



A Loft Grows *in* Brooklyn

Unleash Brooklyn's 7,000 square-foot loft provides any service a dog or cat owner might need.

By Nell Miller

Rob Maher and Bea Boado are not new to the pet industry. In 2005, Boado created a pet clothing brand called Kaschi—Duds for Dogs, which is inspired by the couple's rat terriers, Emilia and Chloé. The Brooklyn-based clothing company uses Peruvian pima cotton and Alpaca and Merino wool to manufacture coats, hoodies, raincoats, t-shirts, dresses, robes and towels. Their pieces are beautiful, comfortable and functional.

"Kaschi Duds is actually how everything got started," explains Maher. The couple has been active in the neighborhood's dog community for years—helping to put in two dog runs, amongst other things—but in 2007, they decided to open their own pet boutique, to showcase the clothing line alongside other natural, unique products.

District Dog carries toys, leads, food, treats, and various items from local artists and designers. "The original store has been open for about two years now," says Maher, "and has been very successful. However, in those two years we've had a lot of people come in with lost or abandoned dogs, and most of the shelters are full and can't take the dogs in. We thought it would be great if we could open a rescue. That was the initial plan."

In addition to locals needing a place to bring rescued dogs, Maher noticed there were lots of customers who inquired about daycare and boarding facili-





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ties. “There are places around, but none that I would leave my own dogs at. So we came up with the concept of opening a rescue, and around the rescue, to support it, we would open a holistic loft that offers a wide range of services. So the idea expanded, and Unleash Brooklyn is home to a rescue, daycare and boarding facilities, a second District Dog boutique, a veterinarian and training services.”

The Turf

Unleash Brooklyn is located in Greenpoint, the northernmost neighborhood in Brooklyn. Greenpoint is bordered by Williamsburg (Brooklyn’s young hipster destination) the borough of Queens and the East River. The neighborhood is full of old factories and lumberyards, which, since a rezoning in 2005, are being converted into various types of residential and retail spaces. The neighborhood is home to a lot of working professionals and families.

Unleash Brooklyn is located in a space that was previously used for shooting television commercials and, before that, was a carousel factory. “Upon entering, there is a large loading ramp that we decided to keep,” explains Maher. “The entire ground floor is 3,500 square feet, and on that floor is the reception area, about 250 square feet of retail space, and the two dog runs, which are 600 square feet a piece. Behind the runs are our offices, and behind those is the veterinarian.”

There is also a lower level, which is another 3,500 square feet. To get to this level there is a main staircase, as well as a ramp that was built for dogs that can’t walk up and down the stairs due to age or disability. “The lower level is home to a cat boarding area, complete with cat condos and a cat run. Also downstairs are the kitchen prep room and the dog boarding suites.”

One of the many ways in which Unleash Brooklyn stands out among other boarding and daycare facilities is by catering to the family feline. “We have a 100-square-foot cat playground,” says Maher, “and any cat that is boarded with us gets an allotted amount of time there.”

The cat playground has a “tree,” with multi-leveled tiers, scratch pads and a bridge. “The concept behind the cat boarding was that cats are very vertical creatures,” explains Maher. “They need to be able to climb and move around. A lot of cat sitting places keep the cats in small crates, and they don’t get the exercise they need. Our cat condos are seven feet tall with multi-tiered shelves and toys. If a cat stays with us, it has a condo as well as time in the cat run. There is nothing like this in NYC.”

In addition to the space being dog- and cat-friendly, Maher wanted to make sure it was eco-friendly. “We only used reclaimed wood for building, and the flooring is recycled rubber. Not only does the rubber absorb impact, which allows the dogs to run, it also repels urine in case a dog has an accident. We wanted to make the building as sensible and as green as possible.”



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To the Rescue

The idea behind Unleash Brooklyn's dog rescue program was simple: Maher wanted to be able to take in dogs that had no other place to go. But like most of Maher's ideas, this one grew and blossomed. "We are now designing a program in which we choose a few of the rescue dogs to be put through a rehabilitation cycle so we can use them to help abused and disabled kids, or kids who have really bad self-esteem," says Maher. "Studies show that dogs can really help these children. For example, children with reading disabilities show improvement after reading to dogs. Some children are just too nervous to read in front of people, so a dog can really help." Rescue dogs not chosen for the program will also go through rehabilitation and socialization, but they will be adopted out to loving families.

Every rescue dog that comes into the facility eats treats provided by Zukes and food provided by Stella & Chewy's. "Both of these companies stepped up and were eager to help by providing complimentary food," says Maher. "Though we are still in the beginning phase of planning all of our operations, the program has taken on a life of its own and is exceeding my wildest dreams."

Home, Sweet Home

Walking into Unleash Brooklyn often gives pet owners the feeling that they have arrived at a friend's loft. "It's very simple," states Maher, "I know that my dogs wouldn't be comfortable in an industrial-

type space with tons of other dogs running around; it just wouldn't feel like home. So our main focus was to create a comfortable environment; one in which I would leave my own dogs."

An example of this concept is the space's airiness. "People want to know where their dogs are and they want to be able to see what is going on," says Maher. "We built the space with that in mind."

And in daycare, it's not enough to simply let the dogs run around all day long. "With most daycares the dogs are let loose in the run and you would be lucky to have someone watching them all day. We make sure there is someone in the run at all times. And when it looks like the dog has to use the bathroom, it will be taken out for a walk. We walk the dogs multiple times throughout the day, so they won't go stir crazy. We also make sure that the dogs are separated in playgroups and size groups so they can run around with dogs that have the same energy level."

When a dog is staying overnight, the owner can request the dog sleep alone in their suite with the door closed or, if the owner prefers, the door can be left open and the dog can roam into the loft area and stay with a staff member.

So far, the neighborhood is loving Unleash Brooklyn's philosophy and accepting the facility with open arms. During its first week in operation, the business had seven dogs booked to stay. "Our idea behind the whole thing was to give animals and their owners the best of everything," says Maher. "I honestly think we accomplished that." ■