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Shared Shop Makes for Crazy Roomies

In Brooklyn's Bay Ridge neighborhood, four businesses share one space



At a store in Brooklyn, four businesses peacefully coexist. Up front are the framers and the insurance brokers. PHOTO: RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By ANNE KADET

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In New York City, the high cost of space creates all kinds of unlikely roommate situations, and not just on the residential end.

A drugstore sublets its sidewalk to a fruit stand. A cellphone shop shares a storefront with a perfume vendor and dental-cap provider. I once saw a flat-repair service sharing a lot with a live poultry market.

I love spotting these combos. So I was delighted when a friend tipped me off to a storefront in Brooklyn's Bay Ridge neighborhood that really takes this concept all the way, promoting a frame shop, health-insurance brokerage, custom-embroidery service and GPS dealer. Not to mention two African turtles and two egg-laying hens.

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I asked AMP Insurance Brokerage owner Louis Peters if people ever stop into the store for a frame and wind up buying a policy.

"That's the idea," he says.

Inside, the space is divided down the middle with a reception area, three desks and a conference room for the insurance brokerage.

Dennis Kyvik, who owns Brooklyn Art & Frame, displays more than 600 frame options along with a small selection of prints.

I asked him if customers ever look confused when they come in. "Very much so," he says. "That's part of the mystique around here."

Mr. Kyvik owns the building, but the sublet situation helps lower his costs, he says, and it's nice to help fellow entrepreneurs in an area where a small storefront rents for roughly \$55,000 a year. "They're getting a substantial discount," he says of his tenants.

Past the frame shop, the GPS electronics counter is usually deserted, the only sign of life being a dusty cash register and a letter addressed, "Dear Bay Ridge shopkeeper."



One storefront houses four different businesses in Bay Ridge. PHOTO: RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I found Juan Morales, who runs the embroidery service, in the backroom, a space crammed with a computer, three embroidery machines and samples for clients like the Sunset United Soccer Club and the bagel shop down the street.

Mr. Morales says his needlework skills are self-taught. "I watched videos on YouTube," he says. "I don't have school. Nothing, nothing, nothing."

The shared space suits Mr. Morales fine, he says, since he does most of his marketing through Facebook. And the location is convenient: He rents an apartment upstairs from Mr. Kyvik and works a second job cooking at Gino's, the Italian restaurant up the street.

Andrew Flamm, director of the Pace University Small Business Development Center, says a shared space is a great solution for many small businesses. While the combinations sometimes look funny, "it's an opportunity to generate cross-referrals and sales," he says.

Indeed, the storefront gets plenty busy. Mr. Peters's nine brokers pop in all morning between client calls. Teenagers peruse the frame shop's poster selection. Norm, one of several street characters who frequent the shop, enters brandishing the Bay Ridge Courier.

"His thing is to give me the paper," says Mr. Peters. "Every free paper that comes out."

Another regular sits at an empty desk and makes small talk about the election while stealing glances at Mr. Peters's receptionist, Desiree Giarraffa.

"I think he has a crush on her," says Mr. Peters.

Just before lunch, Mr. Peters rushes out, announcing he has to deliver a kidney stone to his doctor.

“He comes up with these random things all the time,” says Ms. Giarraffa. “But I wasn’t expecting the kidney stone.”

The frame business picks up in the afternoon. Customers include photographer Dave Foss bearing several works for a coming show with the Rockaway Artists Alliance.

Mr. Foss pays models to pose nude in public places around town: under the Coney Island parachute jump, in an ice-cream truck parking lot.

“I need very brave models,” he says. “That’s one of the issues.”

During a lull, I wander across the street to meet Richie Wells, owner of Bay Ridge Carpet & Linoleum, who introduced Mr. Peters to Mr. Kyvik last year.

“That’s what I do,” Mr. Wells says. “I know everybody.”

I ask Mr. Wells about the synergies between framing and health insurance.

“What does that mean?” he asks. “I just put them together because they’re good guys.”

But the shop’s inhabitants say there are synergies aplenty. Mr. Kyvik bought painted pumpkins for Mr. Peters’s employees on Halloween. Mr. Peters takes out the garbage for Mr. Kyvik.

When Mr. Kyvik is busy making frames in the basement, the insurance team cheerfully mans his \$1 poster table.

And Mr. Peters says the arrangement brought an unexpected bonus: “I never thought, at this stage of my life, that I could get a new best friend.”

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