

LIVING IN/Melrose Commons, the Bronx

The Sound of Construction

By **NANCY BETH JACKSON**

WHEN Paul Newman starred as John Murphy, a police officer, in "Fort Apache, the Bronx" in 1981, he patrolled a burned-out wasteland, a hostile landscape inhabited by junkies, winos, pimps, hookers, cop killers and killer cops.

Today, the tourists who come to see where the movie was filmed find a far different neighborhood. In the last five years, urban decay has been replaced by new houses and apartments.

Melrose Commons, a 35-block area in the South Bronx, still has plenty of vacant lots, but the mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood is abuzz with construction. Retail space, until recently limited to a handful of mom-and-pop shops, rented for \$7 to \$11 a square foot a year in the mid-1990's. A 1,300-square-foot C-Town supermarket in a 124-unit moderate-income rental building opening late next summer will pay \$19.90.

According to the 2000 census, nearly 7,000 people lived in Melrose as the new housing came out of the ground. The New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development anticipates that about 3,000 housing units will have been added by the time Melrose Commons is fully developed at the end of the decade. New construction could

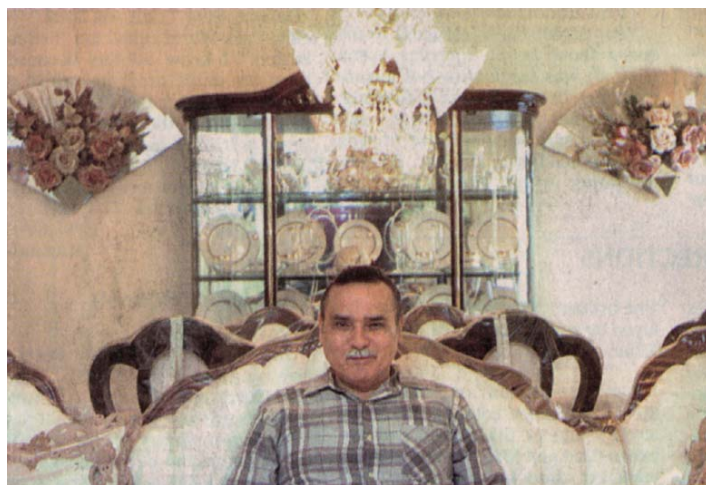
add around 10,000 residents to the neighborhood, estimated Petr Stand, a principal at Magnusson Architecture and Planning who has been involved in the development for 13 years.

The change was accomplished through the efforts of a local neighborhood group, Nos Quedamos/We Stay, a coalition of residents and shopkeepers who refused to be bulldozed by an urban renewal plan with no place for them.

The founder and executive director of the group, Yolanda Garcia, died last month. Her daughter, Yolanda Gonzalez, has been named executive director and will continue what her mother started 13 years ago.

In an interview not long before she suffered a fatal heart attack at age 53 in her modest storefront office, Ms. Garcia recalled how the neighborhood rebirth began.

Ms. Garcia, whose family owned a carpet store on Third Avenue, was among the mostly Hispanics and African-Americans who stuck it out while the South Bronx burned, only to learn by chance in 1992 that the city planned to displace them to make room for 2,600 middle-income residential units. Without being consulted in the nine years the plan was under study, 78 homeowners, 400 tenants and 80 businesses were to be priced out of their own neighborhood where the median income was under \$12,000.



PIONEER

Felix Vasquez owns and lives in a three-family town house at the Plaza de Los Angeles, mixed-income housing in Melrose Commons, in the Bronx.

"You can't fight City Hall," her brother German, now deceased, told her then.

"Yes, we can," she replied.

The mobilization that followed -- at one point meetings were held 188 times in six months and meetings are still scheduled weekly -- taught people to make themselves heard and how to navigate the system. In the end, the city's plan was scrapped, replaced by a development vision that recognized environmental and health issues, good design and community involvement.

The real estate in question had a large concentration of city-owned property about equidistant from Midtown Manhattan and suburbs in Westchester, Connecticut, Long Island and New Jersey and good



Plaza de Los Angeles - Magnusson Architecture and Planning PC

transportation by bus, train, express subways and roads. Yankee Stadium and the Bronx Courthouse are to the west. An industrial zone and Metro-North's Melrose station are on the northern edge. Third Avenue

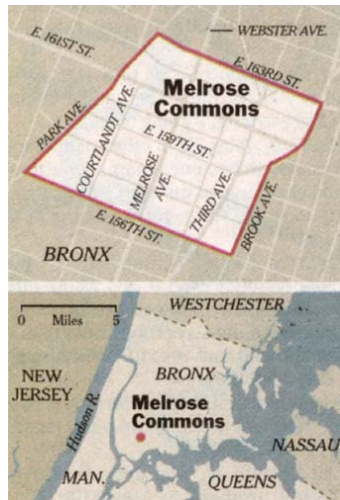
leads south to the Hub, the district's historic commercial center at 149th Street.

Melrose began as a German village in the 1850's. Population took off with the Third Avenue elevated train. By the 1920's the Hub bustled with shops, movie theaters and burlesque houses filled with Italian, Russian-Jewish and Irish immigrants as well as Germans. Before the white flight to the suburbs in the 1960's, Melrose Avenue was known as "the Broadway of the Bronx" with flower shops, delicatessens, funeral homes and at least two German bakeries.

By 1994, a German Methodist church, built in 1878, had succumbed to urban blight. Although stained-glass windows with memorials in German survived, the church organ had been cannibalized and the sky could be seen through the roof when the Rev. Eddie Lopez Jr. merged three small Spanish-speaking Methodist congregations. Inspired one Easter morning, he suggested the church be renamed Silesia la Resurreccion, reinaugurated after a half-million-dollar renovation.

The neighborhood's resurrection is well under way, too, beginning with Plaza de Los Angeles, 35 three-family town houses, which sold out five years ago. First-time homeowners with annual incomes of \$32,000 to \$70,000 paid at an average of \$320,000 with government subsidies to encourage long-term ownership. La Puerta de Vitalidad, the first affordable-housing rental building, soon followed. Other rental apartments, including a senior residence, have been added.

Two additional rounds of subsidized town houses have been completed with more ownership projects to



TRANSFORMATION

Hundreds of apartments and town houses have been built in Melrose Commons. New Buildings, above, under construction on East 159th Street.



SETTLED IN

Alex Trinidad, Above left, owns a town house in Sunflower Way I. Above right, Norma Sotero, left, with her daughter Karmen Rodriguez and grandchildren Michael and Karina, owns an apartment at La Puerta de Vitalidad.



La Puerta de Vitalidad - Magnusson Architecture and Planning PC

come. Under the city's New Foundations program, which encourages home ownership by transferring public lots to private ownership after a competitive process, private developers have begun building affordable housing on private land. Poko Partnerships, a real estate developer from Port Chester, N.Y., recently sold 10 town houses still under construction on Courtlandt Avenue. The average price of the subsidized three-family homes was \$480,000.

The best source of housing availability is the Department of Housing Preservation and Development's Affordable Housing Hotline at 311 and at the Web site www.nyc.gov/hpd. The site notes that a 110-unit building, under construction on Melrose Avenue, is accepting applicants for rentals, from \$542 for a one-bedroom to \$920 for a three-bedroom. Tenants will be chosen by lottery.

Robert Roman, who runs a small construction company, was sweeping the sidewalk one recent winter morning in front of the town house he and his wife, Diana, bought in 2003 after participating in a lottery. The block of town houses replaced a community garden, but Mr. Roman, who began renting in the neighborhood in 1987, thought it a more than fair exchange. A first-time homeowner, he is also a first-time landlord.

The new housing will mean a better community, he said. "We will pay more taxes and have more police protection," he said. Subsidy provisions prevent him and other town house owners from selling for at least five years and offer incentives for staying even longer, but he doesn't mind the restrictions. "I have no plans to move anytime soon," Mr. Roman said.

Ms. Garcia wanted more than roofs over people's heads. Mr. Stand of Magnusson Architecture recalls that she pushed good design to encourage people to identify with their buildings and insisted that owner-occupied town houses and rental apartments for the previously homeless share the same block. She encouraged everyone in the neighborhood to keep an eye out to make sure that construction was carried out as promised.

Environmental issues were addressed as Nos Quedamos explored reclaiming rainwater to wash down sidewalks or water landscaping. It was the local sponsor for New York State's first "green" affordable housing development, 30 three-family town houses called Sunflower Way I, completed in 2002.

Designed by Danois Architects, they sold for an average of \$289,000 to buyers, also chosen by lottery, earning \$41,258 to \$75,000. The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development recognized the project for excellence last year after buildings operated at or below energy use that had been predicted before construction. Sunflower II, completed in late 2003, added 41 town houses.

Because her son, Ismail Gonzalez, had died at age 25 from asthma, which is more common in the South Bronx than in most other New York neighborhoods, Yolanda Garcia was committed to building healthier buildings. She encouraged designs that impede the growth of mold.

Nos Quedamos promotes landscaping and small neighborhood parks, but an ongoing dispute in the community is the future of nearly two dozen pocket-size community gardens established when the neighborhood was in decay. Several gardens have been replaced by affordable housing.

After housing, education is the most important issue in the neighborhood. Mr. Roman, the construction company owner, wants "to do a little better" for his daughters Rose, 12, and Michelli, 5, who attend Public School 29, a few blocks down Courtlandt, but he thinks they are getting "a not bad

education."

Built in 1962 as an elementary school, Public School 29 now is pre-kindergarten through sixth grade with seventh and eighth scheduled to be added by 2007. The school recently was removed from the state's list of schools in need of improvement, but last year only 31 percent of the students met or exceeded the English Language Arts test standards and about 42 percent met math standards. Rhonda Ross Kendrick, an actress and the daughter of the singer Diana Ross, has helped with an after-school drama program, but Insideschools.org, an independent Web guide to New York City public schools, reports that "academic achievement has a way to go."

South Bronx High, which had one of the worst reputations in the city, was replaced three years ago by the South Bronx Educational Campus, made up of three smaller schools: Mott Haven Village Prep, New Explorers and the Academy for Careers in Sports.

While streets are not crime free, local precincts reported a

65 to 70 percent drop in crime in the last 12 years.

One of Ms. Garcia's unrealized dreams was a town center around the 42nd Precinct station house in the northeast corner of Melrose Common that would include new schools, a green market and a pedestrian mall. Although that hasn't happened yet, Boricua College has proposed a campus there. Those who own businesses are optimistic about the changes under way. Paulo Delconte, 67, who immigrated to Melrose from Trieste, Italy, as a teenager, was among the shopkeepers who stayed, keeping his convenience store at the corner of 157th and Melrose Avenue open even in the worst of times.

"The housing is going to come back," he said. "It's going to be good for me, good for everyone." He plans to add a delicatessen with his favorite recipes for eggplant, veal and meatballs. ■



Palacio del Sol is under construction on Melrose Avenue between 156th and 157th. - Magnusson Architecture and Planning PC