

**The New York Times**

January 21, 2007

## **For the Bold, Bargains Near a Harborside Park**

By C. J. HUGHES

THE factors luring homeowners like David Gonzalez into Bridgeport — a city whose persistent problems with crime, corruption and decay have at times subjected it to derision — offer strong evidence that those problems might be conquerable after all.

Last May, shrugging off the negatives, Mr. Gonzalez bought a luxury condominium in the city's downtown, a neighborhood with a chevron shape, sweeping from the compact office district that abuts the McLevy Green and including the more rough-and-tumble South End.

He moved from Greenwich, which can fairly be described as Bridgeport's diametrical opposite, so the new neighborhood, with its shabby multifamily homes and rubble-choked empty lots, took getting used to, he said. Yet neither Greenwich nor South Norwalk, where he owns an insurance agency, had anything remotely comparable in his price range, either in size or quality.

For \$275,000, Mr. Gonzalez was able to buy an apartment with three bedrooms, a bath with a whirlpool tub, and 17-foot rafter-lined ceilings arching over 1,300 square feet, with touches of marble and granite throughout. Circular marks on the original wood floors in the apartment, where he lives alone, show where sewing machines were once bolted, providing evidence of the brick building's past as a clothing factory.

Nevertheless, Mr. Gonzalez said, acknowledging this southeastern city's reputation as Connecticut's most dangerous, "everyone thinks I'm nuts" for moving here.

Last year, according to Nelson Ladue, a Police Department analyst, there were 30 murders — 10 more than in 2005. So far this year, there have been three. But of all those crimes, only two occurred in the downtown neighborhood, Mr. Ladue said.

As Mr. Gonzalez now remembers his apartment search, "When I first started looking, I thought, 'There's no way I'm going up there.'"

What won him over, in a pattern that city boosters hope will be repeated, was the conviction — based on a thorough look around — that Bridgeport finally seems to be taking self-improvement seriously.

Across the downtown neighborhood, buildings that sat vacant for years, many of them architectural treasures, are being redeveloped. Theaters are being refurbished; restaurants, art galleries, and shops are being reborn; and new brick sidewalks have been added.

At the same time, a policy of improving public transportation and encouraging commuters to rely more on it has resulted in connecting walkways between trains and

ferries and, soon, a bus station. A project to widen Interstate 95, which cuts through the neighborhood's midsection, has also been completed.

The only missing element is the residents. But developers, city leaders and business owners express confidence that they will soon discover downtown in the way that, a few years ago, they flocked to Black Rock, a neighborhood to the west.

If so, they would be downtown's first sustained wave of arrivals since the early 1980s, when people began fleeing — though there were holdouts like Nathaniel Plotkin, a retired lawyer, who since 1975 has owned a 19th-century brick row house.

The house, which he shares with his wife, Tatyana Stepanova, an artist, originally cost \$15,000; a \$100,000 renovation, he said, has raised its value to \$350,000.

As for whether the promised improvements will make a difference in the neighborhood, "It's too early to tell," said Mr. Plotkin, who was born in Bridgeport. But whatever happens, it won't change the fact that most places he regularly visits, are a 10-minute stroll away.

"I like it just the way it is," he said.

### **What You'll Find**

The maze of one-way streets squeezed between the Pequonnock River and Route 8 (which doubles as Route 25) is made more difficult to navigate by scaffolding, cranes and Dumpsters, all evidence of the neighborhood's many works in progress.

In fact, if every project currently filed with the city's Planning Department comes to fruition, downtown could have as many as 1,000 new apartments in the next few years.

More than 50 percent of the ones coming onto the market in the near future, however, will be rentals, a consequence of developers' accepting large government subsidies, brokers and city leaders said.

One developer, Urban Green Builders, is creating 117 rental units in the former CityTrust building, whose Art Deco details include blue-and-green fleurs-de-lis on the facade.

There are also apartments for sale. A developer called E/N Properties plans 38 one- and two-bedroom luxury condos, priced from \$165,000 to \$399,000, in a five-story former medical building. Construction begins in February, with closing expected for the end of the year, said Victor Naar, E/N's principal.

Lofts on Lafayette, the eight-building, 140-unit complex where Mr. Gonzalez lives, is now converting the former Jefferson School on Myrtle Avenue into 27 condos, said Aurora Leigh, a spokeswoman.

Also in the South End, on Main Street, developers have floated plans to build luxury condos at the Remington factory, where razor blades used to be made.

Of course, wood-frame homes have long characterized the South End, in addition to older row houses and attached brick co-ops. Single-family detached homes are rare.

Downtown has one remaining housing project, Marina Village, which spreads out between Park Avenue and Iranistan Avenue (named for a P. T. Barnum mansion that burned down in the 19th century).

### **What You'll Pay**

The average condo price, \$250,000, is a bargain compared with those in other Gold Coast cities like Stamford, trading about 30 percent cheaper, brokers said. Even in neighboring Black Rock, 1,000-square-foot condos cost \$350,000.

The multifamily homes of the South End are popular with investors looking to tap a rental market bolstered by the presence of the University of Bridgeport, which has a constant need for student housing.

A one-bedroom rental costs about \$1,000 a month, leasing agents say. Rentals in multifamily dwellings cost about the same amount, but usually offer more space.

These homes, many built in the 1920s, typically sell for about \$300,000 and include three units across 3,000 square feet, each with two bedrooms and a bath, but usually without a garage or parking, says Paul Yasutake, a broker with Park Avenue Realty who has been selling downtown homes for seven years.

One financial downside, according to several brokers, is relatively high taxes. The dearth of industry and the depletion of city coffers through official corruption have inflated such costs. Taxes on multifamily homes, for instance, are about \$6,000 a year; on one-bedroom luxury condos they run as high as \$1,500.

But the taxes are more than offset by low prices, according to Michael Nidoh, the city's planning director.

And, as Mr. Yasutake pointed out, "People also buy down here to be near Seaside Park, which is one of the most beautiful in the state."

### **What to Do**

That park, a thin ribbon with a beach that wraps along the coast for 370 acres, was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and in winter, the only company for runners and bikers are gulls riding the breeze.

Inland are stretches with boarded-up shops, interspersed with the occasional tattoo parlor. Yet a brighter spot, on Fairfield Avenue, is Bijou Square, a large building named for its 1910 movie theater — which Mary Witkowski, head of historical collections at the

Bridgeport Public Library, described as the first one in the country built specifically to show films.

Café Roma, an Italian restaurant in the building, has attracted a lively bar scene since opening two years ago; in March it will gain a next-door neighbor, a branch of Two Boots, the popular Manhattan pizzeria.

Also in March, a refurbished 230-seat theater will open in Bijou Square, joined by two smaller theaters upstairs; all will show independent films and revivals, said Philip Kuchma, president of the Kuchma Corporation, one of the city's largest private landlords.

Ralph and Rich's, which serves Italian food on white tablecloths, recently reopened in a larger space.

### **The Schools**

Some of downtown's new arrivals have said they plan on moving by the time they have children — a trend supported by education data.

Public elementaries are Columbus, which teaches pre-kindergarten through Grade 6, and Roosevelt, which continues through Grade 8.

Also, Cesar A. Batalla School, a primary school that goes through eighth grade, opened in January, and other new schools are planned.

Of the three high schools, the one that serves downtown is Bassick High, at 1181 Fairfield Avenue. Enrollment is 1,279. A shortage of teachers this year means no Advanced Placement courses, said John J. Ramos Sr., the superintendent.

On the SAT, the class of 2006 scored 359 on the math section, 375 on reading and 385 on writing, as compared with state averages of 516 math, 512 reading and 511 writing.

Of 152 graduates last year, 76 percent attended two- or four-year colleges. "They're working really hard over there," Mr. Ramos said. "I'm proud of what they're trying to do."

### **The History**

With the proliferation of factories in the 1900s, Bridgeport diversified ethnically. Early in the 20th century, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Cape Verdeans and Poles each claimed neighborhoods, or distinct pieces of them. Downtown belonged to the Portuguese and the Irish, Ms. Witkowski said. Today, the makeup favors Mexicans, Brazilians and Puerto Ricans.

### **The Commute**

Metro-North Railroad trains take about 80 minutes to get to Grand Central Terminal during the morning rush. A monthly pass costs \$336 (\$329.28 online).

For those with business on Long Island, ferries to Port Jefferson, N.Y., leave from the harbor every hour, year-round.

**What We Like**

Much of downtown's older architecture is stunning, and newer projects like the Richard Meier-designed People's Bank tower fit well. The lofts create a SoHo-style living experience for those who might otherwise never be able to afford it.

**Going Forward**

Large grocery stores are almost nonexistent; to shop at one typically requires a car ride.