HOME

Boomers Invested in "Forever Homes." But Gen Z Is Buying Into "For Now"—Here's Why

ENTER: THE HOMEOWNER GAP YEAR

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED MAR 29, 2025

DASHA BUROBINA FOR PUREWOW

I grew up in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey—a sleepy, wooded pocket of Bergen County where the idea of a "forever home" wasn't just a fantasy. It was a foregone conclusion. Families didn't just settle there—they stayed. I had friends living in Dutch colonials their great-grandparents had built, where the stone foundations dated back to the 1800s and the original deed was framed in the hallway. There were old estates tucked behind wrought iron gates, generational wealth hidden behind manicured lawns and five-car garages. My parents bought our house a few years after I was born and didn't leave until I was a junior in college. They had equity. Predictability. Neighbors who'd lived on the same cul-de-sac since 1985, whose kids married local and moved two streets over. You didn't move unless you were upgrading—or retiring. That was the model.

But that model doesn't exist for my generation. Not really.

According to Opendoor's latest First-Time Home Seller Report, 81 percent of sellers are walking away from homes they once thought they'd live in for life. Among Gen Z, 40 percent admit they bought without considering long-term lifestyle fit. And honestly? Of course we did. When you grow up watching housing prices skyrocket and recessions cycle through like seasons, permanence starts to feel like a joke. We're not building equity—we're buffering against volatility.

Case in point: I'm 27. I've lived in four different apartments in the last five years, bouncing between creaky floors, aggressive rent hikes and not a trace of insulation. I'm not picky. I'm just trying to stay afloat. Because for so many in my generation, the idea of a "starter home" is laughable—and a "forever home" is downright delusional. We were raised to believe that if we went to college, got the right job and made smart financial choices, we

could build the kind of life our parents had. Yet, while we did everything we were *supposed to do*, the numbers have never quite added up.

And the more I pore through this data, the more I realize: They probably never will.

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When the "Forever Home" Stopped Making Sense

The concept of a "forever home" was never just about real estate. It was the American Dream. For Boomers, it meant working hard, buying a house, building equity and staying there. It was security. And for a while, the system supported that story. From the late 1940s through the 1980s, a wave of post-war policies like the GI Bill and FHA-backed mortgages made it easier for young families—at least, white ones—to buy homes with low interest rates and little money down. The federal government paved literal highways to make the suburbs possible, and private developers built neighborhoods like Levittown with the speed and uniformity of an assembly line. Suburban homeownership wasn't just attainable—it was subsidized, tax-incentivized and framed as the definition of adulthood.

For decades, that ideal held. In 1981, the median sale price of a new home was $67,600. A degree from a private four-year college cost roughly $3,617 a year. Wages tracked more or less with inflation. And into the early 2000s, buying a home in your twenties—or early thirties—was still possible. You bought once, maybe twice. You stayed. The idea was to get in, put down roots and let time (and appreciation) do the work. But that kind of permanence doesn't fit the economic reality Gen Z inherited.

> Nearly 80% of first-time homebuyers regret *something* about their decision.

The 2008 housing crash didn't just destabilize the market—it eroded our trust in the market. Younger generations watched the value of "forever" collapse in real-time. Families lost homes. Equity disappeared. The myth that real estate was a guaranteed path to wealth shattered. And while the economy rebounded, our confidence didn't. By the time Gen Z entered adulthood, the landscape had changed. Wages stalled. Student debt ballooned. Cities became unaffordable unless you had inherited wealth or early equity. The idea of buying a home—let alone *staying* in one—felt less like a rite of passage and more like a risky bet.

And yet, many of us still tried. During the pandemic-era gold rush, record-low interest rates and the rise of remote work pushed a new wave of buyers into the market. It felt urgent. If you didn't buy then, you might never be able to. But that scramble came at a

cost. According to Opendoor's report, nearly 80 percent of first-time buyers now regret *something* about their decision. And Gen Z's biggest remorse? Moving too quickly (35 percent) and buying without thinking long-term (40 percent). In other words: we bought as if we were investing in forever—during a time when forever made the least sense.

Because here's the difference: Boomers invested in "forever homes" because they could. But most first-time buyers are staying because they have to. The report found that sellers today remain in their homes an average of 2.3 years longer than those who sold a decade ago—not out of comfort or satisfaction, but because they're stuck. Mortgage rates have doubled. Inventory is low. And the cost of a next move—whether it's a bigger house or a better zip code—is an investment in itself.

The "forever home" hasn't just become harder to attain. It's become incompatible with the way we live, work and move now.

The Rise of the 'Gap Year' Homeowner

OK, Gen Z isn't buying into the "forever home" fantasy. So what *are* they doing?

We're living in a time where the ground shifts constantly. Interest rates spike. Layoffs hit without warning. AI is changing the job market faster than universities can update their syllabi. And if you live somewhere like California, wildfire season can now dictate your home's resale value. So instead, the report says my generation is taking a "**homeowner gap year**."

According to Opendoor, 64 percent of first-time sellers don't plan to buy again right away. They're not jumping into the next mortgage or rushing to reinvest—they're pausing. Renting. Moving back in with family. Essentially, first-time homebuyers are waiting for the market, or their lives, to stabilize before making another long-term decision. (But it's not because they're lost.) Only three percent of Gen Z sellers say they don't know what comes next. Plus, even among those who do, the idea of "forever" doesn't seem to be on the table. For 38 percent of respondents, their next home is just that—the next one.

Yet, when the job market's unstable, the planet's on fire and your mortgage rate can jump six percent in a year? A little hesitation isn't just wise, it's necessary. That might read as instability to Boomers, but for Gen Z, it's ironically about security. It's not that we're avoiding adulthood—or that we "can't commit" to anything (as so many elders like to say). It's about adapting to a version of adulthood that doesn't come with guaranteed returns.

A Gen Z View of "For Now"

My generation was raised to believe in the Boomers' "forever." But that fantasy was built on the illusion of certainty—something the world never offered us. We grew up watching towers fall, markets crash and elections unravel. We've lived through lockdowns, recessions, climate disasters and an internet that never lets us forget how fragile the future is. So for us, permanence hasn't just become out of reach—it almost feels naive.

So, while a "homeowner gap year" wasn't what we envisioned when we were saving dream kitchens on Pinterest at 12 years old (just me?), I think Gen Z deserves some credit. Instead of clinging to a dream that's no longer feasible for most of us, we've chosen a different path: to build a life that fits the world we're actually in.

We may not own homes forever. But we're finally learning how to live in the forever right now.

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