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Old, New in East Harlem

By LANA BORTOLOTT



Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal

Pedestrians cross Lexington Avenue in East Harlem.

'When Manhattan Neighborhood Network, a public-access center for cable TV, expanded to the East Side last year by taking over a decommissioned firehouse at 175 E. 104th St., it sent a signal that East Harlem was ready for prime time.



Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal

La Casa Azul bookstore on East 103rd Street

A 2½-year restoration of the firehouse kept the historic shell but completely retrofitted the interior with production equipment and high-definition studios for use by area residents. But more importantly, it gave the neighborhood access to technology that has long eluded it.

"This studio is squarely aimed at breaking the digital divide," said Daniel Coughlin, MNN's executive director.

The restoration, however, is also a metaphor for much of what's happening in the neighborhood these days, as East Harlem becomes increasingly gussied up while its residents struggle to avoid the pitfalls of gentrification.



Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal

Manhattan Neighborhood Network's El Barrio Firehouse Center on East 104th Street.

As development creeps north of 96th Street—the historic dividing line between Spanish Harlem and Yorkville—residents and business owners worry the cultural heritage that so keenly defines the neighborhood will erode. Many locals say they don't want to see a replication of the gentrification on the Lower East Side.

"We need places that are owned and operated by people who know what the community wants and who are answering the call for things that reflect their culture and history," said Marina Ortiz, executive director of East Harlem Preservation, an advocacy group that promotes the neighborhood's heritage.

Aurora Anaya-Cerda, a West Coast transplant, opened La Casa Azul bookstore in East Harlem in a two-level brownstone at 143 E. 103rd St. 10 months ago. She was initially inspired to open her store by what she couldn't find—anything dedicated to Latino literature—and as she developed programming around her customers' requests, she realized a greater need.



FDNY

Firehouse Engine 53, on 175 E. 104th Street.
Published Credit: FDNY



Mark Abramson for The Wall Street Journal

A public art space near East 105th Street and
Lexington Avenue.

"There's nothing that supported the literary arts in the way I was hoping to find," she said. "We have locals who come in and say 'we've been here for generations and haven't had a space like this.' It is a mission to be part of the community, but a major component of that is to be receptive to the community."

The store has grown into a cultural gathering spot that has hosted 200 events such as children's workshops, cooking classes, readings and film screenings.

The balance between new development and such organic, community-based growth is but one issue here as multigenerational shops are replaced by polished retail spaces.

When his landlord raised the rent, Jorge Vargas, a third-generation botanica-shop owner who grew up in El Barrio, recently relocated his shop from his longtime space on East 104th St. to 1702 Lexington Ave.

"I think it's going too quick," Mr. Vargas said. What he called "the fever" over redevelopment started in West Harlem and it was only a matter of time before it came to East Harlem, he said.

Around the corner from his old shop at 1636-1642 Lexington Ave., a row of renovated retail space awaits new tenancy. Across the street a Super Fi Emporium supermarket is under construction below a new 42-unit condominium development.

George Sarkissian, Community Board 11's district manager, said those movements, in addition to larger issues such as the city housing authority's proposal to lease parcels of the Washington House public-housing complex to private developers, amount to a "crazy amount of development for a tiny area."

"Lexington Avenue is pushing up very quickly, the Upper East Side is clearly extending [and] the council district lines are expanding," he said. "It's the cumulative effect we're keeping an eye on."

El Barrio's Artspace PS 109, a \$52-million development that broke ground last fall and will provide 90 affordable living and workspace in perpetuity to artists, may help allay some concerns about displacement, but those projects are few and far between.

"There might be an imbalance because we're gaining market-rate apartments and losing affordable housing," Mr. Sarkissian said.



But while it's still possible to purchase a townhouse in East Harlem for less than \$1.5 million, stylish apartments in new developments are more numerous. Last fall, two new condominium buildings came to market: Lexington Hill, offering two-bedroom units priced between \$708,000 and \$1.08 million, and one-bedrooms for between \$508,000 and \$588,000; and Copper Hill, where 26 units are sold or in contract, said Brian Meier, a Douglas Elliman broker representing Copper Hill.

Lee Williams, a broker with Rutenberg Realty, said it's not just value driving people to East Harlem. "If you're looking for a non-Disney-fied New York, it's still there," he said.

And it is that authenticity that people like Gonzalo Casals, deputy executive director at El Museo del Barrio, wish to protect.

"You hear terms like 'urban pioneer' and 'the last frontier' and it sounds like no one is living here, but there's very strong cultural identity here," said Mr. Casals.

"The question is how can we make this the better neighborhood that we all deserve without creating displacement?"