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Former 'worst' area is on the mend

Shoppers and retailers rediscover Crotona Park East strip in the Bronx.

By [Hilary Potkewitz](#)

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By all rights, the retail strip on Southern Boulevard in the Crotona Park East section of the Bronx should be thriving. After all, the seven-block stretch running from East 174th Street down to Westchester Avenue boasts three subway stations and roughly 90 businesses.

In spite of all that, the area has struggled for years with a high vacancy rate. And then there's the lingering stigma of having been labeled "the worst neighborhood in the country" by President Jimmy Carter when he visited back in the 1970s.

"This community was broadcast throughout the world as a symbol of urban blight," said Kerry McLean, director of community development for the nonprofit Women's Housing and Economic Development Corp., which is based in nearby Morrisania.

Four years ago, WHEDco decided to do something about that. It began working with local merchants—a disparate group of mom-and-pop businesses ranging from beauty salons and clothing stores to auto-parts suppliers and Latin restaurants. Together they formed the Southern Boulevard Merchant Association.

To figure out exactly where things stood in 2008, WHEDco conducted its first business survey, which showed that despite the neighborhood's growing population—up 20,000 over the past decade—the commercial vacancy rate on the boulevard stood at 24%.

The retail survey showed something else. "We learned that \$146 million was leaking out of the community every year because residents couldn't find the things they wanted within," said Ms. McLean.

FEWER EYESORES

What they wanted was more places to buy electronics, women's and children's shoes and clothing (the neighborhood had several men's casual wear stores), groceries and specialty foods including fish. WHEDco has been using the data to market the area to retailers and restaurateurs. New merchants have moved in, and WHEDco has transformed a couple of empty storefronts from eyesores to attractive pop-up shops. As a result, the vacancy rate has fallen to 16%.

Some existing merchants also found inspiration in the data. Among them was Kate Baez, a 34-year-old who had recently taken over her mother's botanica shop, selling religious candles, statuettes and herbs.

"When I started running the store, some days we'd bring in only \$5 all day," Ms. Baez recalled. "I knew we had to do something different."

After looking at the data, she gutted her shop and installed freezers and refrigerators. Two months ago, she opened Boulevard Fish Market, inspired by a similar place that had been in the area while she was growing up.



SEA CHANGE: Business is jumping at Boulevard Fish Market, a former botanica.

The Merchant Association has also organized several "Shop local" campaigns, sponsored retail events and held raffles to drum up interest in the neighborhood. The effort seems to be paying off.

"You notice the change," said Jebel Ceesay, president of the association and owner of JB Collection Clothing at 1085 Southern Blvd. "Now there are so many people walking around, going into shops. It's much better."

MORE WOMEN'S CLOTHING

The change is even evident within Mr. Ceesay's 7-year-old menswear store. After seeing the customer surveys, earlier this year he carved out a small space for women's clothing. He started with jeans, and when those sold out, he added tops. Those sold out, too. Women's clothing now makes up half of his store, and he's thinking of renovating the second floor to add ladies' dresses and shoes.

Meanwhile, Ms. Baez's fish business is jumping, and her life has changed: She's at the Hunts Point Fish Market every day at 4 a.m., choosing the catch of the day—usually a mix of tilapia, kingfish, crabs and shrimp.

Nowadays, a "bad day" might bring in \$150, and weekly revenues can easily top \$800.

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