Catios' Bring Cats Outdoors

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Robert Davidson and Stefanie L. Russell fenced off half the balcony of their Greenwich Village apartment. Oliver joins them. More Photos »

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WHEN it comes to their homes, there are few things New Yorkers prize as much as a little outdoor space — a terrace, perhaps, or a small deck in the backyard.

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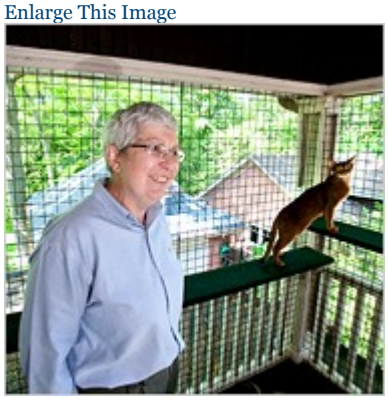

Steve Payne for The New York Times

Madelaine Ann Hare's second-floor porch in Toronto encloses three Abyssinians, as does an attached 25-foot walkway. More Photos »

Their cats feel the same way.

So some cat owners who would never dream of letting their pets roam free outside have come up with a creative compromise: an enclosed space — usually in the form of a screened-in porch or deck — that allows them to share the great outdoors.

Please don't call it a cage. They prefer the term "catio."

"The cats, they like to sit out there," said Stefanie L. Russell, 44, referring to the balcony of her 12th-floor Greenwich Village apartment, where a homemade

enclosure keeps her three Burmese cats safe. “Before, we basically didn’t use the balcony at all, because we were afraid that the cats would fall or jump.”

Two years ago, she and her husband, Robert Davidson, who are on the faculty of the N.Y.U. College of Dentistry, fenced off half the balcony, which runs the length of the apartment. They used industrial-grade PVC pipe and heavy black netting, creating a fully enclosed space that they decorated with furniture, plants and carpeting.

Now the couple and their 9-year-old daughter, Sophie, leave the terrace door open for Oliver, Lily and Jackson, who are, as Ms. Russell put it, “the type of cats that love to run out in the hallway.”

The cats seem happier, she said, and there has been an unexpected bonus: “Before, we used to have pigeons nesting on the balcony, and it was just a mess.” These days, the birds keep their distance.

Catios have made inroads in the suburbs, where they range from small, practical structures — like a box made of wood and chicken wire — to all-out fantasy cat playgrounds, replete with tunnels and scratching posts. But such enclosures remain a rarity in the city, where giving up even a square foot of real estate to a litter box can seem like a sacrifice.

Still, the forfeit felt worthwhile to Mary Sillman and Martin Stein, who set aside half their small deck in Park Slope for Buster, a 9-year-old gray cat adopted from a shelter who had been using the deck off their one-bedroom apartment as an escape hatch. “I did go and find him, but I had to climb over backyard fences and bother neighbors,” said Ms. Sillman, 55, a graphic artist.

Two years ago, Mr. Stein, who is an architect, built a catio the size of two phone booths that Buster can get to through a window. “It’s just been the greatest thing for him,” Ms. Sillman said. “He just loves looking into the gardens below and people’s backyards.”

Although the couple have less outdoor space for themselves, they do not mind, Ms. Sillman said. “It’s kind of like we’re sharing the deck.”

Another Park Slope resident, Rose-Marie Whitelaw, turned her entire 10-by-20-foot deck into a haven for her seven cats. Using pipes, chicken wire and deer fencing, she

erected a seven-foot railing that the cats cannot climb, then spray-painted it black so it would be less obtrusive.

“I’m kind of handy with copper piping and a blowtorch,” said Ms. Whitelaw, 50.

She and her husband, Russell Piekarski, have an outdoor picnic table where they eat meals among the cats in nice weather. Sliding glass doors lead to a kitchen and home office, and the cats can usually go in and out all year round.

“When the snow is piled to here, Julius makes tunnels,” said Ms. Whitelaw, referring to her large orange tomcat.

These catios are the do-it-yourself variety, but several companies, most of them mom-and-pop, sell ready-made cat enclosures or build custom ones. A big name in the market is Kittywalk Systems, a nine-year-old business in Port Washington, N.Y., run by Jeff and Lise King. It sells modular cat enclosures — tubes and rooms — that can be used individually or fashioned into cat-size kingdoms, much like the Habitrail system for hamsters.

“People can be very creative,” said Mrs. King, who designed her first cat pen a decade ago for her daughter’s kitten. “You’re really only limited by your imagination and your pocketbook.”

She now sells enclosures in dozens of shapes and sizes, some with fanciful names like the Penthouse (with three tiers of hammocks) and the Ferris Wheel (it looks like one). Kittywalk also sells strollers for cats and dogs. And as a support-the-troops gesture, the Kings have sent cat enclosures to American military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The thing that gives me the most gratification is that cats like my products,” Mrs. King said.

Even indoors, a cat enclosure can be a boon, said Carole C. Wilbourn, a cat therapist in Manhattan who recommends them to clients struggling with what she calls “inter-cat hostility.”

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“I have cases where someone is introducing another cat, and they have a studio apartment,” Ms. Wilbourn said. “It’s kind of hard for them to put up a barrier” for the cats to get used to each other without fighting, she said. An enclosure keeps the cats separate — but within eye range — until they get along.

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VETERINARIANS disagree over whether it is depressing for cats to spend their lives indoors. Some, like Drew Weigner, a cat specialist in Atlanta, believe that outdoor space offers cats emotional benefits. While it is safer for them to stay inside, “in an

enclosed yard, they're going to get more exercise," Dr. Weigner said. "Plus, there's the intellectual stimulation, quote-unquote."

Dr. Weigner advises suburban cat owners to keep outdoor enclosures off the ground, to guard against fleas and other parasites. He pointed to the American Association of Feline Practitioners' Web page on environmental enrichment, which recommends several types of fencing for suburban cats.

Arnold Plotnick, a veterinarian who owns the Manhattan Cat Specialists practice on the Upper West Side, agrees that stimulation is good, but does not think that cats need to go outside. "Cats are really fine being indoors their entire lives," he said. "That's why they're the perfect New York City pet." But he warns about high-rise syndrome, in which cats leap or fall out of unsecured windows.

For cat owners in the city, there are a few off-the-shelf options. On the low end of the market are collapsible, stand-alone enclosures that can be used on a terrace or deck (or indoors) and cost as little as $40. For people with small yards, there are room-size enclosures — typically with a few shelves where cats can sleep or look around — that can be bought or built for $125 to $500.

In suburbia, where space isn't a problem, catios tend to be more elaborate. "We have some clients that decorate the inside as if it's just another room — a picnic table, cat grass — so they can hang out there with their cats," said Kris Kischer, founder of Habitat Haven in Toronto, which sells dog and cat enclosures.

She offers predesigned kits "that are sort of in the Ikea realm, very easy to put together," and does custom installations. "Some clients fax in exactly what they want, other clients send us photos and then give us a call," Ms. Kischer said. "Then we can talk about measurements and we can design what they need for their space."

Among her customers are Madelaine Ann Hare and her spouse, Patti Holloway, who live in a six-bedroom house in Toronto with three Abyssinian cats. Ms. Kischer turned their second-floor porch into a cat enclosure, then built a 25-foot walkway that extends to a large oak tree and encircles it. The structure is about 20 feet off the ground.

The cats are "in and out of there all day and night," said Ms. Hare, 59, a retired lawyer. "We leave it open March through October, and the cats are perfectly safe there. Nothing can get to them."

The cats — Jasper, Quincy and Nelson — are well known to the neighborhood squirrels, Ms. Hare said. “They calculatedly come and look for the cats and wait for them,” she said. “The squirrels will circle the tree, and the cats will chase after them, then the squirrels will turn around and chatter at the cats.”

Ms. Hare’s tree fort may sound elaborate, but it is modest in comparison with what Kara and Dean McCormick built at their home near Port Jefferson, N.Y. The couple, who have four cats, were engaged on April 15, 2005 (a nod to Mrs. McCormick’s profession as a tax accountant) and began planning their dream catio the next day.

Using products from Ms. Kischer and instructions from a Web site called Just4Cats.com, the McCormicks erected two large outdoor pens connected by a 44-foot tunnel. The front enclosure — 10 feet square and 7 feet high — abuts the house and has a cedar floor and shelves where the cats can lounge.

From there, the long tunnel, which is about seven feet off the ground, leads to a larger enclosure with a bench where the McCormicks like to sit. The cats go out in all weather, Mrs. McCormick said, especially when she starts running the vacuum.

“We wanted our pets to go out safely and not annoy the neighbors,” she said. “We wanted them to enjoy the wildlife, the songbirds, get fresh air and get some exercise.” The couple is now planning home renovations, which will include adding a second floor and — yes — expanding the cat enclosure.

Kate Benjamin, who runs the style blog ModernCat.net, sees catios as part of what she calls the modern pet movement, which holds that people shouldn’t have to sacrifice taste or comfort to live with pets.

On her Web site, Catioshowcase.com, she collects images of well-designed cat enclosures, and on her blog, she showcases hip-looking cat beds and litter boxes.

“I look for well-designed products for living with cats, other than some ugly carpet-covered scratchers,” said Ms. Benjamin, 39, who lives in Phoenix and has seven cats. Her own catio has shelves for climbing, a built-in litter box and a floor-to-ceiling scratching post.

She is passionate about her vision for pet products.

“I want to see the whole market expand so that people can really enjoy having pets and not have things that bother them,” Ms. Benjamin said. “It’s really about a lot more than design and aesthetic — it’s about taking away any reason that people would abandon a pet.”

What You Need to Build a 'Catio'

Cat owners who want to create a safe outdoor space for their cats have several options.

• Do-It-Yourself: equipment like PVC piping, heavy mesh nets and chicken wire is available at Home Depot and other supply stores. Various Web sites offer photos, construction tips and other pointers.

• A Web site called just4cats.com sells a book with detailed drawings and instructions on building a cat enclosure, for $25 plus $5 shipping. The site also has an attractive gallery of its customers’ installations.

• Kittywalk Systems (kittywalksystems.com) sells modular cat enclosures that can be used individually or combined into elaborate cat playgrounds (think of them as Habitrail for cats). Among the freestanding models are a 6-foot-tall teepee ($399.95) that can be set up on a balcony or deck and a 5-foot-tall “penthouse” with enough hammocks for three cats ($179.95).

• Habitat Haven (habitathaven.com) is a Canadian company that sells predesigned do-it-yourself cat enclosure kits. It also offers supplies and advice on making custom enclosures.

• SafeKitty (safekitty.com) is a mom-and-pop company in Buxton, Me., that sells off-the-shelf and custom-made enclosures, starting at $449 for a standard 6-by-6-by-6-foot box. The pieces are made with white cedar from the Maine woods.

• Petco (petco.com) sells a stand-alone outdoor enclosure called the ABO Gear Happy Habitat Cat Tent. It is 3 feet high, 74 inches long and 63 inches wide, and costs $41.97 when ordered online.

• Doctors Foster and Smith (drsfostersmith.com), a pet supply company, sells a no-frills 5-foot collapsible tube called the Fun Run Outdoor Cat Enclosure for $39.99.