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Tiny Pools Are Big in Cramped New York

Demand for pools and spas for Brooklyn brownstones and Manhattan penthouses has soared

By Charles Passy
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Niki Turkington and her husband had a hot tub and sauna installed at their Jersey City, N.J., home. NIKI TURKINGTON

When Jersey City, N.J., resident Niki Turkington wondered how she and her family were going to make the best of Covid-era living, she remembered the good times she had spent with friends in their backyard hot tubs.

The problem: Ms. Turkington's townhouse doesn't have much of a backyard. She and her husband still managed to squeeze in a cedar hot tub and sauna.

The country is reopening, but not everyone is so sure about public pools. Heading into summer, residents of the New York metro area are finding ways to wedge water features into the tiniest spaces.

Local pool and spa companies say demand has soared during the past year or so. They are doing projects everywhere from the backyards of Brooklyn brownstones to the decks of Manhattan penthouses.

Bob Blanda, owner of Mill Bergen Pools, a New York-based company, said his inquiries are up by about 25% since the pandemic started. Potential customers should be prepared to wait their turn, especially since some pool-building supplies, such as resin, are in short supply, he said.

The Pool & Hot Tub Alliance, a nationwide trade organization, said that pool installations across the country increased 24% to nearly 97,000 in 2020 over the prior year.



Ms. Turkington at the sauna. NIKI TURKINGTON

Limited space and tight access are among the key issues in the New York area. For projects in the suburbs, pool builders can easily gain access with their equipment—say, to dig the requisite hole and then transfer the dirt to a truck to be taken away. But for a job at a brownstone or townhome, the process can be a little different.

"You carry the dirt out in buckets," said Mr. Blanda, adding that it can take weeks to do the job, even with a crew of four workers.

For pools on rooftops or decks, the weight of materials is the main problem, said Sasha Newman of Brooklyn-based Little Miracles Designs, a company that specializes in outdoor spaces. It takes a certain engineering savvy to make sure the pool or spa can be supported, especially in older buildings that weren't designed for such projects.

Another challenge for pool builders working up high is getting materials, if not the entire pool structure, to the location. "We craned a pool on a roof," said Nick Tsoukas, owner of Grecian Pools International, based in New York and New Jersey.

Prices can be significant. In-ground pools start at about $30,000 and can easily climb well into the six figures, say local companies. Even aboveground pools that are a cut above the inflatable kind can run up to $10,000 with the proper installation.

Ms. Turkington, the Jersey City resident, said her project cost about $20,000. But she considers it a good investment, especially since she anticipates her family making use of the spa and sauna year-round. In the summer, she is likely to turn off the spa's heater so it can function like a mini-pool, she added.

Luxury properties featuring private pools are often coming to the market these days, according to local real-estate professionals.

At the Soori High Line, a new condominium development in Manhattan's West Chelsea neighborhood where prices can go as high as $20 million, 16 of the 31 units have pools, said James Morgan, sales director of the project. In some units, the pools are indoors and almost an extension of the living room, he said.



Some units at the Soori High Line condominium development in Manhattan's West Chelsea area have pools. VAN SARKI

Some New Yorkers are finding a more-affordable way to make a splash this summer is a stock tank. The tanks, which are traditionally used as drinking troughs for animals, have been embraced as a kind of low-cost alternative to a backyard pool.

Bill Vasel, owner TankAndBarrel.com, an online purveyor that offers stock tanks, said the trend goes well beyond New York, but he has sold "quite a few" to homeowners in the metropolitan area. He is as surprised as anyone by their popularity. "We normally sell these tanks to farmers," he said.

Penny Knops recently acquired a galvanized-steel stock tank, measuring 7 feet in diameter and costing about $1,500 with shipping, for the backyard of her brownstone in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. She said she was looking for something "a bit more substantial" than a plastic pool but she didn't want to spend thousands of dollars. Nor did she necessarily like the idea of having to give over her outside space to a more permanent pool solution.

"You can repurpose the yard for other things," she said.

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