Fort Greene, Brooklyn: A Neighborhood With Many Faces

Amid New York's variegated urban landscape, Fort Greene has been known since the 19th century for its low-rise human habitat: intimately scaled, tree-lined blocks of brownstones, brick rowhouses and occasional frame houses. But a lofty new habitat is emerging on the neighborhood's western edge, as a forest of mixed-use towers rises in the Brooklyn Cultural District around the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Peter Jay Sharp Building on Lafayette Avenue. Incorporating more than 1,200 new apartments into a kind of high-rise Lincoln Center, the district will be home in the next few years to more than 400,000 square feet of cultural space, including performance, rehearsal and studio facilities.

"The idea was always concentrating great culture together in a small area to spur economic development and provide the people of this area with great cultural options," said Andrew Kalish, the director of cultural development for the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, a public-private local development corporation. Photo

274 VANDERBILT AVENUE
A two-family French Second Empire-style brownstone with a garden, listed at $2,695,000. (646) 247-0822 Credit: Jake Naughton for The New York Times

Across Ashland Place from BAM's Sharp building and the BAM Fisher building, which opened in 2012, work has begun on a 32-story tower designed for Two Trees Management by Enrique Norten of Ten Arquitectos. The development will be made up of more than 300 apartments (20 percent below market), a public plaza along Lafayette, retail and 50,000 square feet of city-owned space for organizations like BAM, the Brooklyn Public Library and 651 Arts, a group dedicated to the performing arts of the African diaspora.

Up the street on Ashland, the Theater for a New Audience last year opened a glass-fronted jewel box of a theater, called the Polonsky Shakespeare Center. It will soon be flanked by two much larger neighbors. To the north, the Gotham Organization has begun excavation for a 52-story mixed-use tower with 586

apartments, roughly half below market rate. To the south, a 10-story mixed-use building will replace a parking lot.

Several new high-rises are expected nearby, including an Autograph Collection hotel, one of Marriott's brand of upscale, independently operated properties, on Rockwell Place. The hotel will join 66 Rockwell, a 42-story mixed-income tower that began leasing units this year; two-bedrooms with Chrysler Building views are listed at $4,267 a month.

Closer to earth, and farther east, Theo Peck is living a more typical Fort Greene life with his wife, Ingrid, and their small son. In 2011, the family moved into an aluminum-sided rowhouse on Clermont Avenue, where they pay $3,000 monthly for a duplex "with a really scary basement with friends in low places." Their neighbors include a photographer, a video editor and a pastry chef, whom Mr. Peck hired for his prepared-food shop on nearby Myrtle Avenue, called Peck's.

"The cultural district is amazing," Mr. Peck said. He takes in plays at BAM and has attended a panel on artisanal food at BRIC House, an arts and media center on Fulton Street. In October, his wife and son attend the Annual Great PUPkin Dog Costume Contest in Fort Greene Park. "It's a very mixed neighborhood," Mr. Peck said. "There's a little bit of everybody and a little bit of everything."

What You'll Find
Sandwiched between Clinton Hill and Downtown Brooklyn, with which it shares an ambiguous border, Fort Greene is bounded by the Brooklyn Navy Yard to the north and Atlantic Avenue to the south.

The traditional socioeconomic divide of the neighborhood is Fort Greene Park, a gem designed by Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted. To the south are leafy streets lined with brownstones, some of them expensively restored former rooming houses. To the north are public housing developments.

African-Americans have been an integral part of Fort Greene's multiracial tapestry since the 19th century, and by the 1970s most of the area's homes were owned by middle-income blacks, many of whom had bought them during the white exodus for the suburbs in the '50s and '60s. A predominantly black creative community flourished. In the 1990s and early 2000s, however, as home prices rose, many black homeowners reached retirement age and sold their houses, said Deb Howard, a 40-year resident and the executive director of the Pratt Area Community Council, a nonprofit community development corporation. In turn, low-income tenants were forced out, as new buyers had bought at higher prices with mortgages that could not be supported by the old rents.

All of this turnover was compounded by predatory home-repair loans to the elderly, which precipitated a wave of foreclosures, Ms. Howard said. "Eighty to 85 percent of the housing has changed hands since the '80s," she added. "But it's really just in the last 12 years that there's been such a dramatic upswing in the market."

159 CARLTON AVENUE, #3A
A one-bedroom one-bath condo in a converted stable, listed at $1,150,000. (212) 612-9619 Credit: Jake Naughton for The New York Times

A five-year census survey completed in 2012 estimated that 42 percent of the area's 26,982 residents were black, 27 percent white, 19 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent Asian, according to an analysis of the data performed by Susan Weber-Stoger, a researcher in the sociology department at Queens College. The proportion of whites rose 13 percent since 2000, census data show, while the share of blacks shrunk 15 percent. Median household income in 2012 dollars rose to $56,436 from $44,987.

Pamela Young, an agent with the Corcoran Group who lived in Fort Greene for a decade and still works there, said that talk of tension over gentrification was overblown. "I've seen more tension between drivers and bikers than I've seen between longtime residents and new arrivals," said Ms. Young, who is African-American. "It's more a sense of wistful nostalgia. It's not a feeling of people wanting to throw bottles at each other."

What You'll Pay

Buyers are descending from Manhattan and abroad in droves, and "when a townhouse comes to market, it's like throwing corn to pigeons," said Ms. Young of Corcoran. The average townhouse price in the last year was $2,043,153, according to Doug Bowen, a broker at CORE, while co-ops averaged $628 a square foot. Duplex two-bedroom condos in brownstones sell from $850,000 to $1.2 million, Ms. Young said; two-bedroom condos in new buildings range from $650,000 to $1.5 million. A recent search on Streeteasy.com found 52 properties for sale and 143 for rent; one-bedroom rentals ranged from $1,750 to $3,500 per month.

130 ST. EDWARDS STREET, #7D
An 1,100-square-foot, three-bedroom co-op with one and a half baths, listed at $595,000. (917) 771-6655 Credit: Jake Naughton for The New York Times

What to Do

DeKalb Avenue is a genuine restaurant row, with diverse fare offered by the likes of Madiba Restaurant, inspired by informal dining halls in South African townships, and Colonia Verde, with its Sunday pig roasts. The strip has become so "of-the-moment" that on a recent afternoon, shoots were underway simultaneously for both an Abercrombie & Fitch ad and an MTV drama called "Eye Candy."
On Saturdays from April through November, the schoolyard of Bishop Loughlin Memorial High School hosts Brooklyn Flea, a vibrantly eclectic vintage bazaar and food destination.

The Schools

Public school options include the Academy of Arts and Letters on Adelphi Street, which teaches kindergarten through eighth grade and received a B on its most recent city progress report.

The Brooklyn Technical High School on Fort Greene Place is one of eight city schools that require prospective students to take the Specialized High Schools Admissions Test. Average SAT scores in 2013 at Brooklyn Tech were 591 in reading, 659 in math and 582 in writing, versus 437, 463 and 433 citywide.

The Commute

Among the trains serving the neighborhood either full- or part-time, the B, Q, D, N, R, 2, 3, 4, and 5 trains stop at the Atlantic Avenue-Barclays Center station. The Q runs full-time to DeKalb Avenue. Farther east, the C train stops part-time at Lafayette Avenue.

The History

During the Revolutionary War, 11,500 Americans died in British prison ships anchored in nearby Wallabout Bay. Their bones are entombed in Fort Greene Park, beneath a soaring Doric column.