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Real Estate

Living in Mott Haven, The Bronx

Potential Awaits Its Moments

by Jake Mooney

Decades have gone by, but all around Mott Haven in the South Bronx, certain physical characteristics provide an echo of the bad years in the 1960s and '70s. Of the scores of lots emptied by fires and neglect back then, some have been transformed into lush community gardens, and some have been rebuilt into tidy subsidized town houses by nonprofit developers. Others are just empty, with signs on their fences advertising developments that never materialized.

They are as good a symbol as any of the area's current state, which enthusiasts describe as challenging but filled with potential. Public housing projects, more than a dozen in all, dominate the landscape, but in between are intimate blocks populated by recent immigrants, by adventurous and relatively prosperous newcomers, and by families who have been in the area for generations.

A move to gentrify late in the last decade stalled as the larger economy did, but officials and residents of Mott Haven, which is generally considered to cover about one and a half square miles between the Harlem River and the Bruckner Expressway south of East 149th Street, say the conditions are right for another resurgence.

Housing stock and the income levels of the neighborhood's 48,000 residents are gradually diversifying, said Cedric Loftin, the district manager of Community Board 1, which represents the area. In particular, he said, the main commercial corridor, East 138th Street, is seeing new life. Also, the city's rezoning of industrial areas on the neighborhood's western edge, near the Grand Concourse and the river, represents an effort to promote new housing and to create access to the Harlem River. Combined with the area's ample public transportation and proximity to [Manhattan](#), Mr. Loftin said, that is reason for optimism. "Housing stock is up, it's not that expensive, and there are a lot of opportunities here," he said.

Even a few years ago, those assets were in sufficient evidence to attract Yonette Davis, a [Brooklyn](#) native who is a geriatrician. Dr. Davis bought her three-story brownstone on East 140th Street for less than \$200,000 in 2001, and moved in after a renovation and the birth of her daughter in 2007. Given the South Bronx's reputation, her family feared for her safety. The reality, once she settled in, was different. One neighbor sweeps her sidewalk when she is away at work, and there are annual events and plenty of children for her daughter to play with. "I keep telling people, it's the first neighborhood that I've lived in that feels like a neighborhood," Dr. Davis said. "The residents seem to be really close to each other."

One reason for that closeness, she said, may be a history of shared adversity: Almost half of the area's families, according to census figures, have incomes below the poverty line. And, while crime is far less prevalent these days, Dr. Davis says late nights on area streets can feel unsettling. Still, she said that she had not felt out of place and that the neighborhood had revealed itself to her gradually, as her bond with her neighbors grew.

Whether she will remain, though, is an open question. She works in Brooklyn, commuting 40 minutes by car, and weighs going back. She says she may not be ready to part with the house, or the area.

"It reminds me of Fort Greene years ago, before Fort Greene became this really expensive place to live," Dr. Davis said. "It has that feeling of something about to happen to it."

What You'll Find

There are three small historic districts: one, on Alexander Street between East 137th and East 141st, has a row of finely detailed brownstones, two churches, a police station and a library; another, on parts of East 139th and 140th between Willis and Brook Avenues, has 19th-century brownstones; the third, on 136th near Willis, is marked by two rows of yellow-faced brick town houses.

On East 138th and to the south is a fledgling artist community, Mr. Loftin said. Adrian Thompkins, an agent at Halstead Property who has sold in the area, says the scene reminds him of the Lower East Side, when he lived there years ago. "It's a very sort of insular community, where a lot of things may not be broadcast to the entire five boroughs," he said. "But people in Mott Haven know. A lot of painters are there, a lot of photographers — a lot of them are having exhibits out of their own homes."



Facades along Alexander Avenue are part of a small historic district, one of three in Mott Haven, a once troubled area that some see as on its way up. "It reminds me of Fort Greene years ago, before Fort Greene became this really expensive place to live," one resident said.

Photo: Michael Kamber for The New York Times

To a casual visitor, their presence may not be apparent. Though East 138th Street at times teems with people, the focus of that activity is inexpensive retail and restaurants — some Puerto Rican, Dominican and Mexican. Elsewhere, public housing towers stand on vast blocks; street life is sparse.

Still, Mr. Thompkins said, the newcomers do have their hangouts. Gradually, businesses are opening. “Everything from florists to pet shops,” he added. “There’s a lot there, and I think that when the market picks back up, this is going to be one of the first places that people look to that’s still a bargain.”

Kouma Kpabla, an associate broker at Re/Max Voyage Homes, sees similar improvement. “The place is quiet now,” Mr. Kpabla said. “Crime is down. Nights, there’s no noise.”

What You’ll Pay

Inventory has been low recently, brokers say, as property owners seeking to ride out the slow market hold onto their buildings. Mr. Thompkins says comparable-sales data is scarce, and prices can be hard to predict. “The prices are a little bit all over the place now,” he said. “A lot of the times they have to do with what a person can afford to sell for, rather than trying to establish a market value.”

That means there are bargains. “I think if you can get a beautiful house that’s in move-in condition and has an income unit, for under \$500,000 or \$600,000, tops, that’s going to be attractive in any economy,” Mr. Thompkins said, adding, “That would definitely be for a premium, move-in condition home, generally three units.”

Mr. Kpabla puts the average price for a two-family house around \$425,000, and Patricia Rodriguez, an associate broker at Exit Realty Success, says prices can be far lower: about \$275,000 for a one-family house, \$300,000 for a two-family, and \$400,000 for a four-family. One- and two-family buildings predominate, she added. Many went up in the late 1980s. Two-bedroom rentals on Craigslist tend to range from \$1,300 to \$1,800 a month. One-bedrooms, which vary in size and can include spacious lofts, are in the same range — though there are smaller units, listed for \$1,000 or less.

The Commute

The 6 train runs under East 138th Street, stopping at Third, Brook and Cypress Avenues, and then turns north to East 143rd and 149th Streets. The 4 and 5 stop on the Grand Concourse at East 138th and 149th Streets. The 2 has two area stops. According to Mr. Loftin of Community Board 1, express service to Midtown takes 10 minutes or less. Mott Haven is ringed by highways: the Major Deegan Expressway to the west and south, and the Bruckner Expressway to the east. Both connect to the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, with easy access to three other boroughs.

What To Do

Among the hangouts cited by Mr. Thompkins are Alexander’s Café, at the foot of Alexander Avenue near a cluster of antiques stores. The Bruckner Bar and Grill, a popular spot for burgers and beers, is two blocks to the west.

Since 2002, the [Bronx Council on the Arts](#) has run a free trolley-style bus through South Bronx neighborhoods including Mott Haven, to promote arts events and organizations along the route. It runs on Wednesdays once a month, and some Saturdays; Mr. Thompkins says at least one of his real estate clients was specifically interested in buying near the trolley route.

[St. Mary’s Park](#), with 35 acres of hills, lawns and athletic facilities, lies to the northeast. Its southern end is rocky and partly wooded, like the north end of Central Park. Farther north, it has an indoor pool and a running track.

The Schools

Public elementary schools have struggled. They include No. 154, on East 135th Street, where last year 23.2 percent of tested students met standards in English and 43.5 percent in math, and No. 43, on Brown Place, where 39.7 percent met standards in English and 3.6 percent in math.

A number of [charter schools](#) have opened in recent years, including the [Bronx Charter School for Children](#), the Bronx Success Academy, and, for students in the child welfare and [foster care](#) system, the [Mott Haven Academy](#). Among middle schools is No. 203, on Morris Avenue, where 11.4 percent of tested students were proficient in English and 13.6 percent in math.

Public high schools include [Samuel Gompers Career and Technical Education High School](#), where in March students staged a demonstration to lobby for federal “turnaround” financing. SAT averages last year were 370 in reading, 385 in math and 354 in writing, versus 439, 462 and 434 citywide.

The History

The neighborhood was named for Jordan Lawrence Mott, the owner of the J. L. Mott Ironworks, established in 1828. German and Irish populations predominated a century ago; these were largely supplanted by Puerto Ricans by midcentury. Many of today’s residents are from Mexico or the Dominican Republic. ■