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Living In | Central Harlem

A Neighborhood Worth the Big-Ticket Investment

By [C. J. HUGHES](#)

It might be smart to pack a hardhat on a trip to Central [Harlem](#).

New condominiums, some the width of a city block, are rising from long-empty lots. Narrow tenements are being converted into elevator buildings and given luxury finishes. There are even midrise condos being built to resemble the neighborhood's historic brownstones, which continue to be renovated.

About three dozen projects, promising 1,200 housing units, are being built, said Leslie Valdez, a broker with Warburg Realty Harlem. And for many longtime residents, the activity is a welcome sight. After decades of crime, abandonment and decay, the neighborhood is finally worth big-ticket investment.

But change can be a double-edged sword, as a group of 30 musicians discovered on a Saturday in late June in Marcus Garvey Park.

The musicians, including guitarists, drummers and singers, were jamming on benches by a perimeter fence, as they had done weekly since the 1970s, when police officers asked them to stop. The noise, they said, was bothering residents of 2005 Fifth Avenue, a new seven-story 24-unit co-op across the street. Community leaders and the Department of Parks and Recreation ultimately helped to forge a compromise — the musicians can play, just not near the street.

“There is no need for things to disappear just because new people are here,” said Valerie Jo Bradley, an African-American who is a founder of the Marcus Garvey Park Alliance. “How tolerant will they be of our culture?”

Black culture has thrived for decades in Central Harlem, which stretches roughly between Fifth Avenue and St. Nicholas Avenue, and Central Park and the Harlem River, according to Community Board 10 and the [Manhattan](#) borough president's office.

The neighborhood flourished between the two World Wars, when it became associated with a long list of black writers and poets, painters, musicians and singers who performed, read and spent time here, even if they didn't all live in Central Harlem all of the time, or even at the same time.

As a child, Ms. Bradley was captivated by the way Langston Hughes's poems described Harlem, she said, and later, once she was living in New York, his writing inspired her to move from a one-bedroom rental in Turtle Bay to a three-story Central Harlem brownstone.

The 6,800-square-foot building, whose garden level can be reached from under a stoop, has six bedrooms, three baths and three kitchens, vestiges of its years as a multifamily dwelling. Original details include parquet floors, pocket doors and seven fireplaces.

In 1980, the house cost \$36,000, but it was appraised by a bank last year for \$2.5 million, said Ms. Bradley, who owns a public relations and event-planning business.

She contends that it is volunteerism, not good real estate deals, that distinguish Central Harlem. And that can mean helping neighbors “fill out forms for government agencies,” she said, or raising money for Marcus Garvey Park, whose 1856 fire tower needs a rehab. “It's important to be involved, to serve, to not hold yourself apart,” she said.

What You'll Find

A once-gritty stretch of West 145th Street now includes a condo, the Langston, with 180 units, and two co-ops, the Hamilton, with 76 units, and the Bradhurst Court, with 126 units. Co-ops under construction nearby include the Sutton, on Bradhurst Avenue, with 134 units, and the Ellington on the Park, with 134 units. All five buildings have varying numbers of apartments for moderate- or low-income buyers.

At the Langston, 70 percent of the units were offered at below-market-rate prices and have sold out. Market-rate prices, meanwhile, range from \$590,000 for a two-bedroom to \$995,000 for a penthouse duplex. There are 17 of these units remaining, said Sidney Whelan, a broker with Halstead Property, which is handling sales.

Developers have also zeroed in on [Malcolm X Boulevard](#), adding luxury housing to a market that a decade ago had practically none. The Lenox, whose 12 stories contain 77 one- to three-bedrooms priced from \$461,745 to \$2.4 million, has sold 80 percent of its apartments since June 2005, said Phillissia Amat, a sales agent for the building.

Nearby is 50 West, on 127th Street, which offers 23 condos, from one- to three-bedrooms, for \$500,000 to \$1.45 million. It is 90 percent sold, said Norman Horowitz, a broker with Halstead Property, which is handling sales.

Another hot spot for development is Frederick Douglass Boulevard, between Central Park North and St. Nicholas Avenue. The largest project is SoHa 118, a condominium that offers 94 two- to three-bedroom apartments, on a street where drug gangs once roamed, neighborhood residents said. Units are priced at \$825,000 to \$2 million, according to its sales office.

Smaller projects include the Dwyer Loft Condominiums, with 52 units, mostly one-bedrooms, which sold out in January. Prices ranged from \$371,000 to \$1.3 million, said Denice Johns, the owner of Society Estates, a brokerage.

The Fitzgerald Condominiums, at 257 West 117th Street, created 47 units, from one- to three-bedrooms, in a converted school. Prices range from \$575,000 to \$1.4 million, and five units have sold since June, said Karen Meeker, a sales agent.

Casa Loma, meanwhile, has built 16 one- and two-bedrooms in a one-time tenement. They are priced from \$485,000 to \$775,000. Thirteen units have sold in the last few weeks, according to Ellen Shandalow, a sales associate with Warburg Realty Harlem.

Crime is still an issue in Central Harlem, although there has been a drop in the 32nd Precinct, which is in the northern half of the neighborhood. Homicides have fallen 23 percent, from 22 in 2001 to 17 in 2006. Robberies, meanwhile, have dipped nearly 8 percent, to 402 from 435, and assaults are down 25 percent, to 354 from 474.

Crime levels have actually risen in the 28th Precinct, which covers the southern part of the neighborhood. The murder rate jumped 71 percent, from 7 in 2001 to 12 in 2006. By comparison, in the 20th Precinct, on the nearby Upper West Side, there was a single homicide in 2006.

What You'll Pay

In the 1980s, the city owned about 60 percent of the buildings in Central Harlem, according to Seth Donlin, a spokesman for the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Then, entire buildings were available for a relative pittance. But, "those days are gone," said Belynda M'Baye, an associate broker with Harlem Homes Realty. Today, it is possible to buy one for around \$1 million, though it would require top-to-bottom renovation, she said.

There are still some options for aspiring owners who cannot afford to buy market-rate apartments. Housing Works, an AIDS advocacy group, and the Abyssinian Development Corporation are renovating brownstones and selling them through lottery systems at below-market rates, according to Ms. M'Baye.

The new market-rate condos generally start at \$350,000 for a 400-square foot studio but can run up to \$2 million for a three-bedroom, said Jeffrey Berger, a longtime Central Harlem broker. Mr. Berger is also the sales director for 111 Central Park North, a new 47-unit condo that is 70 percent sold.

"If you want more space for reasonable prices," he said, "Harlem makes a lot of sense."

Average rents in Central Harlem, meanwhile, are around \$1,400 for a 700-square-foot one-bedroom in a walk-up, brokers said.

What to Do

Restaurants have been slower to arrive in Central Harlem than housing. One impediment, developers and community leaders said, is the preponderance of churches and schools. A 1934 state law bans liquor sales within 200 feet of their front doors.

There are exceptions, though, like Moca Lounge, at 2210 Frederick Douglass Boulevard, where a jerk chicken entree costs \$12. Nearby is the Tribal Spears Gallery, which serves fruit smoothies alongside ebony carvings.

And while Copeland's, on West 145th Street, known for its gospel brunches, closed in July, mainstays carry on, like the Lenox Lounge, Malcolm X Boulevard near 125th Street, where a Poor Man's Jumbo, with shrimp, sausage, and okra, costs \$10.95.

The Schools

Some of the city's more troubled schools, in terms of test scores, are in Central Harlem, but to combat the problems, the city in recent years has worked to replace large schools with smaller, more specialized ones.

There are 15 elementary schools serving Central Harlem, including five charter schools, which are run by outside nonprofit groups that can mandate longer school days and school uniforms.

The neighborhood has five public middle schools. The Harlem Village Academy, a charter school for Grades 5 through 8 at 240 West 144th Street, emphasizes college preparation.

Public high schools include the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, named for the [United States Supreme Court](#) justice who lived at 409 Edgecombe Avenue, near [Jackie Robinson](#) Park. The school teaches Grades 7 through 12, with an enrollment of 579 this past year.

In 2006, Marshall's graduation rate was 62 percent, higher than the 60 percent city average, and of those, 70 percent went on to two- or four-year colleges. On the 2006 SATs, students scored 407 on math and 401 on verbal, compared with 510 math and 493 verbal statewide.

The Commute

Central Harlem is served by the A, B, C and D, and the Nos. 2 and 3 subway lines. The A train runs express from West 125th Street to Midtown in about 10 minutes. The No. 3 train runs locally from 148th Street to 96th Street, then express to Midtown. Also, the M60 bus runs along 125th Street to La Guardia Airport.

The History

Sharon Howard, a [librarian](#) at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, said that the influx of African-American New Yorkers into Central Harlem began in earnest with Philip A. Payton Jr., a onetime janitor. In 1904, he founded the Afro-American Realty Company to provide apartments for black families evicted from other parts of Manhattan.

The first five tenements in Mr. Payton's portfolio were on West 135th Street, between Fifth Avenue and Lenox Avenue (now known as Malcolm X Boulevard). In the late 1950s, however, all were torn down to make way for Lenox Terrace, a six-building, six-block complex with 1,700 market-rate rental units, doormen and on-site parking.

The complex, which was perhaps the neighborhood's first luxury housing, is to this day home to prominent African-American actors, politicians and entrepreneurs, Ms. Howard said.