

# The New York Times

## The South Bronx Beckons

By RONDA KAYSEN | SEPT. 17, 2015

In the eight years that Anne Stewart lived in the East Village, she rarely ventured north of 23rd Street, let alone to the Bronx. But in late 2013, when a friend began [apartment-hunting in an industrial section of the South Bronx](#), Ms. Stewart paid the area a visit. To her surprise, she found a sleepy enclave just steps from the Harlem River, with rents low enough that she and Katie Rubright could afford to move in together.

Both Ms. Stewart and Ms. Rubright, 34, an artist who lived in Brooklyn and had been to the Bronx only once, were smitten. Last summer, the couple moved into a spacious two-bedroom in a new building on Bruckner Boulevard, paying around \$2,500 a month.

“We have an actual room that people can come and sleep in and close the door,” said Ms. Stewart, 43, a hair stylist who had previously lived alone in a cramped studio. “It’s like living like normal humans.”

The couple’s story is becoming more common. In the never-ending quest for reasonable rents and tolerable commutes, New Yorkers are branching out in new directions. And the Bronx, it seems, is having a moment.



The block Ms. Stewart and Ms. Rubright live on. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

In the past, the Bronx was often dismissed by outsiders, largely because of a reputation rooted in urban decay. But both the borough and its reputation are changing. With prices in Manhattan, Brooklyn and parts of Queens now out of reach for many renters and buyers, the Bronx, particularly the South Bronx, has assumed the mantle of next

frontier. In the last six months, listings for co-ops in the [Grand Concourse Historic District](#) have turned into bidding wars, with buyers from Brooklyn and Manhattan laying out all-cash offers.

Home prices are up across the borough, but particularly in Mott Haven, Port Morris and Hunts Point. In these neighborhoods, the median sales price in the second quarter jumped a stunning 64 percent from the same time last year, according to the Real Estate Board of New York.

Landlords are renovating to command higher rents. One development, Parkchester, a planned community of rentals and condos that opened in 1941 in the southeast Bronx, is in the midst of a \$14 million upgrade. And homeowners in neighborhoods that were once generally written off now field calls from brokers and investors.

“People are looking for the next hot spot, and the Bronx is this hub. It’s very close to Manhattan,” said Brenda E. Rosen, the chief executive officer of [Common Ground](#), which is building several affordable housing developments in the Bronx, including one to open this fall with 154 units on Boston Road in Morrisania.

Developers have taken notice. Land prices have been rising as investors snap up parcels in Melrose, Mott Haven and Port Morris, where a five-acre site along the Harlem River will soon become a mixed-use project with market-rate housing, stores and a waterfront esplanade. A steady flow of investment in recent years has given the area hotels, shopping malls, breweries and new access to open space.

“The Bronx is just the next place that seems to be happening,” said John H. Banks III, the president of the Real Estate Board of New York.

In June alone, the Department of Buildings issued 759 permits for new residential units in the Bronx, the most issued in a single month in the borough since 2005, according to the Real Estate Board of New York. More change is all but inevitable: The city is studying Jerome Avenue — a north-south thoroughfare parallel to the Grand Concourse — to rezone it for residential development. Infrastructure improvements are also on the horizon, including a park network in Mott Haven and Port Morris, an expansion of Metro-North Railroad service and a new footbridge connecting Port Morris to Randalls Island that will open this fall.

But nearly 40 percent of residents in the South Bronx live below the poverty line, and community activists worry that the area’s most vulnerable residents could be left behind in the rush to develop.

“We’ve watched what happened in other neighborhoods and seen how this has priced out existing residents,” said Mychal Johnson, a founder of South Bronx Unite, an advocacy group. “We are trying to find ways to make sure that the residents who suffered through the really harsh times are able to stay.”

On the face of it, the city’s northernmost borough, particularly its southern tier, is a natural alternative to Manhattan. The South Bronx offers a shorter commute to

Midtown than many parts of Brooklyn and Queens, and has abundant housing, with an eclectic mix of Art Deco prewar buildings, historic rowhouses and single-family houses. But for decades, the lower part of the Bronx remained off the radar.

More than any other area in New York City, the South Bronx suffered the brunt of the white flight of the 1970s and 1980s. Even as the city and community groups made strides to reduce blight, the borough struggled to shed the unforgiving tagline from the late 1970s — “the Bronx is burning.”

Many argue that the reputation is undeserved, as neighborhoods to the north, east and west like Riverdale, Country Club and Pelham Parkway, did not suffer through urban blight. Meanwhile, the South Bronx has been steadily reclaiming its identity for decades.



Byron Smith for the New York Times

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“For many years we’ve received a bum rap. But we’re just no longer the Bronx that we were in the ’70s and ’80s, and folks are starting to take notice of that,” said Rubén Díaz Jr., the Bronx borough president. “We even have sushi in the South Bronx now. Go figure.”

Affordable housing complexes have been steadily rising throughout the South Bronx, including the Belmont Commons apartments, a nine-story residential development by the [South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation](#) that opened last week on East 188th Street.

But investors in market-rate housing are on the scene, too, and their interest could reshape the character of the South Bronx. One area that appears on the upswing is the Mott Haven-Port Morris waterfront, a gritty neighborhood with handsome 19th-century manufacturing buildings and a smattering of art galleries, restaurants and boutiques. It is reminiscent of places like Dumbo, Williamsburg and SoHo before they shed their industrial roots and re-emerged as trendy (and pricey) destinations. Quiet even in the middle of the day, the area seems far removed from the bustle of Harlem. But it is just a short walk across the Third Avenue Bridge to 125th Street, which will soon have a Whole Foods Market, a potent symbol of gentrification.

Two derelict sites straddling the Third Avenue Bridge are to be transformed into a mixed-use project with an esplanade and as many as six 25-story towers with 1,600

units of market-rate housing. Construction could begin early next year on the first phase, to open in 2018.

Apartments would rent for around \$45 a square foot, about \$3,750 a month for a 1,000-square-foot one-bedroom, according to Keith Rubenstein, the president of Somerset Partners, which is developing the property with the Chetrit Group. And the JCAL Development Group is building two multifamily market-rate properties on Alexander Avenue; last year JCAL opened a small four-story apartment house, also market-rate, on Bruckner Boulevard. “You have to be a believer,” said Mr. Rubenstein, who hopes to rebrand the waterfront area as the piano district, in a nod to its piano-manufacturing roots.

The area has almost taken off before. In 2002, the Clock Tower, a conversion of a 19th-century piano manufacturing building, opened on Lincoln Avenue, and boutiques, restaurants and art galleries followed. People started calling the area SoBro. But then the housing market collapsed in 2007 and investment in the area evaporated.

This time, developers and community leaders say conditions are different. Today, apartments at the Clock Tower rent for as much as \$3,500 a month, according to Isaac Jacobs, the vice president of Carnegie Management. Next month, Carnegie Management will break ground on a 160-unit market-rate rental building behind the Clock Tower.

And business is brisk at [Charlies Bar and Kitchen](#) at the base of the Clock Tower, one of the handful of restaurants in the neighborhood. Retail — or the lack of it — is a major source of frustration for Bronx residents searching for a good place to eat, to buy groceries or get a bottle of wine.

“The community wants restaurants, restaurants, restaurants, in that order,” said Nancy Biberman, the president of [WHEDco](#), a community development organization. In December, WHEDco and Blue Sea Development Company will break ground on [Bronx Commons](#), a 279-unit affordable housing development in Melrose. But the main draw will be the 25,000 square feet of retail and the new home of [Bronx Music Heritage Center](#), a performance and cultural space.

“There is no place to eat,” Ms. Biberman said. “You can get people to come to a cultural event in the Bronx, but there’s no reason to stay unless you can feed them.”

To counter that, Somerset has been buying and leasing storefronts near its development, courting trendy Manhattan retailers to venture north. Already, the company has convinced [Douglas Rodriguez](#), the chef behind Patria and Chicama, Nuevo Latino restaurants in Manhattan, to open two restaurants in a 14-unit rental building being built on Alexander Avenue.

The restaurants, one for takeout and the other for formal dining, will open next summer. And in December, the owners of the popular Harlem coffee shop Filtered will open a location on Third Avenue called Filtered Bronx.



Janna Pea, 29, lives a few blocks from Yankee Stadium in a building in the Grand Concourse Historic District. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

On a steamy summer afternoon, Mr. Rubenstein showed the young fashion designer [Jérôme LaMaar](#) a raw space on Bruckner Boulevard for a potential retail store. “What do you think?” he asked Mr. LaMaar. “We’ll demo it out, make it cool.”

“I can see it. I can see the change,” said Mr. LaMaar, whose clothes have been worn by Beyoncé. “It’s going to be amazing.”

Of course, the problems that have long plagued the South Bronx have not gone away. The area lacks access to open space, many of the schools are failing and air pollution contributes to high asthma and allergy rates among children. Community leaders worry that the new investments will not deliver the services that longtime residents desperately need.

“We need green space first and foremost,” said Mr. Johnson of South Bronx Unite. “We’ve seen development happen and then green space is created, but the mind-set is that it’s not for those who already live there — it’s for those who are coming.”

The [New York Restoration Project](#), which is planting 1,200 trees in Mott Haven, is spearheading the [Haven Project](#) to build a network of parks in the South Bronx, beginning with a waterfront park at the end of 132nd Street. “Do we have a will as a city to ensure that people who live in our city’s lowest-income communities enjoy the same connection to nature and open space as everyone else?” said Deborah Marton, the executive director of the New York Restoration Project. “I believe that this is that moment for the South Bronx.”

There are also fears that new investment could price out longtime residents. Although public housing and voucher programs like Section 8 provide many residents with permanent affordable housing, those living in rent-regulated apartments could face pressure from landlords.

In the last three years, investors bought 156 multifamily buildings in the South Bronx, a total of 4,330 units, nearly twice the 2,450 units sold between 2010 and 2012, according

to CoStar Group, a real estate research and analytics firm. A new owner who has paid a large sum for a building would have a strong incentive to encourage rent-regulated tenants to leave.

“People are justifiably concerned,” said Ms. Biberman of WHEDco, adding that she has noticed an uptick in the number of cases brought by landlords against tenants in housing court. “That is really new, and it’s happening at an alarming rate,” she said.



Leena-Maija Rossi, right, and Kari Soinio, both 53, live in a Grand Concourse building. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

“There are definitely buyouts going on in our community,” said Mr. Johnson, referring to landlords who offer rent-regulated tenants cash to leave their apartments. Brokers have been approaching homeowners, he said, asking if they might sell their one- or two-family homes.

Property owners have been making upgrades to attract market-rate tenants. Three years ago, there were some vacancies among the 6,382 rental units at Parkchester. So, in 2013, the Parkchester Preservation Company began a five-year, \$14 million effort to update more than 2,000 rental units. Today, renovated units rent for a \$165-a-month premium above the base rent, and the complex has a six-week-long waiting list.

In the Grand Concourse Historic District near Yankee Stadium, things are looking up. The neighborhood, with striking Art Deco buildings, is reminiscent of Washington Heights. Palombo Bakery, a Bronx institution, recently opened a location on 161st Street.

“Little things like this really matter,” said Marjo Benavides, a saleswoman for Halstead Property.

With only a handful of co-op buildings in the historic district, apartments sell fast, with buyers paying cash for apartments that cost less than \$200,000 for a one-bedroom, according to Halstead Property. “Even five years ago, people were asking about the

safety of the neighborhood,” Ms. Benavides said. “Now those questions are not even there.”

For some newcomers, crossing the Harlem River still takes convincing. When Janna Pea, 29, first began her apartment hunt, the Bronx was nowhere on her list. “I was very anti-Bronx,” said Ms. Pea, who works in public relations for a labor union and previously lived in Harlem. “I’d never go to the Bronx. I only heard bad things.”

But the Grand Concourse was airy and lively. And then she fell in love with a one-bedroom in a prewar building opposite Franz Sigel Park. She bought it for \$161,000 and moved in last February, after completing \$60,000 worth of renovations. “I feel like I am a part of Manhattan, but I am a proud Bronxite, too,” she said. “What do they call it? I am a proud Bronx girl.”

Some Grand Concourse residents, however, worry that the new arrivals might change the fabric of the neighborhood.

“People who are able to buy are buying, and people who are renting then have to move someplace else because they are really being pushed,” said Leena-Maija Rossi, 53, who has been renting in the South Bronx since 2011. “You know the song and dance.”

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