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Editorial Notebook; A Resurrection in the South Bronx

By Brent Staples
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Eleven floors up a pitch-black stairwell, walking in pigeon dung and rotting plaster, is a long way to go for a view. But the roof of Morrisania Hospital – 20 years abandoned, ravaged by scavengers – is well worth the hike.

West from the roof lies curvaceous Yankee Stadium, the elevated train line snaking along its flank. South looms the skyline of Manhattan and a view to swoon for. In the foreground, the Bronx itself rolls in low and strong, right up to Morrisania's doors.

The Bronx is rarely, if ever, described as "majestic." But Morrisania Hospital is certainly that, a signature structure of the 1920's municipal architect Charles Meyers, whose work in New York City includes several hospitals and Manhattan's House of Detention for Men, better known as the Tombs. Built of steel and concrete, sheathed in blond brick and trimmed in stone, Morrisania Hospital was meant not as a fleeting figment on the landscape, but as a monument that would endure. Endure is what it has done, while around it raged the most devastating urban calamity America has seen.

In the 1950's came Robert Moses, hacking at the community with what Moses himself described as "a meat ax" while building the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Neighborhoods that had been stable for most of the century dissolved, as the middle class fled and the poorest of the poor moved in. In the 1960's, landlords, insurance companies and banks left, too. In the 70's, fires were clearly visible from Yankee Stadium, as property owners cashed in on insurance and scavengers torched buildings to get at the copper wiring and pipes.

The Bronx became the backdrop of choice for politicians who wished to tut-tut urban decay for the cameras. The South Bronx in particular became a synonym for urban decline, and was storied in film and literature as a ghost town, peopled primarily by criminals. The gospel of laissez faire preaches that government should do nothing to reverse the decay. But public funds and not-for-profit groups have rebuilt the Bronx from nothing.

Borough President Fernando Ferrer's planners describe Morrisania Hospital as the last significant abandoned structure in the Bronx, which makes its impending refurbishment a cause for celebration. A not-for-profit group called the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, made up of Bronx pioneers, plans to begin renovation in late summer.

The State of New York has committed nearly \$11 million in low-interest loans to the project. The rest of the money, more than \$13 million, comes as an equity investment raised through the Federal low-income housing tax credit program. The state money was committed by the Cuomo administration. The Pataki administration would be wise to honor that commitment. The private-public collaboration fits Mr. Pataki's philosophy. The project will contain businesses, apartments, a day-care center, a family health-care center and P.S. 235, an elementary school specializing in science. There is a hum of anticipation along 167th

Street. No longer will parents passing the hospital say to their small children “I was born there” and point to a building that is darkened and dead. Majestic, strong against the new Bronx sky, Morrisania Hospital is poised to rise again.