Crown Heights
continued from page 1

“Having the choice to choose is the beauty of Crown Heights,” Rubenstein said.

And the choice keeps growing.

In the 1990s, the era of the Crown Heights riots, which took place 25 years ago this month, Crown Heights had basically two groups: African- and Caribbean-Americans and Lubavitchers. But over the past decade, there has been an influx of families looking for more space as well as post-college hipsters drawn by the neighborhood’s increasingly hip vibe.

And as these non-Chabad transplants move in, they’re revising what it means to be a Crown Heights Jew.

In June, a well-publicized dispute erupted over the construction of an eruv, a symbolic boundary that allows some Orthodox Jews to push strollers and carry items outside on Shabbat, which many Chabadniks saw as an affront.

But both camps say such conflicts are the exception; for the most part, there’s a cordial, if distant, relationship.

To be sure, Lubavitchers still make up the vast majority of the Crown Heights tribe. Of the roughly 23,800 Jews living in the 2.3-square-mile neighborhood, according to UJA-Federation of New York’s 2011 study, estimates put the number of Chabadniks at approximately 21,000, or nearly 90 percent, with most living on the southern side of Eastern Parkway. Despite the growth, Jews make up only 15 percent of the population; 70 percent are African- and Caribbean-Americans, according to 2010 U.S. Census data.

But despite their relatively tiny numbers, non-Lubavitch Jews, who mostly live north of Eastern Parkway, are making their mark on the area, building new institutions and informal minyanim. And while those moving in are an eclectic mix, what most seem to have in common is an individualistic bent, a desire to buck traditional categories and forge a Jewish community that feels true to them.

“People who make up the community in Brooklyn like to express their Judaism [individually]; while people in other communities, they just like to follow their Judaism [conventionally],” said Dov Alpert, a 31-year-old Judaic studies teacher who moved to Crown Heights last September.

And express their Judaism, they do.

In November, Alpert co-founded Kavod, a monthly partnership minyan that seeks to maximize women’s participation in services within the confines of Orthodox Jewish law. He also co-founded, with Hannah Grossman, the “Jewish Ritual Life Tools Exchange,” where people can sign up to teach or learn such skills as reading the Torah and leading services.

Bicycle Roots owner Nechama Levy, 32, who grew up chasidic in Queens, moved to Crown Heights in 2012. In June, she started the woman-led Orthodox prayer group Brooklyn Women’s Chavura, where men are welcome, but sit behind a mechitza.

“People here, they’re not interested in labels,” said Ben Kramarz, 30, a music educator. “I think all these categories, they all get jumbled here, and that’s why I want to be here.”

Eighteen months ago he started holding a once-a-month, open-to-everyone “proper heimishe [homey] lunch with chulent, etc.” that attracts 40-60 people “of all varieties.” One of his proudest moments: seeing his non-Jewish, gay Brazilian friend talking with a Chabad shaliach (emissary). Kramarz also founded Brooklyn Beit Midrash, a monthly, egalitarian, chavruta-style Torah study group.

A longtime Lubavitcher, who asked that we not use his name for privacy reasons, summed it up this way: “Millenials want everything to be small-batch and artisanal, and they want their synagogues to be small and artisanal as well.”

Just about everyone interviewed pointed to this sense of wanting to build community as a defining quality of the neighborhood’s new Jews.

“Because it’s an emerging community ... if you want something to happen here you have to make it happen,” said Anna Hanau, 34, a CKI member and owner of the kosher, humanely raised meat company Grow and Behold. “It definitely appeals to a certain kind of [Jew who is] not quite conformist.”

But perhaps the most apt symbol of the change is the opening of Repair the World last year. The nonprofit, which partners with local organizations in the areas of food justice and education, chose Crown Heights because it is both an area “where service is needed” and has a large