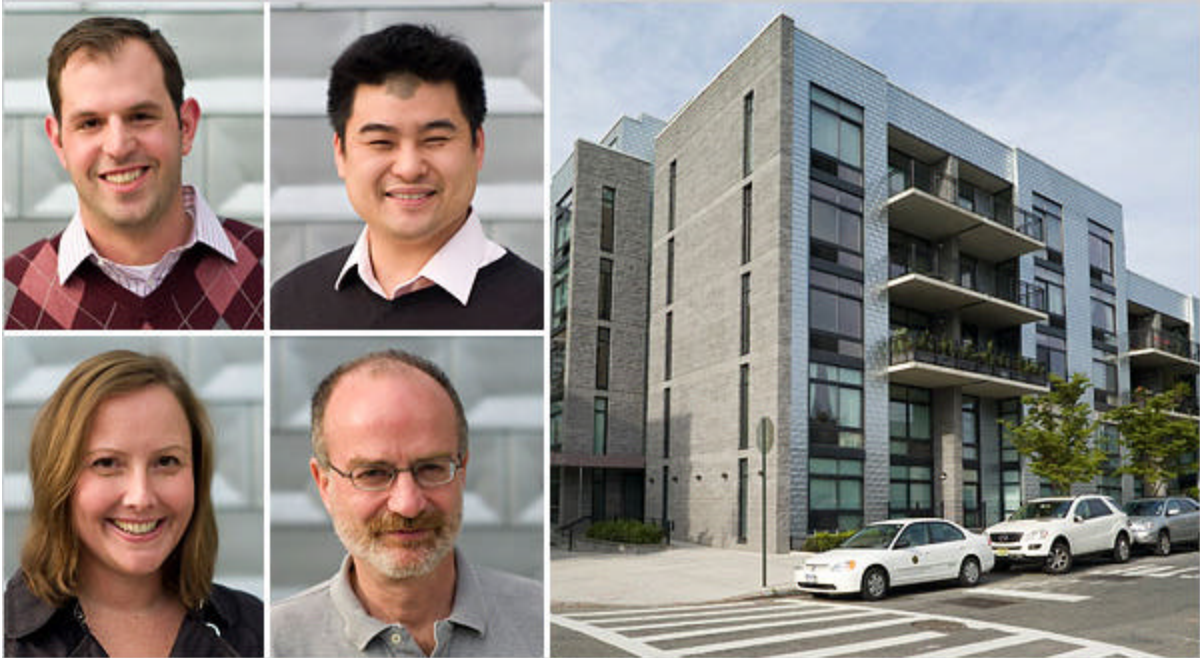


# They're All Connected



Robert Wright for The New York Times

Yvan Chu, top right, started a Google Group at the Gantry in Long Island City, Queens. Mr. Chu is on the board, along with, counterclockwise, Josh Lamberg, Susan Burns and Eric Greenberg.

By LISA KEYS

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**WHEN James Keating moved into the Beacon, a 10-tower residential conversion in Jersey City, in August, he found a cascade of e-mail messages circulating among the new residents. Some had questions about amenities, some wondered when construction projects would be completed and others just wanted to get to know their neighbors.**

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Evan Sung for The New York Times

Ryan James, left, joined LifeAt.com at Eleven80 in Newark. He met a neighbor, Dr. Stephen Wang, on the site.

Mr. Keating, the vice president for marketing of [ShopWiki.com](http://ShopWiki.com), an online shopping search engine, found the seemingly endless forwarding of those messages inefficient and time consuming.

To streamline things, he founded an online message board, [BeaconOwners.com](http://BeaconOwners.com), where residents can post messages about everything from poker games to elevator noise.

“For \$9, I bought the domain name,” said Mr. Keating, who is 38. “For free, I downloaded the software. Two hours later, we had a message board. It was amazingly easy to do.”

Electronic communication in residential buildings has gotten a lift in the New York region in recent years with so many new condominiums hardwired for the Internet.

But the means to connect residents in buildings of any age can be as simple as creating a Google or Yahoo group, building a group on social networking sites like MeetUp or [Facebook](http://Facebook), or joining a site like [LifeAt.com](http://LifeAt.com), which allows members to post profiles and pictures. Another Web site, [MeetTheNeighbors.org](http://MeetTheNeighbors.org), is free to join and largely

functions as a message board for people who live in the same building or the same neighborhood.

The buildingwide systems have allowed residents to get to know one another, to communicate with building management, to request and track repairs that must be made and to settle disputes.

LifeAt is used in 149 buildings in [Manhattan](#), according to the company. Buildings pay a one-time fee of \$6,000 for access to the site. Residents can post personal profiles and classified ads that can be seen by others in the same building, as well as rate local businesses and receive coupons from national retailers like Kohl's and Sears. The building's staff members can also contact residents through LifeAt.

In January, Ryan James, 29, moved into Eleven80 — a 317-unit luxury rental at 1180 Raymond Boulevard in Newark that opened in August 2006 — and signed up for LifeAt.

**“I was surprised with the level of participation,”** said Mr. James, who is vice president for financial services at Unity Financial, on Wall Street. “It goes to show that people are willing to extend, if not friendship, some level of acquaintance and familiarity. In all the buildings I lived in, particularly in [New York City](#), people kept to themselves.”

On his profile, Mr. James describes himself as a “single, fly-by-night kind of guy” whose hobbies are politics and sports. “I did go on there to see what kind of ‘companionship’ the site offered,” he said. “There are some cuties in my building, yeah.”

And while he said he was still working up the nerve to contact them, he attended a football playoffs party, held in the building's media room, that he had discovered through the site.

LifeAt also offers a message board for resident-to-resident chats. “In the beginning, a lot of developers said, ‘We don't want them to communicate with each other,’ ” said Matthew Goldstein, the chief

executive at LifeAt. “Our response was that they’re doing it anyway — they’re going to Yahoo and Google and creating groups. Here’s a way to be able to monitor it, maintain it and react to problems and issues instead of hiding behind them.”

Some groups are set up before buildings are even finished.

At the Gantry, a 47-unit condominium in Long Island City, [Queens](#), Yvan Chu, who owns a unit there, started a Google Group in early 2006, before the building opened later that year.

“With new construction, there’s such a long lead time between contract and closing; I thought it would be a good place to sort of get together,” said Mr. Chu, 35, a real estate lawyer. “We all wanted to know about each other, what expertise we could lend each other.”

Susan Burns, a Gantry owner and president of its board, said that in the building’s preclosing days, the Google Group was an excellent source for real estate advice. “It was a great way of sharing resources and sharing information.” At the time, said Ms. Burns, 44, a vice president at Sard Verbinnen & Company, a financial public relations company, future residents exchanged messages about painters, real estate lawyers and [home insurance](#).

Mr. Chu, who serves as the assistant treasurer of the Gantry board of managers, said that activity on the message board had died down somewhat, now that residents can easily knock on one another’s doors. Nonetheless, it remains a tool for communication.

Recently, messages from a few residents regarding custom window screens developed into a conversation about aesthetics of the building’s exterior and, eventually, a group order of screens.

“We were able to get everything done collectively, in one day,” Mr. Chu said. “Everyone was happy, everyone was getting a lower price.”

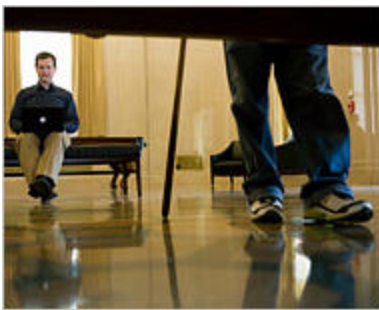
As technology becomes more prevalent, some buildings use multiple systems simultaneously.

Last Wednesday, for instance, the Beacon in Jersey City added something beyond BeaconOwners.com: Vertalink, an Internet-based system that allows residents to book spa treatments or order food via computer or touch-screen hardwired into the building.

Also, the Gantry has gone beyond the Google Group to add [BuildingLink.com](#), which allows paperless communication among building residents, staff members and managers.

“The Google Group is more informal — let it all hang out and share,” Ms. Burns said. “BuildingLink is the official channel.”

BuildingLink is used in some 375 residential buildings in the New York City area, according to the company. With the system, which charges \$13 per unit per year, everything from work orders to package deliveries is recorded online. (Residents receive e-mail messages when packages are received; signatures are recorded electronically.)



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Annie Tritt for The New York Times

**ONLINE** James Keating (left, with pool-playing neighbor) created a message board for the Beacon, in Jersey City.

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“Our biggest fans are doormen,” said Fran Besdin, BuildingLink’s marketing manager. “We have streamlined their operations tremendously.”

One of BuildingLink’s clients is the Albanese Organization, which uses the system in all its residential developments, including the Visionaire, a new Battery Park City condominium scheduled to open this summer. “It adds tremendous value, as it helps us efficiently manage a property,” Mr. Albanese said.

The Visionaire will also be testing a service that will allow residents to order hotel-like amenities, like wake-up calls from the front desk.

Internet-based systems can bring even older buildings into the digital age.

At Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town, two adjoining developments along the East River, built in 1947, with 110 buildings and more than 11,000 units a new residents-only Intranet will start in August.

Among its many applications, the site will allow residents to make and track maintenance requests and to keep abreast of events around the complex. This is an upgrade of an existing resident portal, CommunityNET, which alerts residents of news and events.

The new system — which will be more user-friendly than the current system, according to its developers — is separate from the online message board that is independently run by the Stuyvesant Town-Peter Cooper Village Tenants Association.

“With the emphasis on online interaction these days, it was a natural fit for us,” said George Hatzmann, a managing director at Tishman Speyer, which bought the complexes two years ago.

Another, perhaps unintended, effect of buildingwide communication is that it’s easier to grouse as a group, too.

“There’s a lot of collective complaining that happens on the Web site,” said Mr. Keating of the Beacon. “But, interestingly enough, it’s been constructive as well.”

Cathy Chin, the Beacon’s property manager, said that when residents have a problem, they are more likely to go online than pick up the phone. “As long as we have a place where we can access complaints and react to them, it certainly makes our job easier,” she said. “We’re able to know sooner if there are any problems arising and we can correct them before they become an issue.”

As a result of complaints on the message board, residents were able to persuade Metrovest, the Beacon’s developer, to increase the size of the shuttle bus to the PATH train and increase frequency of service.

Like a lot of Internet chatter, conversations on individual building sites can become less than civilized. “People say things online that they would never say face to face,” Mr. Keating said.

He said a fellow resident began calling him names after an online discussion about enforcing the cellphone ban in the building’s gym. Many residents rushed to his defense, Mr. Keating said. Nonetheless, it has made for awkward encounters in the mailroom.

“Anonymous or not anonymous, it doesn’t seem to make a difference as far as I can tell,” Mr. Keating said. “People just seem to forget that what we say online gets carried into the hallways.”

Still, he said, sometimes the simplest applications are most rewarding.

Thanks to the owners’ Web site, “I get instant feedback: This is what the community wants,” said Mr. Keating, who also serves on the Beacon’s board. “It’s great for me to send a question out there and get responses right away. Normally, with a condo association, you could only do that when you have a meeting. In this way, I could hold virtual meetings online.”

Mr. Keating added, "It was the best \$9 investment I ever made."