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Living Together

To Each Her Own

By SUZANNE SLESIN

ROSELYN LEIBOWITZ and Catherine Redmond have been friends for years, and as friends do, they would often talk about how they imagined their futures. They would discuss how they wanted to live when they were older, and what would make the best balance in a living situation. Both are artists, and agreed they wanted companionship but a great deal of privacy.

Ms. Leibowitz, who is now 54, and who proudly calls herself "a spinster," and Ms. Redmond, 65, who is divorced, would often meet for coffee or dinner in the '90s because they both lived in TriBeCa and shared a work space. "We would sit for hours," Ms. Leibowitz recalled. "That's when Catherine and I really became closer friends."

They talked and talked about how to create a supportive structure without losing one's individual sense of privacy. One might call it the yin and yang of independence and togetherness, an issue that concerns many more people than it once did. The Census Bureau, based on data collected in 2007, estimates that 31.1 million people in the United States live alone, which is 27 percent of all households, a significant increase from 17 percent in 1970.

Their conversations were only theoretical, however, until 9/11, when Ms. Redmond's building on Chambers Street near the World Trade Center, was evacuated. "At the time I had one parrot, three cats, and a border collie," she said. "Roz took us all in."

They all stayed for a month in Ms. Leibowitz's loft on North Moore Street in TriBeCa. "There were bouts of crying and terror," Ms. Leibowitz recalled, "but we laughed more. And I also became aware of how, apart from my mother and some friends, how alone I was."

At that point the women decided to look for a place where they could have separate quarters and yet be fairly close. "We had discussed this move for a long time, years in fact," Ms. Redmond said. "Once we decided to actually look for a place we simply sat down and discussed everything, all eventualities, all responsibilities, and looked at the potential worms in the arrangement.

“None of this would have been possible had we not been open and frank with each other,” Ms. Redmond continued. “The question for me was, what can we be for each other and what can we not be. We had to be free.” A large house with two separate wings or a brownstone with different apartments was the general idea. “And we had a rule — never to lie to each other about anything,” Ms. Leibowitz said. “If either of us felt uncomfortable with the place or anything about it we would not hide anything from each other.”

On a visit to a ground floor and basement in a small loft building in TriBeCa, Ms. Redmond loved the skylights at the back, and something about the space fondly recalled the fruit cellars of her Chautauqua County childhood in a 600-person town in rural New York.

“A paradise,” was her reaction. But Ms. Leibowitz, who grew up in Queens, was less romantic. “It was a dump,” she said.

One day riding the subway, Ms. Leibowitz saw a newspaper advertisement for a loft in the West 30s. “Who would want to live there?” she thought at first. But she had second thoughts, and they decided to take a look. There were actually two connected lofts, and the smaller north-facing unit had a grand piano. “I hit middle C and knew it was my space,” Ms. Redmond said. “Although it was a rabbit warren, I knew it had possibilities.” Ms. Leibowitz, on the other hand, never noticed the piano at all but was impressed with the neighborhood and the exterior of the building.

They decided that they wanted the space, but also knew that it had to be gutted and completely reconfigured. Ms. Leibowitz could afford to buy it with the proceeds from selling her loft in TriBeCa. Ms. Redmond had been renting, and could not afford to buy. They agreed, after long and open conversations, that Ms. Leibowitz would buy the two lofts and pay for the renovations. She paid $3.1 million in 2007 for the space.

“Our financial arrangement is a casual relationship between trusting friends,” Ms. Redmond said. “To be sure, I am a beneficiary of Roz’s immense generosity, but our friendship, and more important, the soul that is Roz’s kindness to me, has never impinged on my sense of freedom.”

The women have no legal or written agreement governing their living situation, an arrangement that some people would find unnerving and others would not accept for its lack of guarantees. But they say it works for them.

As for the monthly bills, they share them, Ms. Redmond said.

“Artists don’t need guarantees,” she continued. “They need places to do their work and the freedom in which to do it.”

But also, Ms. Leibowitz added, “we were very clear that Catherine and I had equal say in the renovation.”

Once they agreed to go forward, Ms. Leibowitz called Michael Zenreich, a New York architect with his own firm who specializes in residential, commercial and retail interiors, and who had done some work 10 years earlier on her mother's apartment uptown.

The two women explained to Mr. Zenreich how they imagined living together, but not together, in the 4,600-square-foot space, which was already two distinct apartments. "Our friends thought we would live together like a couple," explained Ms. Leibowitz, who said that Mr. Zenreich was the first one to really comprehend the idea. "They could not get it."

"He was also able to understand our similar yet different visions," she added, "not only in the way we live but especially our working needs."

Mr. Zenreich had once been a student at Pratt, where Ms. Redmond, a painter, teaches, a connection that helped them to bond. Figuring out how to create a live-work studio for her was right up his alley, he said. Understanding Ms. Leibowitz's work needs was more challenging, at least at first. "I sit and watch TV and draw on the bed," she said. "I work almost like a writer."

The architect asked for 10 days to come up with a plan.

An hour later, he had the design. "It was one shot, one drawing, one hour," Mr. Zenreich said. "I've never done that in my life. I saw the space as being turned not into apartments but studios to be lived in — for two people who make different kinds of art. That was the fun of it."

"Roz does drawings and collages and illustrative pieces that are lyrical and narrative," he said. "She works with a lot of found pieces of paper and bits of things like old lace. Catherine is a painter of larger abstract canvases so she needed more wall space."

Because Ms. Leibowitz likes to work on her bed, her bedroom is open and spacious. Ms. Redmond's is a tiny afterthought of a bedroom, tucked away in an alcove.

There were lots of other special requests.

Ms. Redmond made detailed lists of her desires, including "90 yards of bookshelves," "two work tables," "both track lighting and fluorescent Verilux or accurate daylight lighting and separate switches for each," as well as a "built-in sofa" for a guest.

The two homes are quite different. Ms. Redmond's loft has white walls and, while fairly spare, has a touch of charming funkiness. Ms. Leibowitz's more structured and Shaker-like space has pale wood shelves and cubbyholes, lots of them for all the things that inspire her art, mostly labor-intensive drawings that are based on memory. (They will be exhibited at a solo show at the Sears-Peyton Gallery in Chelsea in May.)

Ms. Leibowitz does not cook and did not even want a kitchen, although she was talked into having a basic one. But, she said, "I only use the refrigerator and microwave." Ms.

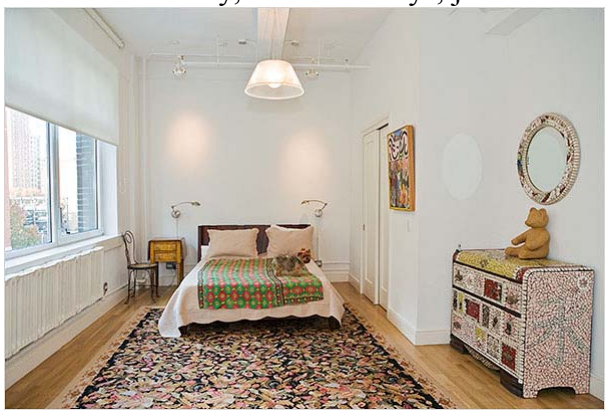
Redmond, on the contrary, wanted the best one she could get, with a marble slab for candy making and baking, and white shelves and cabinets that “look exactly like the pantry where my grandmother taught me to cook,” she said.

The communication or lack of it between the two spaces was the crucial point. “When I was growing up, in my family there were no locked doors and people were always barging in unannounced, and I really did not like that,” Ms. Leibowitz said. Ms. Redmond, who grew up as the youngest in a family of four children, also recalled yearning for some private time. “There were always too many people around,” she said. “Everyone was social, but I liked to be left alone.”

Even though a daylight-infused private interior hallway links the two lofts, there is a greater feeling of separateness than togetherness in the whole arrangement.

“It’s not a commune or based on the 1960s,” Ms. Redmond said. “It’s about choices that mature people make — choices not based on partnerships but on the idea of a social community. Lots of single people don’t want to live alone but don’t know how to combine privacy and community. In the past it was the next-door neighbor. Now it’s about having someone, a friend who cares about you. I see it as a model for the future.”

Since they moved in last summer, neither of the women has changed her habits. Ms. Leibowitz really likes to go out to eat, often alone, and Ms. Redmond likes to stay home. On Sunday nights, Ms. Redmond often makes supper for a group of friends — and Ms. Leibowitz usually, but not always, joins in.



Most of the time, they respect their separateness and communicate only by sending each other text messages: “I’m stopping by the store, do u need anything?” or “DS?” which is their shorthand for duck salad at the Thai place.

The women also discussed weightier matters in preparation for their new living arrangement. “We talked about what would happen if one of us met someone or if I wanted to get married and needed more space, for example,” Ms. Leibowitz said. “Knowing each other a long time, we still both took chances. Ours was an agreement based on trust and friendship.”

After the initial instant layout breakthrough, drawing up the plans took longer, and the architect met with his clients weekly for a year. No decision was too small not to be considered by all concerned. “They got something from me and I got a lot from them,” Mr. Zenreich said.

“In the end,” he added, “they feel they designed the place, that it’s truly theirs. That’s the trick.”