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Out of Blight, a Step-Up Neighborhood

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CONVERGENCE Shoppers navigate the intersection of Southern Boulevard, Boston Road and 174th Street, a business hub in Crotona Park East. New construction has replaced blight in many parts of the neighborhood.

IT would be hard to get much emptier than the landscape of Crotona Park East in the late 1970s.

After being eviscerated by highway projects, poverty, public health crises and crime, this square-mile South Bronx neighborhood took its final blow in the form of arson, both by tenants and landlords, which helped to reduce rows of tenements to rubble.

The ruined streets conjured fear when used as film locations, whether for horror movies (“Wolfen”) or police dramas (“Fort Apache the [Bronx](#)”). They also served as a different type of media backdrop when, 31 years ago this month, President [Jimmy Carter](#) paid a visit, describing the area as America’s “worst slum.”

In the intervening decades, much has changed. Once-desolate lots now have housing, whether rebuilt two-families or luxury condominiums.

One lot that Mr. Carter visited is now the site of Intervale Green and Louis Nine House, a \$46 million complex with 173 moderately priced apartments, built with planted roofs and leafy courtyards by the nonprofit Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation. It is to open to renters next month.

Some new homes in the area make use of materials that are sensitive to Crotona’s high asthma rates. In fact, 28 new brick-and-stone two- and three-families with nontoxic rugs

and paints built by the Blue Sea Development Company, won a city environmental award in September.

Other burned-out lots in this neighborhood of 33,000 residents have become Charlotte Gardens, a 1980s subdivision of raised ranches with deer lawn ornaments and covered boats in driveways. One resident is Elizabeth Jurden, who said that when she checked out Crotona more than 20 years ago, it didn't look much different from the way it had when she watched Mr. Carter's visit on the news.

"Rats were running across the street," said Ms. Jurden, a retired transit worker, who moved here from a two-bedroom rental on the Upper West Side. "But I figured if it's the pits now, it can only go one way, and that's up."

Her 1,500-square-foot home, with three bedrooms and one and a half baths, as well as grass on all sides, cost \$50,000 in 1983, she said. Today, owing to its suburb-in-the-city feel, it might sell for \$400,000, even in the downturn.

As tranquil as parts of Crotona might look, however, they still have their share of crime, as the barred windows on Ms. Jurden's block suggest.

There have been 12 killings this year in the 42nd precinct, of which this neighborhood is a part. This is four more than in 2007. But from 1990 to 2007 murders here fell by 85 percent. Robberies are keeping pace with last year's total, with 288 reported so far in 2008, about the same as late October 2007. And high unemployment persists, city officials say.

Yet now that Crotona's long-term build-out seems to be nearing completion, attention can be focused more fully on social issues in this mostly black and Hispanic area, says Peter Williams, president of the Mid Bronx Desperadoes, a nonprofit developer and community organization founded in 1974 by women who patrolled to stop arsonists.

"Our next phase is human-capital development," said Mr. Williams, whose group has worked on 121 local buildings, including Charlotte Gardens.

"We always believed this community could be revitalized," he said, "and that dream seems closer."

WHAT YOU'LL FIND

The Cross Bronx Expressway forms Crotona's northern border. The Sheridan Expressway frames it to the east.

To the west lies Crotona Park, which in the 1980s was known for its crime. Today, through an \$11 million Parks Department project, the 127.5-acre expanse is receiving new sidewalks, a pool house, tennis courts and a soccer field.

To restore Indian Lake, workers are removing concrete banks. A 500-seat amphitheater is to open in May. Among other events, hip-hop concerts will be held there on Thursdays in July, said Steven Cain, the park's administrator.

Crotona Park East's southern boundary, which touches Morrisania, is open to interpretation, but in terms of housing stock, there's little distinction.

Both have squat vinyl-sided homes tucked in between three-story brick tenements that survived earlier eras. In Crotona, examples line Hoe Avenue, and Simpson and Home Streets.

Along Bryant Avenue, yellow-brick row houses feature terra-cotta inlays of cherubs. Some are in rough shape, with graffiti-scrawled doors, cracked stoops and plywood-covered windows.

In places, sneakers dangle from power lines. Sizable spray-painted murals also punctuate the area, like the eulogy to Mad Mark on East 167th Street ("the only M & M that will melt your heart").

Early-20th-century apartment towers face Crotona Park. Their residents, like most in the area, are renters — many in Housing Authority buildings.

But the area has its share of owners, who live in single-family homes or in buildings where they rent out the upper floors, brokers say.

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Even though many rents are set low, they're slipping out of the reach of some residents, says Nancy Biberman, the President of Women's Housing, citing its Intervale project, where the most expensive three-bedrooms are \$1,089 a month.

"We're having trouble filling it, which is extremely unusual," she said. She guesses the problem is the current economic climate.

Otherwise, the rental market is fairly tight, with only about 75 apartments out of 3,000, or 3 percent, changing hands every month, brokers said.

Sales inventory, on the other hand, is escalating; it is currently at about 200 homes — three per block. Buyers, many of them investors, typically pay \$360,000 for three-families whose units have two bedrooms, a bath and 900 square feet each, said Leslie Bhagwandin, a broker with Nardin Real Estate in Baychester. That price is off 20 percent from 2007; most of the decline occurred in the last 90 days. Older row houses on Bryant Avenue average about \$425,000.

Still, "this is a step-up neighborhood," for first-time buyers who ultimately settle in areas like Throgs Neck or Pelham Parkway, Mr. Bhagwandin added.

One troubling sign is the recent spike in foreclosures in a place where "for sale by bank" signs are not uncommon. Foreclosures have tripled since 2005, Mr. Bhagwandin said.

WHAT TO DO

The commercial strips are Southern Boulevard and Boston Road; under a flaking trestle sit auto-body shops, storefront churches and bodegas.

For groceries, most residents head to the New Horizons mall on East 174th Street, which offers a Pathmark, a Radio Shack and a Hollywood Video. At El Despertar restaurant nearby, \$6 buys a plate of chicken, beans and rice.

On Bristow Street, at the quarter-acre Model T Senior Citizens Garden, volunteers grow figs, squash and beets, and tomatoes the color of plums. People can pick what they need, said Tina Espinell, as she sat at a picnic table under wind chimes, “and it’s just a nice place to come for peace of mind.”

THE SCHOOLS

Crotona’s many public schools receive mixed reviews; one of the better-performing schools is Public School 61, the Francisco Oller School, which teaches prekindergarten through fifth grade. On state proficiency exams, 45 percent of fourth-graders there met standards in English, 83 percent in math. Citywide, percentages were 61 and 80.

For Grades 6 through 8, many head to Intermediate School 98, the Herman Ridder School, which enrolls about 500. On the 2008 state exams, 24 percent of eighth graders met standards in English, 57 percent in math, versus 43 and 60 citywide.

In recent years, the city has replaced large dropout-plagued schools with smaller specialized ones; South Bronx High School in Morrisania, for example, gave way to three schools, among them Mott Haven Village Prep. This year, averages at Mott Haven were 377 in reading, 355 in math and 369 in writing, versus 488, 503 and 475 statewide.

THE COMMUTE

The Nos. 2 and 5 trains, which share elevated tracks through Crotona, have stops at Freeman Street and 174th Street, though the 5 skips those stops during the morning rush.

Most morning commuters take the 2 and transfer at 149th Street-Grand Concourse to the 4 or 5, to arrive in Midtown in 35 minutes.

Buses include the Bx11, Bx17, Bx19, Bx21 and Bx36. There is also the Bx35, which runs to the George Washington Bridge Bus Station.

THE HISTORY

The area’s hip-hop legacy is notable, says Mark Naison, a professor of African-American studies at Fordham.

Joseph Saddler, known as Grandmaster Flash, inducted into the Rock ’n’ Roll Hall of Fame last year, grew up on Fox Street, just south of Crotona, and gained fame as a D.J. at parties at Public School 63. A block away lived Theodore Livingston, a.k.a. Grand Wizard Theodore, who is said to have invented turntable scratching, Mr. Naison said.