

New York Times

# *Turf; Dreams, and Now Hope, Among the Ruins*

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EXPOSED steel girders stand out rudely against the sky, rusted reminders of what were once finely detailed brownstones. On the same block, the interiors of prime examples of High Victorian architecture are mostly gone. The evening light shines through Gothic windows missing their glass.

For 17 years, residents of the Mount Morris Park neighborhood in Harlem have lived with the eerie block facing their park -- the block they call "the Ruins." No one passing would dream that these derelict brownstones -- seized in the 1960's by the state for an urban renewal project, which never happened -- were once the centerpiece of the neighborhood's landmark district.

But now the renters and homeowners -- a hearty group of urban pioneers who fought to restore this block and the blocks around it -- say they are finally starting to imagine their world with the Ruins reclaimed.

"We've had so many disappointments that 'hope' is not the word," said Conrad Neblett, 42, an actor who has lived there for seven and a half years. "But there's a light I begin to see at the end of the tunnel. It doesn't matter what politician did what. The time is right."

A number of significant projects are coming to Mount Morris, a half-square-mile area loosely bordered by Park Avenue, 125th Street, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and 116th Street. In this neighborhood -- where beauty ignores the blight next door -- incomes, rents and house prices are rising. Middle-class professionals, who came to the more pristine Hamilton Heights blocks to the north in search of a mansion, are buying the cheaper brownstones here, "the finest brownstones in the city," said Karen Ansis, a director at the New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Nobody knows how Mount Morris Park -- officially renamed Marcus Garvey Park in 1973, although the neighborhood still goes by Mount Morris -- got its name. It was originally conceived as one of Manhattan's little squares, said Andrew S. Dolkart, an

architectural historian. Wherever the "Morris" came from, the "Mount" seems obvious: there is a huge craggy rock ledge in the middle of the park.

The area to the west of the park -- where the grandest brownstones stand -- was one of the first in Harlem to be developed for housing after the Els came in; the rows along Mount Morris Park West were constructed around 1885. White Protestants came first, Mr. Dolkart wrote, followed by Eastern European Jews and, in the 20's, African-Americans.

Now, there is a feeling among the residents of Mount Morris that all of Harlem is being rediscovered: Disney is coming to Harlem to be part of an entertainment megamall; Radio Shack and Home Depot are imminent. This, as one local resident said, is "the second Harlem Renaissance."

It could also be the renaissance of Mount Morris.

Last week, Andrew M. Cuomo, the Secretary of the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, announced a \$4.65 million grant that will help to build 119 three-family row houses, near Marcus Garvey Park, for low- and moderate-income residents. The state will match that with \$3 million; \$7 million more will come from the city and \$31 million from private developers.

Another public-private development, Anchor Partnership Plaza, will create 600 co-op apartments -- including penthouses -- for buyers with varied incomes. Beneath these co-ops will be a retail complex with tenants like the Gap and Starbucks.

But the most exciting report, Mount Morris pioneers say, is that all but one of the 10 state-owned houses that make up the Ruins will be transformed, turning the eyesore into 34 luxury condominiums.

This week, in an interview, a spokesman for Charles A. Gargano, the chairman of the Empire State Development Corporation, confirmed that the Ruins project is going forward. The development team for the \$6 million renewal has been chosen, he said, and a ground breaking is scheduled for this fall.

"Mr. Gargano saw the Ruins as a betrayal in that community," said Randy Daniels, the senior vice president in charge of economic revitalization for Empire.

Neighborhood residents say that despite their initial skepticism, they believe the Ruins will once again become homes. "We've been very vocal at every step," said Kellyn Tillers, 35, who represents the Mount Morris Park Community Improvement Association in talks about the fate of the Ruins.

"I believe it will happen," she said, sitting with members of the group in the spacious third-floor apartment she rents in a brownstone on West 121st Street.

"It will happen because the people here were pioneers," she said. "They put down roots that finally ripened. The people moving here -- that's why the developers are rushing in here now."

DR. JOAN DAWSON, who runs the federally financed Desegregation Assistance Center, based at New York University, bought her house on Malcolm X Boulevard in 1983. "We've seen organizations sort of 'spot develop,' where one house is renovated but another is abandoned," she said. "So, before the renovation is finished, the rest of the block is in a state of blight. The attempts they made, at best, weren't working."

In the Mount Morris area, the rate of home ownership is one of the lowest in the city, which itself has one of the lowest in the country: 6.5 percent in Mount Morris, compared with 29 percent citywide, compared with 48 percent nationally.

"We all wanted to see home ownership increase," said Steven Brown, the vice president of the New York City Housing Partnership, the nonprofit agency that, along with the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development, is spearheading both the federally sponsored new housing and Partnership Plaza, as well as many of the area's rehabilitation projects.

Dr. Dawson, 61, who rents out part of her grand Queen Anne-style house at the corner of 122d Street and Malcolm X Boulevard, credits the recent improvements in Mount Morris to the Republican Administrations of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and Gov. George E. Pataki. Others credit the booming economy and the Clinton Administration.

"There is an aliveness now," she said. "Harlem has lived with a myth that everything is terrible and that there is no middle class up here. But as people venture up here for our annual house tour -- those house tours have done a lot -- they see the beauty."

To Secretary Cuomo, it was the sheer number of new home-ownership development and retail projects that clinched the decision to award the community the \$4.65 million. Like Dr. Dawson, he had seen too many single-house renovations, followed by a double or triple abandonment.

"I'm a big believer in critical mass," he said. "If you have a distressed neighborhood, and you do something very small, it doesn't turn around the dynamic."

The Federal money for the new construction is being directed at vacant land created during the 1960's urban renewal. It will be used primarily to reduce the income necessary to qualify to buy the houses: from \$32,000 to \$25,000 a year, with an upper limit of \$70,000.

With the subsidies, the three-family houses will sell for about \$230,000. Under the plan, the buyers will live in one apartment and rent out the other two: two-bedroom apartments will rent for \$900 to \$1,200 a month.

The first of the three-section development, the 135-unit Shabazz Gardens, is scheduled for a ground breaking next month. Madison Park Homes, the next phase, will follow.

Maple Court, sponsored by nearby North General Hospital and built in 1995, served as a catalyst, and now a co-op development called Maple Plaza is going up next door.

"That was a real issue, the market for home ownership, particularly co-ops, in this part of Harlem," said Richard T. Roberts, the Commissioner of the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. Now, there is no longer a question: his department has helped to renovate 1,365 houses in the Mount Morris area -- all sold.

Anchor Plaza, the housing and retail development, will be located at the site of the 116th Street outdoor vendors' market. When the plaza is built, merchants will move to a more permanent souk across the street.

While Shabazz Gardens will incorporate Islamic symbols in its design (a sponsor is the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz mosque), longtime residents of Mount Morris want to see more of the late 19th century.

And these residents are not afraid of making their feelings known. "I am optimistic, but cautiously," said Patricia Pates Eaton, the founder of the Mount Morris community association, who owns an elegant neo-Grec town house facing the park.

Mrs. Eaton was here in 1981 when the state wanted to build a mental health center on the site of three brownstones along Mount Morris Park West. The community stopped the project -- but by then the three brownstones had been demolished.

Three years later, the state Corrections Department turned No. 10 Mount Morris Park West into a minimum security women's prison. In 1990, the feisty residents stopped yet another state plan: to expand the prison to the vacant but still-standing row houses to the south.

"I was here when they ripped off the facades to put in the mental health center -- that was one of the catalysts that really united us," she said. "The coming of the jail brought us into a marriage. We just couldn't believe in our entire landmark block they would put a jail!"

Now, the residents will turn their attention to getting rid of the prison at No. 10. A study prepared for Chase Bank by the New School for Social Research and City College, called "Rethinking the Ruins," discusses a proposal for luxury condominiums in Nos. 1 through 9 Mount Morris Park West. It also suggests new uses for No. 10 -- including a bed and breakfast.

The plans are all intriguing, the neighbors say. Yet, as they point out, they have been excited before: dreams have drifted around the place for decades. "When I see somebody actually dig a hole in the ground, then I'll believe it," Mrs. Eaton said. "When I see some dirt dug up, then I'll say, 'Gee whiz, they are getting busy.' "

The annual Mount Morris house tour will include 10 houses, among them Mrs. Eaton's, on June 14, 11 A.M. to 4 P.M. For information: (212) 369-4241.