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LIVING IN | EAST HARLEM

More Small Dogs and Big Home Prices



Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

New construction along Lexington at 103rd Street. East Harlem's Hispanic flavor is pronounced, with Mexicans and Dominicans joining a longstanding Puerto Rican population. More Photos »

By JOHN FREEMAN GILL

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IN his 1995 memoir "Dreams From My Father," Barack Obama described the Yorkville walk-up on 94th Street near First Avenue where he had lived in the 1980s as "part of the shifting border between East Harlem and the rest of Manhattan." Over the last several years, as the latest wave of gentrification has washed north of East 96th Street, breaching a traditional dividing line sometimes called the Wall by East Harlem residents, that boundary has blurred even further.

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Living In | East Harlem

In particular, Lexington Avenue between 96th and 104th Streets has been transformed by the arrival of luxury housing and spiffy lounges. At the East Harlem Cafe, laptop-pecking patrons can dine on a goat cheese and tomato salad called El Barrio, the name by which parts of the neighborhood have been known for decades by its many Hispanic residents.

Brian Armstead of the Corcoran Group, who grew up on East 110th Street, said that one of his condominium sales on 104th and First fell apart last

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year when the buyer, an investor from [New Jersey](#), learned that the apartment she had chosen was in East Harlem.

“Some Web sites call that area the Upper East Side,” he said, “and then she heard somewhere else it was called East Harlem, so she backed out because it confused her.”

The gentrification has by no means been wholesale; of the area is still dominated by rows of crumbling tenements and mountain ranges of public housing. many cases, residents say, multiple immigrant families crowd together in a single one-bedroom unit. But for students of Manhattan’s tendency to remake itself block by block, the signs of evolution are evident.

James Garcia, a manager at a nonprofit group, needs only to gaze from his condo’s south-facing terrace to see the change. In 2005, Mr. Garcia and his partner moved from Battery Park City, paying \$595,000 for a two-bedroom condo with two baths and two terraces on 112th Street near [Thomas Jefferson Park](#). Next door was an auto body shop, and beyond that a tire repair place.

“Looking out from our back terrace, there was nothing but public housing back then,” Mr. Garcia recalled, “and now I see eight new residential buildings. And the empty lot next to mine is going to be converted into an eight-story condo.”

Development has been spurred in part by [East River Plaza](#), a long-awaited mall at 116th Street and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive that offers the likes of Target and Old Navy. The increased foot traffic has brought restaurants to the avenues nearby as well as to 116th, which has come to be called Little Mexico. On 119th and Third, Hunter College’s graduate school of social work now resides in a shiny new eight-story brick-and-glass building. Along with condos and a graduate center apartment house, the school has drawn a diverse crowd and helped rejuvenate a down-at-heel area of dollar stores.

“There’s a young professional population of every ethnic group,” Mr. Garcia said, “and a noticeable, huge increase in the gay population.”

But perhaps the greatest leading indicator of cultural transformation can be found at the dog run. “You can always tell a neighborhood is changing by its dogs,” Mr. Garcia said. “When we moved here, they were mostly pit bulls, but now there’s every breed, every terrier you can imagine.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

Broadly speaking, East Harlem is made up of the one and a half square miles of Manhattan Island covered by Community Board 11: The area between 96th and 142nd Streets, from Fifth Avenue to the East and [Harlem](#) Rivers. These borders can be a subject of disagreement. Some place the northern boundary at 125th Street, the southern edge north of 96th.



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Nearly half the area's 101,448 residents are Hispanic or Latino, but from 2000 to 2010 their proportion shrank to 47 percent from 52, according to census data provided by Andrew A. Beveridge, the chairman of the Queens College sociology department. The black population dipped slightly, to 38 percent, while the percentage of non-Hispanic whites rose to 13 from 7 and the share of Asians doubled, to 6 percent. Median household income was \$30,833, less than half that of Manhattan households overall.

English and Spanish are both widely spoken, but the background of those speaking the Spanish has changed. The proportion of Puerto Ricans, the area's dominant group by the 1950s, was just a quarter of the 2010 population, while an influx of Mexicans and Dominicans brought the reported share of each of those groups to 8 percent.

Most East Harlemites live in some form of rent-regulated housing, and the neighborhood has one of the largest concentrations of public housing in New York. But development pressure is mounting. In 2010 and '11, more new certificates of occupancy were issued in East Harlem than in any other city neighborhood, according to a report by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University.

George Sarkissian, the district manager of [Community Board 11](#), said that rising rents had priced some longtime residents out of their own neighborhood. "We have private equity firms that have bought up large portfolios of low- and middle-income housing at the tail end of their rent-regulatory period," he said, and in some cases the buildings have opted out of government rent-regulation programs, bringing some apartments to market rate. "So there's a bit of tension between people who have been in East Harlem for generations and those who are moving here, although there's no outright conflict."

The community board has made a priority of preserving affordable housing, Mr. Sarkissian added, and it has held discussions with new building owners to try to persuade them to remain for 25 years in the federal Section 8 program, which provides rental payment assistance to low-income New Yorkers.

Below-market-rate and mixed-income housing has also been built by private developers making use of government incentives. One of the newest mixed-income co-ops is the eight-story [Lancaster Madison](#), the fourth in a corridor of pleasant brick-and-masonry buildings between 117th and 120th Streets on Madison Avenue.

"All the brand-new buildings make you feel that people are already investing up here," said Enrique Vela, an architect, while taking a break from painting a room for the baby whom he and his wife, Gimar Diaz, are expecting. Last month the couple paid \$395,000 for a two-bedroom unit in the Lancaster Madison. "The neighborhood's not there yet," he said, "but it's getting there, and when it does I think we'll be sitting pretty."

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Fifth Avenue from 96th to 110th Street has several new developments and renovated prewar buildings that sell or rent at heights unheard of elsewhere in East Harlem. Three-bedrooms in [1214 Fifth](#), a new 53-story glass tower on 102nd, rent for \$9,000 a month and up, said Daria Salusbury, a senior vice president of [the Related Companies](#), the building's leasing agent. Condos at [One Museum Mile](#), the tower atop the as-yet-unopened Museum for African Art on 110th, command more than \$1,000 a square foot.

Outside of this rarefied corridor, two-bedrooms in luxury condos typically bring around \$615,000, said Mr. Armstead of Corcoran, and the pace of sales has picked up markedly since September. A search on [Streeteasy.com](#) found 71 residential properties for sale.

Two-bedrooms in tenements rent for around \$2,300, said Dianne Howard, also of Corcoran. Luxury rentals can be had for \$2,500 to \$3,000 a month, Mr. Armstead said.

WHAT TO DO

The area boasts some of the best Mexican food in town, at restaurants like El Paso Taqueria. Diverse local favorites include Ricardo Ocean Grill; Harley's Smokeshack;

Creole; and Piatto D'Oro, one of whose owners is a former Roman paparazzo.

THE SCHOOLS

Among the public elementary schools is the [Bilingual Bicultural School](#) on 109th, for kindergarten through fifth grade, which earned an A on its most recent city progress report. Middle schools include the [Isaac Newton Middle School for Math and Science](#) on Pleasant Avenue, which scored a C. At the [Central Park East High School](#) on Madison, SAT averages last year were 405 in reading, 421 in math and 395 in writing, versus 434, 461, and 430 citywide. The private [St. Bernard's School](#) on 98th runs through Grade 9.

THE COMMUTE

The 2, 3, 4 and 5 express trains stop at 125th Street. The 6 makes five stops on Lexington from 96th to 125th. The trip from 116th to Grand Central Terminal takes about 20 minutes. From 125th on the 4 or 5, the ride to Wall Street is about 25 minutes. There is a Metro-North Railroad station at 125th and Park.

THE HISTORY

In 1930, 80,000 Italians lived in East Harlem; by 2010 that population had dwindled below 1,900. "My father grew up here in the 1930s," said Robert Martinez, the maintenance superintendent at the local Boys' Club of New York, who is of Puerto Rican descent, "and if you weren't Italian or Irish you couldn't pass Second Avenue toward the East River between 106th and 116th. My dad was very light-skinned, so he was able to filter in with the Italians; our name is Martinez so he called himself Martini."

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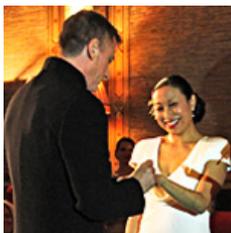
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