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MOTT HAVEN
MELROSE
CONCOURSE
HUNTS POINT
CROTONA PARK
EAST
MORRISANIA
TREMONT
MOUNT EDEN
HIGHBRIDGE



- Ⓐ Bertine Historic District
- Ⓑ St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church
- Ⓒ Opera House Hotel
- Ⓓ Silvercup Studios
- Ⓔ Bronx Brewery
- Ⓕ Port Morris Distillery

MOTT HAVEN

MOTT HAVEN'S BOUNDARIES ARE E. 149th Street on the north, E. 149th Street and the East River on the east, the strait known as the Bronx Kill on the south, and the Harlem River on the west. Jonas Bronck, a Swedish sea captain after whom the Bronx was named, established his farm in Mott Haven in 1639. In 1670, the land was bought by the Morris family, one of whose members, Lewis Morris, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. In 1841, Jordan Lawrence Mott purchased the land for his ironworks factory. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, it became more heavily settled, and a good number of handsome brownstones and row houses were built there. The area became much more densely populated in the twentieth century as tenement houses proliferated throughout the area.

Until the 1950s, Mott Haven was largely German, Irish, and Italian, along with a small Jewish population. It was famous then for a large annual Irish parade sponsored by veterans of the Irish Republican Army, who marched proudly on Willis Avenue on Easter Sunday. Puerto Ricans began moving into Mott Haven in the early 1940s, a



pattern that accelerated in the '50s. African Americans also settled here in the early '40s and were drawn to the NYCHA Patterson houses that were built in 1956. Situated on Third Avenue between E. 139th and E. 141st Streets and with almost 1,800 apartments spread through its fifteen buildings, the complex is one of the city's largest housing projects. This community is where the South Bronx's reputation began and where illegal blockbusting tactics resulted in a mass exodus of white people from the area. The 1960s, '70s, and '80s, were marked by arson, abandonment, and crime here and in the neighboring communities of Hunts Point, Morrisania, Melrose, and beyond. These problems and issues, including the lack of opportunity and lack of adequate social programs for those experiencing poverty, have been discussed at length in my first book, *The New York Nobody Knows*.

In recent years, there have been some attempts to gentrify the area, centering on Alexander and Lincoln Avenues, west of the Major Deegan Expressway. It is still in an embryonic state, and whether the trend will grow is uncertain. Mott Haven also has one of the largest concentrations of public housing in the city, with most of it located in the area immediately east of the Major Deegan, a block from the gentrifying area. The major commercial thoroughfares of Mott Haven are E. 149th and E. 138th Streets; Third, Brook, Willis, and St. Ann's Avenues; and Bruckner Boulevard. There's only one decent sized park—St. Mary's—and crime is a significant problem in Mott Haven. While, like the city as a whole, it's safer than, say, fifteen years ago and you can walk through it in the daytime, anyone who is unfamiliar with these streets should exercise caution. This is, of course, true of other South Bronx communities as well.

I begin my trip on the corner of Brown Place and E. 136th Street. There's a charter school—Mott Haven Academy—across the street from the pretty Public School 154, named after Jonas Bronck, as in “the Bronx.” The Haven Academy is beautifully painted with a large mural in bright colors: aqua, turquoise, purple, and pink.



Bertine Historic District

Painted on the upper part of the building are leaves and circles in various colors. Below, near the second and third floor is a bird that's very eye-catching because of its plumage and graceful body, notwithstanding that it's impossible to determine what species of bird it is. It's perched on a tree branch of gorgeous shades of blue and yellow. At the bottom of the wall are fanciful designs, some of which look like leaves. What makes this mural so different is its dreamlike quality. The colors are soft, and the bird is the fruit of someone's fertile imagination, especially the upturned beak.

Returning to 136th Street via Brown Place, I make a right and, after passing a brand-new playground built by the city, find myself in front of a group of handsome homes, part of the Bertine Historic

District. Built in the late nineteenth century by Edward Bertine, the homes are structures featuring nice stonework with orange and tan brickwork, mostly in the Queen Anne mode. What stands out is the architectural detail—the gables, arched doorways and windows, fan lights, ziggurat designs—with each home looking different. They are exceptional, but visitors must be cautious, for the block also has a NYCHA-owned and -operated tenement that is an active drug-dealing scene, notwithstanding the drug-free zone sign outside the building. Of course, this may well have changed since I last saw it, but it's symptomatic of a general problem in Mott Haven.

Turning left on Willis Avenue I go one block to E. 135th Street, turn right, and then left onto Lincoln Avenue. As I proceed under the highway I am entering the heart of what's considered to be gentrifying Mott Haven. This area was once a major center for piano manufacturing, and some enterprising real estate people have renamed it the "Piano District."

Many articles have been written about Mott Haven being the epicenter of the newest geographical trend in gentrification. They state that gentrifiers are moving in, mostly on the south side of the Major Deegan Expressway along Lincoln and Alexander Avenues, Bruckner Boulevard and the surrounding streets. Among the eateries touted are Charlie's Steakhouse, which occupies the first floor of the Clock Tower, originally a piano factory and now a residential building on the corner of Lincoln and Bruckner.

Leaving the waterfront area, I turn my attention to the nongentrified areas east of the Major Deegan, walking up Lincoln Avenue and turning right on E. 139th Street. I soon arrive at a small three-block historic district of handsome two-story row houses on Alexander Avenue between 138th and 141st Streets. This street was known variously in earlier times as "Politicians' Row," "Doctors' Row," and "the Irish Fifth Avenue." It also includes the historic St. Jerome's Roman Catholic Church, a large and handsome Italianate Revival and Spanish Colonial building, founded in 1899. But these three blocks are atypical for this area. About 80 percent of

Mott Haven, the part from 149th Street on the north, the Bruckner Expressway on the east, and the Major Deegan on the south and west, is very much a low-income area with little upscale shopping anywhere. The stores on Brook, Third, and Willis Avenues, as well as on 138th and 149th Streets, cater to a low-income population. Therefore, unsurprisingly, investment seems to be, as in Melrose, overwhelmingly in affordable housing. And today, such housing may have amenities like a small fitness center and a rooftop garden.

At 138th Street I turn left and pass block after block of plain and sometimes drab retail outlets that typify the community, with one exception. At number 570, on the corner of St. Ann's Avenue, my attention is drawn to a Chinese takeout joint, with a most unusual name: "Worship Super Heroes—Best Chinese Food in Bronx." This is probably a result of hearing the words "worship superheroes" in a positive context and thinking, why not use it as a name for the store? In any case, it's clearly eye-catching. I swing left onto Cypress Avenue, walking several blocks until it dead-ends at St. Mary's Street.

Here, I enter St. Mary's Park and immediately see a dog run that isn't well maintained. Several pit bulls are gamboling about, with their owners keeping a watchful eye on them. St. Mary's is the largest park in the area, and I stroll down a wide walkway running through the center of the park and flanked on both sides by majestic London plane trees. People are sitting on benches, talking, playing with their smartphones, and taking in the sun on a warm afternoon. Beyond the trees on the right side are sports fields and playgrounds. While one of the playgrounds has been renovated, the others are not in great shape, and the athletic court surfaces are cracked in many places. There are bleachers, but they have no seats. On the left is a maze of pathways winding through hilly and rocky semi-wild terrain interspersed with grassy spaces and trees, offering a commanding scenic view of the neighborhood. I ask a Jamaican couple whether the park is safe at night, and they say it is. But the consensus is that it's definitely safe in the daytime, but not at night. I exit the park at St. Ann's Avenue and walk up to 149th Street, the

major shopping thoroughfare and the border between Mott Haven and Melrose. In five minutes, I arrive at number 436, home of the Opera House Hotel.

A long time ago, in the early twentieth century, 149th Street was a center for theater and film. And one of the outstanding venues for live performances was the Bronx Opera House, which opened in 1913 and closed in 1920. It seated more than 1,800 people and was lavishly decorated in various colors, with silk damask curtains, beautiful ornamentation, and a stunning crystal chandelier. It had several reincarnations as a movie theater, Latin dance club, and Pentecostal church. Today, in its latest iteration, it has become a boutique lodging house. In its heyday, the Opera House was considered the best of several such spaces in the area. Today, nothing remains of it except the site itself. Don't expect a luxurious-looking lobby. It looks more like a Best Western hotel, but it provides a chance to connect with the old days. Among those who performed there were Lionel Hampton, Ethel Barrymore, Harry Houdini, and Fats Waller. And tourists may enjoy telling the folks back home, "Guess what? We stayed in the South Bronx."⁶

The rooms at the Opera House are quite nice, especially for about \$200 a night or even less, depending on how busy things are. One of its biggest markets seems to be people from out of town going to Yankee games desiring a nice place for half the price of a Manhattan hotel. Cabbies are reluctant to go there because the stereotype of the dangerous South Bronx remains alive in their minds and because they're unlikely to get a return fare to their favorite borough, Manhattan. On the other hand, it's a pretty quick ride by express subway to the 149th Street station and then less than a ten-minute walk. The community hums with activity until late at night, and the walk is quite safe on the populated streets. I cannot imagine that this area is big on nostalgia, but you can never tell. Many people grew up in the Bronx and can remember their shopping expeditions to the Hub (described in the Melrose section). And there are business people who need to be in the Bronx for one reason or another. The bottom

floor of the Opera House has several establishments including a Crunch gym, a pharmacy, and a medical care center. Metropolitan College is across the street; it's small, with seventeen classrooms for now, but its goal is to serve the local community, which sees such institutions as an expression of faith in the future of the South Bronx.

On another day I explore the portion of Mott Haven known as Port Morris, which turns into a very interesting experience. Its boundaries aren't really fixed, but it's fair to say that the main part lies generally between Bruckner Boulevard and the East River, from E. 141st to E. 132nd Street. Some have taken to referring to the gentrifying area as Port Morris, which sounds more catchy and upscale. They're free to do so, and the name may even take root, but in my view, it's a reach geographically. People also call this area the Piano District, hoping to attract well-to-do buyers, but that hasn't really caught on either.

My walk begins on 141st Street off Bruckner Boulevard as I head east toward the river. At the end of that brief jaunt I'm on Locust Avenue, which is where Silvercup Studios, whose headquarters are in Queens, has its Bronx location, running from 141st to 138th Streets. Fully operational, with "SILVERCUP" signs everywhere in large letters, it's a 115,000-square-foot facility with four separate studios. Access is restricted, with fences, gates, and guards, just like those you see in Los Angeles studios. It's located on the waterfront and on the other side of Locust as well. Its presence here gives the community some cachet and is a major boost to the local economy in terms of jobs and local businesses.

At 856 E. 136th Street I stop in front of the Bronx Brewery. Smaller breweries like this have become a hit in the city, especially in Brooklyn. This one offers a tasting room and tours. I speak with an owner, Patrick, a man wearing a New York Rangers jersey, with large, almost hypnotic, pale-blue eyes and a neatly trimmed brown beard.

"How would you say your beers differ from others?" I ask.

His answer almost humanizes the product, gives it real personality: "We like to say we're a no-nonsense craft beer, very

approachable, not as gimmicky, by which I mean throwing all different kinds of fruit in. We like to keep things straightforward, like the people who live in the Bronx. We always let the beer be the hero; we don't sacrifice it just for a gimmick." As he speaks, I remember having chocolate beer in Bushwick. It really didn't taste at all like beer, so I know what he means.

"How do you define a Bronx personality?"

"People who are very proud of where they live and who they are. People here in the Bronx are the kind who are gonna tell you how it really is."

The brewery produces about 15,000 barrels, or 200,000 cases a year, and tries to hire employees from the Bronx. It offers a number of different flavored beers and sells everywhere in the tristate area, and now in Massachusetts. This is the type of business for which a location like this works. It's not retail, so it's not dependent on people passing by; it's in an area zoned for industry, near the highway; and it's safe.

A block farther, between Willow Avenue and Bruckner Boulevard, I see four brick row houses in the Federal style, dating back to the 1920s. I wonder what it's like to live here, as there are very few private homes in Port Morris. Shopping requires a drive if it's a major trip. For small items, I guess you could walk to a nearby grocery store or under the expressway to St. Ann's or Cypress Avenue, perhaps a fifteen-minute trip. But there doesn't seem to be a real community here. I chat with an older man who has a small business that he runs here.

"Do you live here?"

"No, but I grew up in the Bronx, over on Hoe Avenue."

"What's it like to live here?"

"Well, it's quiet, but prices are going up. One of these homes sold not long ago for about 600K. They've doubled in the last couple of years. People were here for about a month, filming a movie. And they did another one two years ago." Clearly, this area is newsworthy. And, he adds, the neighborhood got better.

“What do you mean by better?”

“More white people moving in.” This is stated not in a necessarily racist way, but simply as a descriptive fact. White people have more money and more options. They live in safer and wealthier communities. Thus, if they move in, then the neighborhood must be getting better. He doesn’t know my views on the subject. All he sees is that, like him, I’m white.

Across the street from the homes, at number 728, in a large older commercial building, is a baseball school, called New York Sluggers, offering training, lessons, and programs for kids from the surrounding area and beyond. Inside the building is a fully equipped batting range. Some of these students seem to be well-heeled, with their moms pulling up in Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs to drop off their charges. To appeal to this market, the school advertises that it’s only seven minutes from the Upper East Side, namely 96th Street. It has five batting cages with pitching tunnels, and the kids can belong to travel teams. This is another example of the interesting enterprises that flourish here. The *New York Post* has long had a plant here, one owned by the Dow Jones Company. In an urban metropolis there are plenty of takers for property near Manhattan for the right price.

On the corners of Willow and 136th Street are two homeless shelters, one for women and one for men. They are not identified as such, and you couldn’t guess it just from walking by. People in the area appear to view it as a mixed blessing. A local worker who pointed it out to me said: “Around Christmastime we give them [homeless people] something. They used to hang around in an alleyway by the building, but we closed it off. I’ve used some of them a couple of times to load up trucks and to clean up the snow. I give them a couple of bucks and they’re happy.”

This is clearly a symbiotic relationship, with each group finding ways to benefit from the shelters’ presence here and with one group controlling behavior it doesn’t like. The worker also observes that a number of the occupants have prison records. But even this is mitigated by the relationships that have developed. Another man

told me: “My gate got stuck one night. It wouldn’t close and I had to leave it open. I came out here later at 10:30 p.m. and my heart was in my mouth. The cops came and checked the cameras. No one had even gone in there, much less taken anything. And they had to know it was open. They surely saw it since it’s right next to them.”

At 780 E. 133rd Street, I enter a well-configured tavern, with floor-to-ceiling windows and very modern, light-colored wood paneling, which turns out to be attached to the Port Morris Distillery next door. The owner, Rafael Barbosa, introduces himself to me.

“Who’s your main market?” I ask.

“New York City and anyone else who will buy what we produce. We do focus on the Puerto Rican market. Our main item is Pitorro Shine. Everywhere where liquor was once illegal, people made moonshine, and this is our special mix. The Hondurans have their moonshine; the people in Tennessee had theirs during Prohibition. Our history began in the seventeenth century in the mountains of Guyama, Puerto Rico. Our moonshine was made from sugar cane since that is a major crop in Puerto Rico, not molasses or corn mash. While Pitorro is technically a rum, it’s stronger than the typical 80 or 90 percent proof.”

“By the way, just to understand, what’s the difference between brewing and distilling?”

“Both require fermentation. When you’re brewing you simmer it warm. You’re cooking it. Alcohol, which is distilled, is actually vapor that results from a mixing and heating process. Once it hits cold air, it condenses and becomes alcohol.”

“Why did you come to Port Morris?”

“We had a different business here, which we closed, but we knew we wanted to remain in the area. I actually grew up in Manhattan and was the superintendent for a while of the NYCHA Frederick Douglass Houses.”

“What’s this bridge overhead, fifty yards away?”

“That’s the Hell Gate train. It goes over that bridge. The Acela runs by here all the time, and when it does, our distillery vibrates,

and that actually helps the distilling process by ‘agitating’ it. We’ve had people that have come here and said, ‘I saw your sign from the train.’”

I take a tour of the spanking-clean, gleaming distillery. Rafael describes it: “We have a German-made ultra-modern copper still. And here on the side we have an old moonshine still. It’s smaller, but it works in a similar way and was homemade by my partner, a sheet-metal fabricator. We don’t use it anymore. It’s just a trophy piece. This small silver still is what you would have seen in the mountains in the old days.”

It’s evident that Rafael takes great pride in what he does. He’s producing a distinctive blend, similar to rum, packaging it in beautiful bottles, and introducing the public to it. He’s also relating it to his own Puerto Rican culture and that island’s rich history. Moonshine is often associated with Appalachia, but Puerto Rico has its own region, history, and ways of producing alcohol. In addition, Rafael has remained close to his New York roots by creating a business here even as he seeks to expand his market elsewhere. Perhaps the most important component is that he really loves what he’s doing. It’s clear from his voice and from the fact that he uses the finest-quality products, such as his imported copper still. To top it off, the tavern he owns and operates next door is beautifully configured, with excellent food and service. It would fit in perfectly in the best neighborhoods of Manhattan, places like Midtown, Chelsea, or Murray Hill.⁷



- (A) Veterans' Memorial Garden
- (B) Fort Apache
- (C) La Resurreccion United Methodist Church
- (D) Old Bronx Borough Courthouse
- (E) "Heart of the Hood" Mural
- (F) Via Verde

MELROSE

THE BOUNDARIES OF MELROSE ARE, roughly, E. 163rd Street on the north, Prospect Avenue on the east, E. 149th Street on the south, and Park Avenue on the west. Melrose's modern history begins in the late nineteenth century, when it was home to a substantial German community that was anchored, in part, by the Haffen Brewing Company. In fact, beer gardens were quite popular then throughout the area. Melrose also became more urban during this period because of the construction of the elevated Third Avenue line, which was followed by the subway line in 1904. After World War II, it became predominantly Irish, Italian, Jewish, and, after 1960, Hispanic and Black. Many will see this pattern of ethnic succession as emblematic of how the South Bronx declined, but it's important to remember that for many Blacks and Hispanics, quite a few of them working- or middle-class, coming here was a dream come true, a chance to escape overcrowding in the lower-income neighborhoods of Manhattan. That this didn't happen is due largely to factors that developed or existed here and elsewhere in the city and in other metropolises, a number of which are discussed in the introduction.



The central business thoroughfare is 149th Street, also known as “the Hub.” Here, four major streets converge—149th Street and Melrose, Willis, and Third Avenues. It’s like a Times Square for shopping and restaurants, accessible to transportation from all points in the Bronx and beyond. Back in the 1930s, it was also an entertainment center, with both theaters and movie houses. The surrounding streets, especially Third Avenue, are also lined with stores. Melrose is undergoing a bit of a renaissance these days, with lots of new affordable housing, including many one- and two-family units. The northern part of Melrose between 161st and 163rd Streets has experienced quite a bit of affordable-housing construction in recent years. This upturn in available housing, in turn, is attracting new business investment. And it’s home to a large and still growing number of community gardens. Boricua College, an independent, private liberal arts school, has a beautiful new building with a nice plaza at 890 Washington Avenue near E. 162nd Street in an area called Melrose Commons. In short, Melrose is nothing like its past reputation, and the best way to appreciate that is to walk the community. Nostalgia lovers or just people who want to combine a Yankee game with an evening in the Bronx will find inexpensive lodging here, too. One place that’s clean and modern is the Umbrella Hotel, at 681 Elton Avenue, where rooms can be had for about \$150 a night.

I begin my first community trip here at the Andrew Jackson Houses, which run along Park Avenue between E. 156th and E. 158th Streets. It’s one of five NYCHA projects in Melrose. At 158th, I turn right, heading east. Quite a few of the old-style tenements remain here, mostly five-story walk-ups, but the majority of structures are attractive though not fancy two- and three-story brick homes. They’re generally two- to four-family affordable housing, and there are also apartment buildings, many with air-conditioning units for each room. These blocks are a perfect example of the dramatic changes that have occurred in the South Bronx. The buildings date back to the 1980s and more recent decades. Some are, in fact, quite new. Here and there

you can also find old private houses that go back a long way. I speak with a young Hispanic woman who lives in a three-apartment brick home, which she owns and rents out to two other families:

“How do you like it here?”

“Very much. It’s pretty safe and the mortgage was low, so I can pay it. The only problem is some crime from the Andrew Jackson Houses. And, you know, nothing is ever 100 percent safe. It’s New York,” she says, with a resigned shrug.

Regardless, I think to myself, this is a great improvement from the lunar landscape of burnt-out hulks of apartment buildings and empty lots that typified this area in the seventies and eighties. And yet, in a reminder that this community isn’t crime free, many of the low-story houses still have bars on the windows, most of which were put in during the 1980s.

On 158th, east of Courtlandt Avenue, I see, on my right, opposite a long row of beautiful townhouses, the Veterans’ Memorial Garden, also called the Courtlandt Avenue Association. I walk in through the unlocked gate in the back and meet an older Puerto Rican man, a volunteer, who’s doing spring-cleaning. He greets me and says: “In the summertime it’s gonna be real nice. We’re growing green peppers and eggplants. Then we give them away to the people who live around here. Here we have chickens, which lay big beautiful brown eggs. These cost money. My daughter, she pay eight dollars for a dozen in the store. And here we have apple trees and a peach tree.”

The place is quite attractive, with colorful little fences, wishing wells, and other decorative items that blend in nicely with the garden. There’s also a memorial to Puerto Rican war veterans in the form of two polished wooden benches with backs and a table in the middle. This is, in fact, a point of pride in the Puerto Rican communities. In many ways they are immigrants like Dominicans, El Salvadorans, Mexicans, and other groups, but there’s one huge difference: because Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, they are full citizens and therefore serve in the US armed forces, which they do with great pride. Many of the homes are owned by Puerto Ricans and fly Puerto

Rican, American, and armed forces flags, and it's the same in many of the community gardens in their communities.

"Do you live around here?" I ask the volunteer.

"No, I don't. I live on 151st Street."

"How long does it take you to get here?"

"Ten minutes. I live there thirty-two years."

It's interesting that in his mind, a ten-minute walk is not considered "around here." What it reveals is the relative nature of distances. In a more spread-out area, ten minutes would mean nothing, but the density of the Bronx in terms of population makes each block seem much farther away. The Bronx is, in fact, the third most densely populated county in the country. Two blocks away, and certainly seven, can be another world, given how many people live on each block. This concentration has a way of reducing the feeling of community to that of a block or two.

On the next cross street, Melrose Avenue, I see a nice-looking red-brick apartment building called the Peter Cintron Houses, with air-conditioning units beneath every window and an entrance on E. 158th Street. A replica building is next to it on E. 157th Street. Attractive-looking retail outlets take up the first floor—a nail salon, barbershop, insurance business, and an embroidery store. The setup reminds me of a typical block on gentrified Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem, though the community isn't nearly as safe. Entering the embroidery store I learn about high-priced hats called "distressed hats," meaning they have loose threads to make them look old. "I have hats like that that look old because they *got* old," I joke. "But don't worry; I'm not in this business." The Peter Cintron Houses looks pretty plain inside, no frills, but it's clean and well maintained—not surprising, as it's a NYC Housing Development Corporation building intended for lower-income wage earners looking for affordable rental housing.

Farther down, at 416 E. 158th, I see a pretty private house with an oval wooden sign on which is carved a Native American with feathers. Beneath it are the words "Fort Apache." That was the

famous moniker given to a nearby police precinct back in the “wild west” days when chaos ruled in the South Bronx. The Fort Apache precinct was a grim place surrounded by streets where violence was commonplace. But so many years have gone by that it’s now simply a reminder that those days are thankfully no more. I see three more community gardens near each other on various blocks and realize that they represent a cottage industry, all of them run and funded by the city with the intention of beautifying the area and giving residents pride in where they live.

On Elton Avenue and E. 156th Street, I stand in front of the La Resurreccion United Methodist Church. The architecture is Gothic, with bright red-painted bricks and white stone, arched stained-glass windows, and a rose window, all very quaint-looking. Established in 1878 to serve the German community that had settled here, it’s still in good condition. Amidst all the modern housing it’s a bit incongruous, though it can serve to remind people that the Bronx has a long history and that this nineteenth-century house of worship was constructed just after the Bronx first became a part of New York City.

At Third Avenue I turn left and in one block, where it meets E. 159th Street on an angle, I see the 42nd Police Precinct, a typical-looking precinct structure from the old days. This isn’t Fort Apache; that was the adjacent precinct, the 41st. Yet it has an important place in another sense, as an older cop explains to me: “We have tour buses, Greyhound buses, coming from all over the world, practically every day, especially from Spain. Over there, when they go to college, they have to see the movie *Fort Apache*. They want to see the South Bronx, and especially Fort Apache. The problem is, when they did the movie about it, they had to film part of it here because their building over on Simpson Street was too small. So the tourists come here, and we let them inside to look around a bit.”

The film, starring Paul Newman, appeared in 1981, despite objections by Bronx leaders about how it would damage the borough’s reputation. Predictably, not everyone’s happy about the tour buses. Sam Goodman, a city planner in the Bronx Borough President’s office, tells

me that many locals resent these tours because they remind people of how bad things once were. This was also the case with Harlem, but once Harlem became more gentrified, the resentment died down.

“Would you say that this community is safe today?” I ask the officer.

He appears a bit dubious as he responds: “It’s a lot better now than back then. You can walk safely in the daytime, and even at night if you’re careful and know how to walk the city at night—you know, take precautions.”

“Do these nicer buildings make the area safer?”

“Somewhat. People care more about the community when it’s nicer, but remember, when you take an apartment, you’re living next to somebody with Section 8, unemployed most likely, and that could be a problem.”

To the right of the police station, at 513 E. 161st Street is a still magnificent-looking white building created between 1905 and 1914 in the Beaux-Arts style. It’s known as the Old Bronx Borough Courthouse. Today, it’s been gutted from the inside, and the outside could use a makeover. Still, it’s well worth seeing for its external granite stone architecture, which includes an impressive statue of Lady Justice, flanked by two giant Tuscan columns. While the inside may be put to commercial use, with offices or a community facility, the exterior, a national and New York City landmark, will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

From here, I walk south down Brook Avenue as it crosses Third Avenue. After a block, on 159th Street, I see on the left a tall, imposing Gothic-style cathedral, Saints Peter and Paul’s Church, founded in 1932. It’s an outstanding structure, made of rectangular gray and brown stone in different sizes, with a very ornate entranceway. The statues of Jesus and other holy figures, along with an exquisitely designed rose window, definitely merit a look. All in all, it’s reminiscent of the types of Catholic cathedrals you see in Europe. The parochial school building, founded in 1912, with the separate “Boys” and “Girls” entrance signs is still there, but today it’s a charter school. I make a left on 159th Street and in one block turn right on to St. Ann’s Avenue.



Old Bronx Borough Courthouse

At 156th Street I make a left and go east one block, up a hill. Turning right on Eagle Avenue, I see on the right side of the street an amazing collection of ten old, mostly brick houses, built around 1901. They are painted in a rainbow of bright colors—yellow, blue, red, gold, gray, et cetera. They have arched doorways and windows and are two stories high. One woman, a Honduran lady, has lived here for at least half a century. On each side of her home, atop a brick pillar, is a gorgeously designed stone or granite gnome. Three signs with arrows near the home’s entrance point to the house. One says “gone fishing,” a second sign reads “gone paddling,” and a third claims “gone surfing.” I speak with William, a friendly Puerto Rican, who’s just entering the house next door.

“Excuse me, but can you tell me about these houses, please? They’re so unusual-looking.”

“Sure. I bought mine ten years ago and I paid 150K for it. Today, it goes for more than half a million. There are three bedrooms on the first floor and three on the second floor and I rent out the basement.”

“What’s it like to live here?”

“It’s the best. You won’t find a nicer block in the Bronx. It’s very quiet and very safe. All the people on this block, they look out for each other. We are friends and it’s a real community. And the police patrol here regularly too. We know them and they know us.”

I wouldn’t say that these are the nicest houses in the borough, but what matters is he thinks they are, and the reality is that in this community they are among the prettiest. There is a feeling of peacefulness here because traffic is practically nonexistent and the street is sort of hidden away. At one point, Eagle Avenue has its own little bridge as it crosses high above 158th Street, thus leaving the visitor a bit mystified as to how to access it. I found it on a map, but because I was driving, it took a little while before I figured out how to get there, given the numerous one-way streets here. Gentrifiers would probably find this an ideal home because it’s quaint and only a few minutes from the Jackson Avenue subway station. The only problem is that most of the stock available here is affordable housing for low-wage earners. And with so few houses, there isn’t much incentive for entrepreneurs to create the stores and shops—restaurants, cafes, boutiques, and the like—that gentrifiers like. Regardless, seeing these homes is worth the trip.

Just as I’m leaving I ask another Puerto Rican homeowner about his Yankees hat: “I see you have a Yankee hat, but it’s not the usual navy blue; it’s a camouflage color. How come?” “My son got it for me as a present,” he replies. “When he told a friend who makes hats that I was a war veteran, the guy decided to make me an army camouflage hat. I love it.” This gift combines two loves of many Puerto Ricans, their patriotism for the United States, which has given them special standing among the many groups who have immigrated here, plus

their love affair with the Bronx Bombers in the borough with the largest Puerto Rican population in the city. Yet it's more than what they do for the Yankees by supporting them. It what the Yankees do for the Puerto Ricans here by deciding to remain in the Bronx, even as their well-heeled fans must make the trip from Westchester, Manhattan, and towns in New Jersey and Connecticut to see them play. And when the Yankees doubled down by building the new stadium only a few blocks away—in the South Bronx, at that—they sent yet another message: that the Bronx is their true home. These two considerations are strengthened even more when Puerto Ricans get discount tickets to the games because they are veterans.

From here it's back down the hill to St. Ann's, a quick right and a left onto 157th Street. Just beyond Melrose Avenue I see a mural dedicated to the memory of a Hispanic-looking man named Cisco, who died in 2016 at the age of thirty-seven. The colors are mostly red, green, black, and tan. An inscription reads "Heart of the Hood." I also see dice and rolls of hundred-dollar bills. Perhaps he enjoyed shooting craps. On the right in big red letters framed against a white background are the dates of his life—1978–2016. There's also a parchment scroll drawing on which are the words: "Money come & go, but Legends Live Forever." I chat with two Hispanic men who live near the mural. They tell me that Cisco was shot to death one night as he walked home. I think to myself, at least people did something to remember him. In fact, the Bronx has hundreds of such murals.

As it turns out, there's more to the story, but I learned that only because the *New York Times* chose to make a major story out of it as an example of what life can be like here. As it turned out, Francisco Perez, a.k.a. Cisco, was a street-level heroin dealer who did business at Melrose and 157th for many years. He had expensive tastes, as if to make up for an impoverished life as a child, born to a mother who used heroin and died when Cisco was thirteen and a father whose name he did not even know. Then, as he approached middle age, he advised young people not to follow his path and to choose honest work instead. But it was too late for him. He kept dealing

and met his end at the hands of rival drug dealers, his body riddled with bullets. There are still plenty of people here whose lives revolve around drugs, but thankfully they are fewer in number. These murals remind us of how bad things once were. I ask the men about the community and receive an instructive response.

“It’s better than before. People are living in nicer places. But it’s still a lot of the same bad people. Look, a girl was taken to the roof of the Andrew Jackson Houses two blocks away last week and raped. Of course, nothing’s ever really safe in New York. And the only project I know that’s safe is the Roberto Clemente Houses in Williamsburg where the Jews [read: Hasidim] live. They can keep their baby carriages in the lobby and no one will steal them.” Underlying this is the resigned view that in a big city you can’t feel completely safe anywhere, even in a safe community.

My trip ends on a somewhat hopeful note as I visit the award-winning Via Verde development at Brook Avenue near 156th Street. It’s one of a number of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design)-certified apartment buildings in the Bronx. It’s a beautiful group of buildings that emphasize healthy living as the rationale for much of its design. Health is a major issue in lower-income communities, where obesity, asthma, and poor diets are common. There are ceiling fans in the hope that people will limit their use of air conditioners, along with rooftop gardens, plus a health education and fitness center. The buildings are configured in a way that allows maximum use of sunlight. At the broader level there’s a South Bronx nonprofit organization called *Nos Quedamos*, or *We Stay*, dedicated to supporting ideas about healthy and sustainable community growth. Its members consist of business people, homeowners, and residents in general. Groups like this make an emphatic statement that people are determined to improve their neighborhood and infuse it with new life.

I visited Via Verde and was impressed by the way it looked. But appearances don’t always tell the whole story. I speak with one

Hispanic resident, a professional with small children, who tells me that there are problems.

“Look, it’s a nice place, but that isn’t enough. You need professionals to plan activities that bring people together. Without that you don’t have a community. You see, I’m an owner and I’m friendly with other people who own their apartments. And then you have renters who live on the other side of the development. We have nothing to do with them, but some of us would like to meet them. But there’s no vehicle through which to do it.”

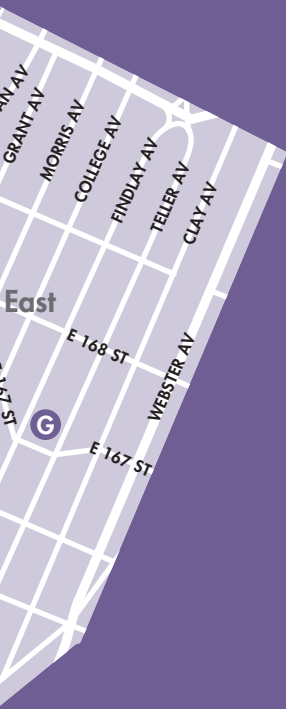
“Have you asked management to try to make something happen socially through programs?”

“Yes, but they haven’t done it yet. Hopefully they will. But that’s not the big problem. What’s bothering me and others is that just a few blocks from here, they’re building a facility for people with HIV-related illnesses, and we are very concerned about what this will do to the community. And then there’s the fact that Rikers Island is being broken up. It’s moving into different communities in New York City. And one of the new facilities is going to be ten blocks from here.”

She’s right, unfortunately. Via Verde, built with the best of intentions, cannot fight city hall, as they say. These decisions will provoke protests, and the projects may be scaled down but probably not enough to have much of an effect on community stability. In a sense, history is repeating itself as city officials, looking for an easy solution, place controversial projects into communities that don’t have the clout to resist. Unfortunately, the South Bronx is one of those places. The tragedy is that “solutions” like this dash the hopes of so many people who have made enormous efforts to reinvent the borough into an attractive location for working- and middle-class people. The same goes for gentrifiers, who have begun moving into neighboring Mott Haven. But Melrose is different in this regard. In addition to what has already been said, the city has bought up so much of the land that developers who want to attract market-rate buyers have little to offer them.



CONCOURSE



- A Thomas Gardens
- B River Avenue Skateboard Park
- C Macombs Dam Park
- D Executive Towers
- E "Fish Building"
- F Bette's Rose Garden
- G Daughters of Jacob (Geriatric Center)
- H Andrew Freedman Home
- I Lorelei Fountain in Joyce Kilmer Park

THE BOUNDARIES OF CONCOURSE ARE E. 170th Street on the north, Webster and Park Avenues on the east, E. 149th Street on the south, and the Harlem River on the west. As the map shows, this large area is divided into three subsections, Concourse Village, Concourse East, and Concourse West. The first contains an area that is home to many employees of the court system and people who are employed at Yankee Stadium, along with thousands of other local residents. It is said to be gentrifying, revolving especially around the Grand Concourse, with its nicer apartments and parks, and that may turn out to be the case. It's also important to note that Black and Hispanic gentrifiers are choosing to live here just as much as white gentrifiers. In short, gentrifiers can come from many backgrounds. It also helps that the Grand Concourse, from 153rd Street to 167th, has been designated a historic district.⁸ As it happens, the name Concourse Village also applies to a New York State Mitchell-Lama development located in this section. The other two parts of the community have many lower-income residents and tend to resemble the demographics of the South Bronx in general.

The history of this area follows the familiar cycle of succession. First, Native Americans lived here, then the Dutch, followed by the British, and then after the Revolutionary period, the Americans have ruled the roost. For a good part of the nineteenth century, the Morris family owned much of the land. After the development of transportation in the form of rail and subway lines, the population greatly expanded. Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians were the major ethnic groups who settled here. In the late 1950s and 1960s the community became home to Hispanics and Blacks, and in the early 1970s a period of steep decline began as the poverty caused by lack of opportunity led to crime, drugs, and abandonment of buildings by landlords. Even established complexes like Executive Towers on the Concourse felt the effects, and the prices of apartments there went down accordingly.

Beginning with the twenty-first century, crime began to decline throughout the city, and this community became more attractive to middle-class professionals. Some liked the charm of the older Grand Concourse buildings; others were enticed by new housing developments. Also, the designation of sixty-one older apartment buildings along the Concourse as landmarks gave the community a certain degree of cachet. It was also part of a changing perspective by a newer generation of New Yorkers who welcomed diversity so long as their communities were safe. Many of today's residents come from outside the area—journalists, lawyers, businesspeople, and the like—and they are a multicultural group who wish to take advantage of easy access to Manhattan, lower rents, and the new stores that have been sprouting in response to this change. The area that has shifted the most in this direction is Concourse Village, but there has been some spillover to the edges of the Concourse East and West areas. These two portions, however, are not affluent on the whole, and it remains to be seen what will transpire there.

One anchor of the community is Yankee Stadium, which attracts millions of visitors annually to that immediate area. This keeps the area “in play” as a possible community to live in. Another is the

numerous courthouses and administrative buildings associated with them. There's also the Bronx Museum of the Arts, another attraction that enhances the community's reputation. Hostos Community College, part of the CUNY system, serves the local population and beyond and is situated on the Grand Concourse at E. 149th Street. It's named after Eugenio Maria de Hostos, a Puerto Rican educator. Most of its students are Hispanic, and it brings cultural access to the local community through its well-regarded Center for the Arts, which includes an excellent art gallery and which has been offering programs for the students and the community for decades.

The major parks include Joyce Kilmer, Franz Sigel, Macombs Dam, and Mullaly Parks, quite a few for one community, all of them with much to offer and well-maintained. Crime has gone down quite a bit in recent years and it is one of the safer parts of the South Bronx. The major thoroughfares are the Grand Concourse; Jerome, River, Morris, and Webster Avenues; and 170th, 167th, and 161st Streets. Jerome, Inwood, and Cromwell Avenues are industrial streets, with Jerome specializing in automobile-related shops—body work, radiators, alignments, tires, spare parts, et cetera. In fact, people come here from everywhere in the tristate area to have their cars repaired at cut-rate prices.

CONCOURSE VILLAGE

I peek inside the lobby of 750 Grand Concourse near E. 156th Street, an Art Deco structure entered via a steel door with glass bricks on the side that allow light to flow into the lobby. It has a terrazzo floor, with panels in the shape of palm leaves. The lobby is in the round, encircling a large pillar. It's pretty well preserved. There's a seat and desk for a security guard or concierge, but no one's there. Maybe they're literally out to lunch. I've gained entry by following someone else in who apparently doesn't think I'm a mugger. When you're my age you're invisible, a distinct advantage when doing fieldwork.

Next, I stop in at 840 Grand Concourse. A walk-up complex, built in 1923, it was considered one of the first examples of what we consider garden apartments. Also called Thomas Gardens, it's named after Andrew Thomas, the landscape architect who laid out the elaborate gardens. Sam Goodman, an urban planner in the Bronx borough president's office, is with me for part of the time as I explore the Concourse areas. Extremely knowledgeable about many aspects of the borough, he weighs in here.

"This building, like many in this area, is shaped in the form of an H. It has cross-ventilation, meaning windows letting in air on both sides, as opposed to the Lower East Side, which didn't have this sort of layout. The market was working-class families, and it was funded by John D. Rockefeller Jr., one of the few complexes financed by him in the Bronx. A long time ago, there was a brook running through it, with Japanese fish in it and a little bridge going over it."

My next stop is 888 Grand Concourse, an Art Deco gem, on the southeast corner of E. 161st Street. The *New York Times* writer Constance Rosenblum has penned an outstanding book about the Grand Concourse, with its six lanes for cars and promenades for walkers. Her description of this building in her volume, *Boulevard of Dreams*, is as good as any I've seen: "a medley of curves, scallops and concave spaces executed in polished black granite, bronze, stainless steel, marble mosaic, and gold stripes that was unique on the boulevard." Some of the designs aren't so clearly defined after all these years, but there's still enough worth seeing, and there's even talk about restoring parts of it. I would add that mirrors surround the lobby, with its round ceiling-light fixtures, and there's a huge golden bowl in the center of the lobby made from mosaic tiles of the same color.

Crossing 161st Street, I pass, on the northeast corner, what was once the finest hotel in the Bronx, the Concourse Plaza Hotel. Today, it's a housing complex for low-income senior citizens. What was at one time an elegant ballroom is now an open-air space, with some trees and benches for the residents. On the west side of the

(continued...)

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