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In Hamilton Heights, a Renaissance

In the wake of historic-home restorations, cafes and restaurants proliferate



Row houses on Convent Avenue in Hamilton Heights

Alexander Hamilton may be the current toast of Broadway, but he is having a moment, too, in the uptown Manhattan enclave that bears his name.

Bookended by City College to the south and the Hispanic Society of America to the north, Hamilton Heights, so named for the founding father who made his home in the area, is enjoying a renaissance with a wave of historic home restorations, followed by new restaurants and cafes.

“The neighborhood has exploded in the last few years,” said James Endress, founder of Absolute Properties, a brokerage firm on Amsterdam Avenue. “You can still find needles in the haystack...if you’re up for a project, it’s good to look here.”

Mr. Endress, who has lived in the neighborhood since 2007, said prices and inventory are attracting people “who want townhouses but have been priced out of the Upper West Side.”

Sara Henderson, a retired investment banker, was one such buyer. She moved from a condominium on 94th Street and Central Park West to a four-story townhouse on West 141st Street.

“I always wanted to live in Harlem and always wanted a townhouse,” she said. “I had something specific in mind—I wanted detail and I was willing to restore.”

In her old neighborhood, she couldn’t find a property within her price range and taste. After six months of looking, Ms. Henderson closed on her townhouse in April 2014, paying \$2.3 million. She restored parts of her home, and after finding it too large to manage on her own, recently put it on the market. Within a month, she had several bids and accepted a cash offer of \$2.9 million.

One of Harlem’s most architecturally eclectic neighborhoods, with landmarked blocks of townhouses and churches, prewar apartment buildings and national monuments, Hamilton Heights seems lost in time.

“Architecturally, it’s one of the most beautiful areas of the city, [attracting] people who have an appreciation for prewar elegance and beauty,” said Sidney Whelan, an agent for CORE, a boutique residential brokerage, and himself a 12-year Hamilton Heights resident. He said the townhouse inventory that dominates the area near Convent Avenue doesn’t trade often, and new development around the historic interior is limited. The Langston, a 180-unit development built in 2005 at 68 Bradhurst Ave., is one block outside the Hamilton Heights neighborhood. Aside from a spurt of activity in 2006 that brought three boutique developments to market, other projects have been small in scale.

But buyers looking farther west will find more apartment conversions.



Harlem Public, a pioneering bar in the neighborhood.

“Toward Riverside Drive there’s a diversity of floor plans, some with huge apartments and some with tiny layouts,” Mr. Whelan said. “It’s a kind of chaotic inventory on those kind of conversions...there’s neither rhyme nor reason to it.” But, he added, “You can find some gems there.”

Adding to the mix will be the conversion of the long-vacant P.S. 186 on West 145th Street, a private/public project that will create 79 units of housing, eight at market rates. It also will be the home of the Boys and Girls Club of Harlem.

Slated for completion in fall 2016, the project will “help transform 145th Street and bring in more upscale retail,” Mr. Endress said. Places like the craft-beer tavern Harlem Public, which opened in 2012 at 3612 Broadway, have jump-started the makeover, paving the way for other like-minded businesses.

Grange Bar & Eatery owners Roy and Rita Henley, who live on West 145th Street, said they were inspired to open their restaurant by both the Harlem Public’s success and a desire to provide a new offering. “We were sick of the commute downtown and decided we missed this in the neighborhood,” Mr. Henley said. “At the time, Harlem Public was the only thing open—no one [else] was doing anything craft or pushing the envelope here...I knew the neighborhood was ready.”

The Henleys, in turn, may have helped spawn a micro-dining destination, which in the past year included the nearby Tsion Café, Hogshead Tavern and the newly revamped Sweet Chef bakery. At 1616 Amsterdam Ave., Filtered Coffee opened this spring in a storefront that will include OSO, a restaurant in which Matthew Trebek, son of the “Jeopardy!” game show host, is a partner.



St. Nicholas Park

Tsion Café owners and local residents Padmore John and Beejhy Barhany said they were encouraged to open a restaurant after seeing a revitalization of abandoned houses and storefronts. When they opened a year ago, Mr. John said, “A lot of people told us we’ve been waiting for something like this for ages.” Other retail has yet to catch up. The main retail corridors along West 145th Street and Broadway are a jumble of bodegas, salons, small electronic and phone stores. The neighborhood lacks a diversity of grocery stores, forcing residents like Alisa Roost, an associate professor at Hostos Community College, to travel for items beyond staples.

“We have more coffee shops than we need...I personally would love a reasonably priced grocery store,” she said. “We don’t have good grocery stores but we have a good brunch place. Sometimes it doesn’t work the way you’d think it works.”



A coffeehouse on Broadway

Dining and drinking: On the eastern side of the neighborhood, the Grange Bar & Eatery specializes in farm-to-table dishes and craft cocktails. Tsion Café fuses Ethiopian, Caribbean and North African cuisines. Hogshead Tavern features craft beers and whiskeys, and small plates. A bar, coffee shop and noodle shop line the Broadway block between West 148th and West 149th streets.

Culture: The landmarked Audubon Terrace is home to a number of small museums including the Hispanic Society of America, whose collection includes works by El Greco and Velázquez. Hamilton historians can visit his home at the Hamilton Grange National Memorial at 414 W. 141st St. The Dance Theatre of Harlem, 466 W. 152nd St., offers classes and performances at its Everett Center for the Performing Arts. Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling opened in October at 898 St. Nicholas Ave.

Transportation: The neighborhood is served by the A, B, C, D and No. 1 subway lines to West 145th Street.

Schools: In District 6, schools that serve prekindergarten to fifth grades include P.S. 153 Adam Clayton Powell, P.S. 28 Wright Brothers School, P.S. 192 Jacob H. Schiff and P.S. 325. P.S. 368 Hamilton Heights School serves kindergarten to fifth grade. P.S./I.S. 210 21st Century Academy for Community Leadership includes prekindergarten through eighth grade; Middle schools include Hamilton Grange Middle School. The New Heights Academy Charter School serves grades five through 12. High schools include A. Philip Randolph Campus High School and the High School for Mathematics, Science and Engineering at City College.

Corrections & Amplifications:

A bar, coffee shop and noodle shop line the Broadway block between West 148th and West 149th streets. Also, Roy Henley is a co-owner of Grange Bar & Eatery. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated the businesses line the Broadway block between 139th and 148th streets and incorrectly gave the first name of Mr. Henley as Ron. (Dec. 4, 2015)