, listed at \$905,000. (908) 277-1398



387 MOUNTAIN AVENUE
A four-bedroom two-and-a-half-bath 1965 split-level, listed at \$519,000. (973) 377-4444

American Telephone and Telegraph Company built a research facility in 1941 in its southeastern corner. Bell Laboratories, which later became Lucent Technologies, straddled Berkeley Heights and New Providence and brought thousands of workers to western Union County.

Seventy years later, however, the general effect remains uncluttered, almost rural — much more like a town much farther from [New York City](#), like Sparta, the previous hometown of Joseph Bruno, the mayor. “We have a lot of folks here who want to live in the country but also want to live close to work,” he said.

“It’s kept its small-town charm as long as I’ve been here,” said Mr. Bruno, who has lived in three houses in Berkeley Heights since moving to the township in 1992.

Mr. Bruno, a store manager for J. C. Penney not far away in Wayne, took on the part-time job of mayor this year. As in other places, the township has had to run on a shoestring budget recently, he said, but not to the point that services have been cut.

Although Berkeley Heights is within minutes of Interstate 78, the lifestyle is quiet, and residents tend to stay put. Mr. Bruno, who bought a four-bedroom house seven years ago for \$640,000, describes the town as “multigenerational” and cited two neighbors who are putting additions onto their houses to avoid having to move.

Kenneth B. Baris, the president and broker for Jordan Baris Realtors, whose main office is in West Orange, says he has had a number of clients choosing to stay in town when they trade up to larger houses, “which is a very positive statement.”

The quality of the local schools is a selling point, as are the tax rates, which tend to be lower than in similar bedroom communities in nearby Essex County. The town, nestled in the Watchung [Mountains](#), feels more spread out, less densely populated.

Yimin Tang and his wife, Bei Jiang, are engineers. They just paid \$490,000 for a four-bedroom 1963 bilevel. He said they had looked nearby in New Providence, Mountainside and Warren Township, but felt Berkeley Heights offered the best deal. “This is big enough for us,” he said. “And there’s some potential for the future.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

The township, area 6.3 square miles, is bordered by the Passaic River to the north and I-78 to the south. It sticks out of Union County like a hitchhiker’s thumb, with Morris County to the north and Somerset County to the west and south. Two thoroughfares cut east to west: Mountain Avenue and Springfield Avenue, the commercial strip.

To the east on Springfield, near New Providence, is a sprawling shopping center. To the west, Springfield looks a lot more like Main Street U.S.A., with American flags fluttering above a block that includes a bagel store, a barber shop (with a barber pole) and a hardware store.

“Berkeley Heights is really a small town at heart,” said Mary Ann Walsh, a RE/MAX agent who moved here with her husband 13 years ago from Maplewood to raise their children. “We have every amenity as any other place, but when I got here, I felt very welcome. It’s a

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very friendly town. We feel like we got the best of both worlds.”

The Berkeley Heights train station — near the intersection of Springfield and Plainfield Avenue, the main north-south road — is at the center of town. Several restaurants, a park and a variety of businesses are within walking distance of the station, including a garage, a dry cleaner and a plant nursery. Signs for yard sales are stapled to utility poles.

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