

## Something's Brewing in Bushwick



A detail of an early 20th-century beer poster, showing the S. Liebmann's Sons Brewing Company facility in Bushwick.

The brewery site now, with housing construction under way. Since the mid-80's, some 2,400 units have been created in Bushwick.



The brewery site will include 57 two-family homes selling at \$228,000, and 4 three-family homes, offered at \$332,750.

### New housing on old Rheingold site is part of a larger campaign.

By DENNIS HEVESI

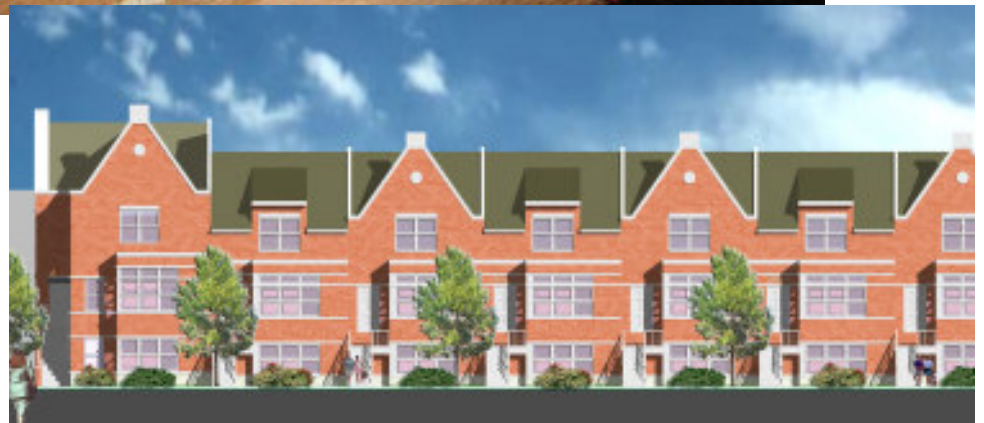
The pungent aroma of boiling barley and hops is long gone. Long gone, as well, are the six-keg-high phalanxes of beer barrels in the storage yard, the single-file march of cans and bottles below their filling spouts, the fleet of gothic-lettered delivery trucks.

Rising now on the 6.7-acre Rheingold Brewery site in Bushwick, Brooklyn - a community decimated during recent decades by arson, riots and building abandonment - are nearly 300 two-family homes, condominiums, low-income rental apartments, a

day-care center and a community center. All interlaced by green space, new streets and a suburbanlike cul-de-sac.

The creation of what has been purposefully designated as Renaissance Estates and Rheingold Gardens is the outcome of a long and

arduous community struggle. It was an often frustrating campaign that eventually brought together 15 block associations, a senior citizens group, the nonprofit New York City Housing Partnership, urban planners from Columbia University, an international panel



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of brownfield remediation experts and a spectrum of city, state and federal agencies.

And while Bushwick remains a neighborhood in difficult straits - one of the city's poorest with one of the highest rates of people on public assistance - the restoration of the Rheingold site is just the most recent and concentrated flowering of housing from that community campaign. Since the mid-1980's, another 2,386 residential units have been created in a more scattered pattern on Bushwick's 150 or so blocks - 1,244 units in new or rehabilitated buildings, including 699 for the elderly, and 571 two-family homes.

The neighborhood has a long way to go. And Angela Battaglia - who remembers both the thriving mom-and-pop stores dotting her route home from St. Joseph Patron School in the 60's and the all-night siren wails of the 70's - will certainly attest to that. Still, said Ms. Battaglia, now the housing director for the Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Council, "It's a rebirth."

The housing campaign, while certainly a coalition effort, was sparked by a city social worker who decided to do something for his adopted neighborhood. In 1971, fresh from earning his city-financed master's degree in social work from Yeshiva University, Vito J. Lopez was assigned by the Department of Social Services to be director of the new Ridgewood Bushwick Senior Citizens Center.

Mr. Lopez, who moved to Bushwick within six months, and lived there for decades before moving to neighboring Williamsburg, is now the chairman of the New York State Assembly



Angela Battaglia and Assemblyman Vito J. Lopez near the rising two-and three-family houses.

Committee on Housing.

Asked to assess Mr. Lopez's role in the rebuilding effort, Kathryn S. Wylde, president of the New York City Housing Partnership - a nonprofit group that has helped create 25,000 homes since 1985 - said: "He fought for the housing dollars, he fought for the rezoning, he worked with the local groups to sell the houses. It simply wouldn't have happened without him."

The city's commissioner of Housing Preservation and Development, Jerilyn Perine, agreed. "He's key," she said.

"If he's there," Commissioner Perine said of the seemingly countless public meetings, negotiating sessions, contract closings, "something will happen."

Something needed to happen. By the late 1970's and early 80's, Assemblyman Lopez said, Bushwick, along with the South Bronx, were virtual sideshow exhibits of urban ruin. "Bus tours

carrying foreigners came from Manhattan just to see the devastation," Mr. Lopez recalled. "By then, we had lost 45,000 residents due to fires, riots, abandonment, displacement" - one-third of the population.

Now, particularly on those 6.7 acres of what was, for more than a century, the largest of 11 breweries in the heart of the community, a lot is happening.

Already under construction on the main portion of the site, bounded by Forrest Street on the north, Stanwix Street on the east, Melrose Street on the south and Bushwick Avenue on the west, are two six-story low-income rental buildings called Rheingold Gardens.

Its 93 apartments will be offered by lottery to people who earn no more than 60 percent of the metropolitan area's current median income of \$51,900 for a family of four. Rents will range from \$470 to \$560 for one-bedrooms, \$590 to \$725 for two-bedrooms and \$690 to \$845 for three-bedrooms. The first floor will be set aside for a not-yet-designated community service program.

"We tried to make sure the apartments are spacious, have a lot of light and air," said Ms. Battaglia, whose agency is the developer for the \$20 million project, which is primarily financed by low-income tax credits through the New York State Housing Trust Fund. "We used different color brickwork to make it distinctive," she said.

The buildings will be connected by a walkway with an arch, leading to open space. "We have trees, benches, shrubbery, a playground

in the back," Ms. Battaglia said.

The project, said Ana Gonzalez, chairwoman of Community Board 4, "means an eyesore full of debris will be turned into beautiful homes, that the community will come back to where people won't be afraid of walking the streets."

"You already see people taking pride," Ms. Gonzalez said. "If you go down Bushwick Avenue, you see that some storefronts have already been renovated. Opposite the site, there is some tree planting."

"This was the dream of many people."

In October, on another section of the main parcel of the brewery site, ground will be broken for a third six-story building called Renaissance Estates. The \$11.1 million building, with similar financing through the state's Housing Trust Fund, will offer an additional 62 apartments to low-income people. Rents will range from \$440 to \$575 for one-bedrooms, \$559 to \$740 for two-bedrooms and from \$659 to \$855 for three-bedrooms. The first two floors will be a day-care center for 125 children from the community. (In preliminary planning for the main property are another 40 units of low-income housing and 18,000 square feet of commercial space on Bushwick Avenue.)

For-sale homes and condominiums are also rising on the Rheingold site, including seven on a triangular parcel across Bushwick Avenue from the main site.

Construction has begun on what will eventually be 57 two-family and 4 three-family homes,



In the blackout of July 13, 1977, arson and looting in Bushwick produced \$300million in damage, and many properties were later abandoned.

including 30 to be set aside for people from the community and the rest for households that meet the income criterion of between \$40,000 and \$75,000 a year.

Of those 61 homes, 28 have already been sold, with the two-family homes going for \$228,000 and the three-family homes priced at \$332,750. The owners are required to rent the units they do not occupy.

The homes, developed by the Bluestone Organization, are being created under the aegis of the Housing Partnership, following a well-tested pattern. "The partnership brings the parties together," Ms. Battaglia said. "They get H.P.D. to donate land that the city has taken over. They choose a community sponsor, which is usually also the marketer; in this case, us. Then they choose a builder and work out the price of the home, based on the cost of construction minus a state and city subsidy."

Those subsidies can be sizable - \$15,000 per unit from the New York State Affordable Housing Corporation and \$10,000 per unit from the city - reducing the buyer's price for a two-family home by \$50,000.

Yvette Perez, now a housing marketer for the senior citizens council, knows a good deal when she sees one.

In 1998, three years before she started working for the council, Mrs. Perez and her husband, Raymond, an elevator operator, bought a two-family home on Evergreen Avenue, five blocks from the Rheingold site. Their home was built according to the Housing Partnership formula.

The Perezes and their daughters, Nicole, 17, and Emily, 6, have deep roots in Bushwick. "I grew up in Bushwick, around the corner on Cedar Street," Mrs. Perez said. "I met my husband on Knickerbocker Avenue. When we married, we moved to Ridgewood. Bushwick was a ghost town."

Then, five years ago, while visiting friends in the old neighborhood, the couple "saw the beautiful new homes," and jumped at the chance.

"We paid \$174,000," Mrs. Perez said. "The subsidy, about \$50,000, was already taken off the price. We put down 5 percent." The monthly mortgage payment is \$1,150. Rent from the ground-floor, two-bedroom home is \$750, up from



Rheingold Gardens Partnership Homes - Magnusson Architecture and Planning PC



\$500 five years ago.

"The way I see it, we paid \$600 a month in rent in Ridgewood," she continued. "It was a six-family railroad apartment. I could lie on my bed and see my bathroom four rooms away."

"Here, with \$200 a month in bills, electricity and stuff, we pay out \$600 a month" - a figure further reduced after tax write-offs. And the house is theirs.

Sitting in her finished basement, decorated with seashells, ship models and fishing nets, Mrs. Perez beamed and said, "I call it my little yacht."

The first group of private homes at Rheingold is expected to be complete by October, and condominiums are also coming - "for the first time in Bushwick's history," Ms. Battaglia said proudly. The condominiums will consist of 28 two-bedroom apartments and 2 one-bedrooms in

10 three-story buildings called Rheingold Condominiums. This, too, is a Housing Partnership project.

The one-bedrooms will sell for \$124,226; the two-bedrooms for between \$129,226 and \$134,226. To be eligible for a two-bedroom apartment, a buyer must earn between \$49,000 and \$75,000, and be able to make a 5 percent down payment.

The planners of the reborn Rheingold site avoided the drab. "They felt this should be a high-quality town house development within a lot of greenery," said Magnus Magnusson, founding partner of Magnusson Architecture, designers of the private homes and condominiums of Rheingold Gardens as well as Renaissance Estates.

The facades feature large bay windows and corner-glass windows. "The front of every other house comes to a distinctive peak while the next house has a gable, so there's an up-down rhythm," Mr. Magnusson said.

"So, without being literal," he added, "the peaked roofs created something reminiscent of the old Dutch homes in the city." And, appropriately, of the community's historical roots.

Bushwick was founded by Peter Stuyvesant in 1661. "It was one of the original six Dutch towns," said

John Manbeck, the borough's historian emeritus. "The word comes from 'boswijck,' meaning thick woods."

Initially, of course, farms were carved out of those woods. "Later, they brought in some manufacturing, sugar, oil," Mr. Manbeck said. "But the big one was glue, started by Peter Cooper, of Cooper Union, a glue factory using dead horses."



Yvette Perez in the finished basement of her two-family house.

**I**N the late 1840's, an influx of Germans brought beer, in bulk, to Brooklyn. "They arrived because of revolutions in Europe," Mr. Manbeck said. "They set up, between 1850 and 1880, 11 breweries in a 14-block area called

Brewers' Row, around Scholes and Meserole Streets." Their names included Schaefer, Piel, Trommer, Ulmer and - arriving in 1854 - Samuel Liebmann, the founder of Rheingold.

"Within a week, he opened a small brewery on Meserole," Mr. Manbeck said. "Within a year, it moved to 36 Forrest Street," the start of what would eventually expand to a site the size of seven football fields. "In 1855, they put out 2,000 barrels a day; by 1900, it was 200,000 barrels," he said. "Later, they pioneered electrical refrigeration."

Samuel Liebmann retired in 1868, turning over the business to his sons; and, in time, they to theirs. And eventually - after a takeover by PepsiCo (and the demise of the Miss Rheingold contest in 1965) - the company would go out of business in 1975. "After 121 years in existence, Rheingold was the longest-lasting brewery in Brooklyn," Mr. Manbeck said.

There has, however, been a recent refill. In March, the brand restarted at a brewery in Utica, N.Y., with headquarters in Manhattan, and the first Miss Rheingold in 38 years - Kate Duyn, a New York City bartender from Portland, Ore. - was chosen.

By the mid-60's, Bushwick was already plagued by the onset of profound poverty.

It also had a somewhat unusual real estate problem. "All these wooden row houses had cocklofts - 3- or 4-foot attic spaces between the top apartment and the roof connected through rows of buildings," Assemblyman Lopez said. "They were for ventilation. So, when there was a fire in one building, and this happened many times, often 10 or 12 buildings would draw the fire through that space."

Then came the night of July 13, 1977, when the lights went out - all of them, all over the city. A transformer north of the Bronx had exploded early that sweltering evening and, like dominoes, five boroughs worth of safety switches tripped. After sunset, a wave of looting and arson swept through poverty-stricken neighborhoods.

"There was a riot on Broadway, and about 100 stores and buildings



Renaissance Estates - Magnusson Architecture and Planning PC

were burned down," the assemblyman said.

Mr. Manbeck said: "There was \$300 million in damage in Bushwick that night. And within a year, 40 percent of the businesses had closed." The community, he said, "didn't start recovering until the late 80's, when people from the Caribbean, and also Asians and Muslims, started arriving."

By then, however, Assemblyman Lopez estimated, 1,500 buildings "with probably 4,000, 5,000 units" had either been destroyed by fire (in some cases set by owners who could get more from insurance than by selling) or abandoned. On most streets - and, in some sections, in swaths of blocks - derelict buildings were torn down, with the city taking title to the property.

The buildings on the Rheingold site were leveled in the mid-80's. "It became a despicable property with mountains of garbage," Assemblyman Lopez said, "sofas, tires, abandoned cars." And as a former industrial site, it would have to be remediated, though no one knew to what extent.

In 1998, the community coalition asked a panel of professors and students from Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and

Preservation to assess the site for possible residential development.

"They gave us legitimacy," Assemblyman Lopez said. "When the mayor's office said it was interested in giving us site control and Columbia came up with that thorough assessment, H.P.D. became a very supportive partner." "What we did," said Commissioner Perine, "was put together a group from the International Brownfield Exchange," a program financed by the federal Environmental Protection Administration. The remediation experts came from Canada, France, Germany and western New York.

And after three days of testing in 2000, the verdict was, the commissioner said: "Beer is organic, not like a dye factory. There wasn't terrible contamination, and it was a viable site for residential and mixed-use development." For \$3 million, 7,500 tons of topsoil were removed.

At last, with title transferred by the city and all of the governmental and financial threads woven, bulldozers rumbled onto the site last August.

To be sure, the Rheingold site - amid factories with brickwork bearing faded lettering, hubcap

mosaics on fences and razor wire atop corrugated gates - represents a revival still in the works.

Yet, for one city official, a director in H.P.D.'s development office, the possibility is linked to history. John Liebmann is the great-great-grandson of Samuel Liebmann, the Rheingold founder.

"When I learned about the project, I talked with my father, whose name is also John," Mr. Liebmann said. "He's 83."

"My father stressed that ours was a family that came to this country primarily because of political persecution. Samuel was outspoken against the monarchy; he held different ideals. And the powers that be ordered a boycott of his business."

"My father feels that the site was a haven for this immigrant family, allowing it to not only be safe, but to prosper. And the way this project seems to be going, it can be that for the residents and owners who move in." ■