

DAILY NEWS

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YOUR HOME Clinton Hill SPECIAL SECTION

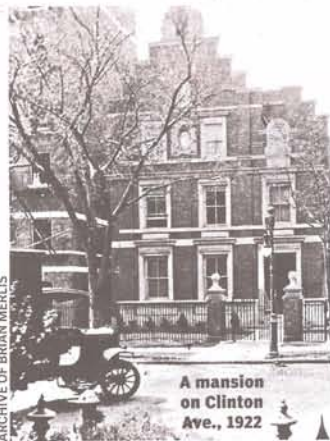


Unique architecture has always characterized this Brooklyn neighborhood

JEFF BACHNER

A Hill of a Revival

Brooklyn neighborhood blooms in a historic residential and retail awakening



ARCHIVE OF BRIAN MERLIS

A mansion on Clinton Ave., 1922

It can be compared to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

Right now, before our very eyes, Clinton Hill is undergoing an explosion of culture, arts, retail, food and neighborhood improvement that in 50 years may be considered one of the most important community-inspired growth periods since legendary activist Jane Jacobs saved the West Village and SoHo in the 1960s.

Call it the Clinton Hill Revival, where a combination of factors — namely people and persistence — have come together to catapult this once-checked area into one of the most attractive, affordable and interesting urban neighborhoods in the United States. For young families, historic house hunters, artists, foodies or people who just love the city (and not merely the clean streets of Park Ave., hipster heaven of Williamsburg or soccer-mom den of

Jason Sheftell



Real Estate Correspondent

Park Slope), Clinton Hill delivers the top block-by-block living experience in New York.

Here's the how, who and why that make this Central Brooklyn enclave a magical, spiritual and affordable place to live.

The streets: Some resemble tiny corners of Paris. Others feel like Fifth Ave. circa 1910, or paintings of New Orleans in 1850. Some are pure Brooklyn, with brownstones built with cornices, stoops and window sills that repeat in architectural symmetry for what seem like miles.

Others look almost Amish. You can turn the corner and run into an urban barn.

There are mews, mansions, townhouses, carriage houses, clapboard wooden homes with front porches set off by center stairwells and columns, warehouse loft buildings and Greek Revival apartment complexes in the middle of blocks. An old pharmacy with original fixtures is now a classic Italian restaurant named VINO e OLIO, where the menu changes daily. Even decayed wrought iron gates, eroding with time, add a rustic, simple charm.

Brownstones, some rehabs, are on the market for \$745,000. One-bedrooms in apartment houses built in the 1940s for the upper middle class can be had for \$1,300. Two-bedrooms cost less than \$1,600, with three-bedrooms available below \$3,000.

Then there are the mansions. Huge *continued on next page*

YOUR HOME



continued from previous page

mansions, built by the Pratts, who founded and funded the country's leading art school, and industrial giants. They lend the feel of regal London or peaceful Vienna.

"The area always had a fancy feel," says Brian Merlis, a photo archivist who just came out with a book, "Brooklyn's Clinton Hill and Wallabout." "It was a getaway for the rich in the 1830s, who built villas through the 1870s, when it was discovered by the industrialists who built the mansions you see there today. One nice thing, after the African-American migration of the 1940s, the local population couldn't afford to make many changes to the homes, which is why the architectural integrity remains. The faces may have changed, but the structures never did."

The anchor: Every great neighborhood needs a cultural and physical anchor. Think Central Park, Lincoln Center or Washington Square. For Clinton Hill, it's Pratt Institute, as significant an academic institution as New York University or Columbia. Counted among the finest undergraduate/graduate specialty colleges of art and design in the country, Pratt's more than 4,700 students come from 50-plus countries and all 50 states.

More than 67% of graduates stay in New York, most in Brooklyn, adding to the artistic fabric of the borough. This past fall, architect Frank Gehry lectured at the college, where roses and daffodils bloom each spring.

Seventeen years ago, current Pratt President Thomas F. Schutte inherited a campus crippled by dirt fields and run-down buildings. Today, the campus is home to a 25-acre sculpture garden, new structures, grassy stretches and rehabbed historic structures, such as an 1896 library with cast-iron metal shelving designed by Tiffany Glass and Decorating Co. Students — intense, talented and diverse — use dormitories and New York City as living laboratories to enhance skills as architects, fashion designers and interior designers.

"The importance of Pratt is tied to Brooklyn's creative character," says Schutte, who lives on campus in the Caroline Ladd Pratt House, an 1897 mansion built by the institute's founder Charles Pratt. "The physical appearance and quality of Pratt had to be improved to draw students from all over the world and improve the surrounding area. I knew from the beginning that our students could not be bound to the campus alone."

The Myrtle Ave. turnaround: When Schutte arrived at Pratt, he and the student body were told by campus security not to walk to Myrtle Ave. at night or alone in the day. Recently, Myrtle Ave. has become one of Brooklyn's biggest retail success stories with boutiques, restaurants, bars, bakeries and new businesses forming an urban Main St. more reminiscent of the 1950s



than the current century.

Approached by local merchants and political leaders, Schutte helped found the Myrtle Avenue Revitalization Project (MARP) in 1999, which six years later sponsored the creation of the Myrtle Avenue Brooklyn Business Improvement District (BID). Both groups worked to change the look of the street. As a first step, they cleaned up the graffiti and trash.

"Removing the graffiti and litter removed the perception of crime," says Schutte. "That took three years. Then, we worked on boarded-up storefronts. That took longer, but the improvement has made Myrtle and Clinton Hill one of Brooklyn's most important corridors. Pratt has two new structures on the avenue, the most recent named after it. Myrtle Hall shows a commitment to the neighborhood and strength of the relationship."

The two improvement groups, led by executive director Michael Blaise Backer, a trained urban planner, recruit new entrepreneurs to the strip, direct grants to local businesses and actively pursue private and public investment for the area. Of the 148 businesses on a mile-long stretch of Myrtle Ave. starting in Fort Greene, 75 have been brought in by the BID in the past nine years.

"There was 20% vacancy when we started," says Backer, whose staff works with residents in local public housing developments merchants, prospective business owners and developers in among other things streetscape improvement projects, such as transforming the space under the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. "Now you're seeing major investment. Three years ago, young families did not even stop to look at this neighborhood.

That's a major part of the current resident base," says Backer.

Grateful, long-term store owners see room for improvement. Former health care worker Melody Burns handcrafts jewelry in her store, Kiini Iburu, which means "the innermost part of something special" in Swahili. She has been on Myrtle Ave. for seven years.

"One day is great, and the next can be quiet," says Burns, who runs a children's jewelry-making class on select Saturdays. "But you can't call it Murder Ave. anymore. Everyone is friendly and everything is at your fingertips."

New Developments: With change and economic improvement come real estate developers. In addition to the historic architectural structures, many of which are within a 1982 city landmark district, more modern structures (some pretty, oth-



Ricardo Barreras works in his restaurant, Pilar Cuban Eatery



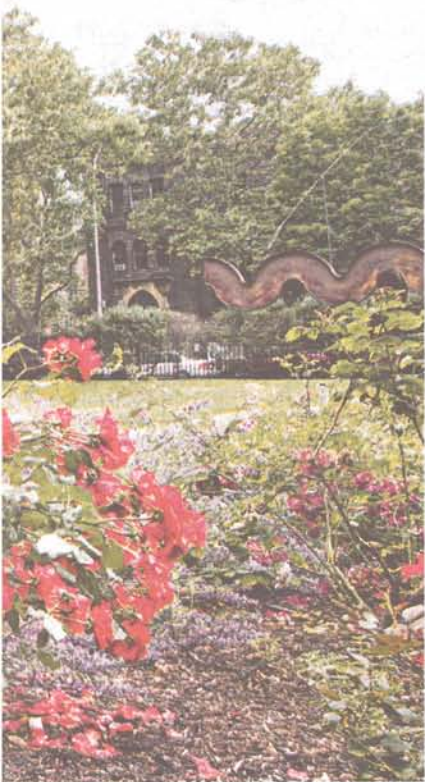
Melody Burns in her store, Kiini Iburu Jewelry, on Myrtle Ave.

DIANA PAU

JAMES MONROE ADAMS 4TH

JAMES MONROE ADAMS 4TH

The Rose and Sculpture Garden at Pratt Institute



305 Washington Ave. is a showpiece among the neighborhood's well-preserved residential sites

YOU SHOULD KNOW

- PRATT INSTITUTE**
A top national art college. 200 Willoughby Ave., (718) 636-3600. pratt.edu
 - PILAR CUBAN EATERY**
Classic Cuban cuisine in relaxed atmosphere. 393 Classon Ave., (718) 937-0727. pilarcubaneatery.com
 - KIINI IBURU JEWELRY**
Handmade jewelry and other gifts. 388 Myrtle Ave., (718) 858-5195. kiiniiburajewelry.com
 - PRATT AREA COMMUNITY COUNCIL**. A local housing partnership. 201 DeKalb Ave., (718) 522-2613. <http://pacc.publishpath.com>
- How to go:** Take the G train to Classon Ave. or Clinton/Washington Aves. The B38 bus travels along DeKalb and Lafayette Aves.

ers not) bring fair-priced new construction projects to the area. From the Bedford-Stuyvesant border to a neighborhood subsection called Wallabout near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, condos with studios start as low as \$195,000 and two-bedrooms can be had in the low \$400,000 range.

At 111 Monroe, the developer will pay closing costs. At 315 Gates, over 40% is in contract. At 163 Washington, buyers showed up early for last Sunday's open house. All take FHA loans, meaning a 3.5% down payment is acceptable. The Developer's Group, a sales and marketing firm with strong Brooklyn roots, represents all of these.

"So much thought goes into creating the right product for the right buyer in the right location," says David Behin, a founding partner in the firm, who lives in the neighborhood with his wife and daughter.



275 Clinton Ave., a co-op building on the corner of DeKalb Ave.



81 Vanderbilt Ave., more Old South than Brooklyn

"We work with developers who believe in the area, like we do. There is so much out here that people haven't even discovered it yet. When people from Manhattan come, they can't believe it exists. That makes us smile, but we wish more people made the trip. There might not be a better neighborhood for value and quality new construction right now."

Buyers range from locals who want new

construction to newcomers who like the price-to-space ratio.

"Two bedrooms, two baths for \$455,000 with Corian countertops, oak floors, two sinks in the master bathroom, custom-made cabinets and plenty of light?" asks Behin. "When you consider where this neighborhood is headed, this is the closest thing to a steal I've seen in a while."

Perks: Little pockets of retail and food pop up on side streets and smaller avenues such as Classon, Franklin, Lafayette and Grand. In the past six months, two coffee shops have opened up. A food co-op is on the way.

Choice has been selling prepared foods on Lafayette Ave. for years. The same partnership owns an organic food market down the street, where fresh fish and cheeses are sold while '40s musical trios like the Andrew Sisters play on the sound system.

Down the street on the

corner of Classon and Greene Aves., Pilar is a Cuban restaurant with one table and a counter with barstools. Ricardo Barreras, a former banker, opened the restaurant with his Venezuelan wife, Lisbeth Moreno. They live two blocks away.

Barreras, who learned to cook as a child from his Cuban grandfather in Miami, sends out classic Cuban dishes made fresh daily. Named after Ernest Hemingway's boat, Pilar is already famous for its pernil (roasted pork) and paella Cuban. This August, the restaurant will expand. At any given moment, a dreadlocked film director can be next to Latino construction workers, a Cuban composer or Pratt students dining on full meals costing less than \$12.

"Affordability is why we live here and opened up here," says Barreras, who moved from Park Slope. "Things haven't always been rosy — we were robbed the day



Thomas Schutte and Michael Blaise Backer

DIANA PAU



Carriage houses, like this one at 266 Waverly Ave., are common in Clinton Hill

PHOTOS BY JEFF BACHNER

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YOUR HOME

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we moved in. But that's why we like it. It brings everyone together. It's much safer now and still edgier than Park Slope."

Problems and Solutions: Yes, the area has housing projects. Public schools are questionable. Robberies happen. Some drug peddlers, who will watch your car if you leave it running, have set corners. The neighborhood has many Chinese takeout shops. Luxury automobiles can blast rap.

But three bakeries and two coffee shops have opened in the past six months. Supermarkets are plentiful. The retail renaissance on Myrtle Ave. provides jobs, as does Pratt. While foreclosures are heavy in Bed-Stuy, real estate value and rents remain affordable. Local community groups specializing in housing such as the Pratt Area Community Council (not affiliated with the university) lend legal assistance to area residents and continue to develop affordable housing in the area.

"We try to make a difference by helping local residents and keeping the area affordable for those who have lived here for decades," says Deb Howard, executive director of PACC, formed to help the local area in 1964. "Anybody can walk into our offices and ask a question about a lease, rent control, foreclosure or homeowner loan. That's what we're here to do."

Transportation hinders the area's popularity among Manhattanites, who cringe at the phrase "G train." Some locals and realtors believe Clinton Hill's reputation and beauty remain concealed because of poor subway service. Bicyclists and bus riders, however, have no problem getting around,



The modern side of Clinton Hill: A one-bedroom model apartment at 163 Washington Ave.

nor do people who enjoy long walks along the well-designed streets.

At the Raymond V. Ingersoll Houses in Fort Greene, MARP worked with a small group of residents to start a community garden program. Long-time Brooklynite Joan Bryant, a retired health aid at Erasmus Hall High School, got a small plot of land along Myrtle Ave., where she and her neighbors planted tomatoes, green peppers and collard greens. Some Chinese families, Bryant remembers, planted bok choy. This winter, some gardeners filled their 5' x 10' plots with wild flowers.

On a cold December day, Bryant talked

to some neighbors about the importance of getting involved.

"This started when MARP put out flyers for a community meeting to get ideas from the community," she says. "It's up to us to go the meetings. I tell everyone who complains about a broken elevator or something that that doesn't do any good. As low-income families, we have to get involved. How else can you be part of the good changes happening around you?"

Interior designer Brooke Gomez recently sold her single-family townhouse to move back to Manhattan, where she works and was born. Gomez remembers



163 Washington Ave. has hot open houses

her time in the neighborhood fondly.

"Having a four-story, single-family house was too much space for me as a single person," says Gomez. "I also wanted to be back in the city to be closer to my friends. But I don't doubt for a second that I will have another house in Brooklyn at another time in my life. I miss the laid-back mentality, the sense of neighborhood and the quiet. There is a real sense of community. Even my neighbors I didn't know by name would notice if I went out of town, and offer to move my car for me. You don't find that kind of hospitality everywhere in New York."

THE CLOSER

Flips and splits of New York's real-estate community

✿ What's the opposite of déjà vu? When you're somewhere you know you've been before but it doesn't look the same at all. That's how it feels standing on the corner of Steuben St. and Myrtle Ave. in Brooklyn.

Three years ago, there were half-built condos and a Kentucky Fried Chicken dubbed a "trouble spot" by local police. But the avenue's transformation, capped by Pratt Institute's new academic building Myrtle Hall, shatters any memory of a tired past.

Not only is Myrtle Hall in line to become the first LEED Gold-certified building on the avenue,

and the first such academic institution in the borough, it will also house an organic grocery on its ground floor. The Daily News has confirmed that Williamsburg favorite **Khim's Millenium Market** will open its fifth Brooklyn store in the building next month, taking 3,000 of a total 15,000 square feet of available retail space.

Named after the street, the building was designed by New York-based **WASA/Studio A**, whose lead partner, **Jack Esterson**, is a Clinton Hill resident and Pratt alum. Housing the Department of Digital Arts, admissions, all student

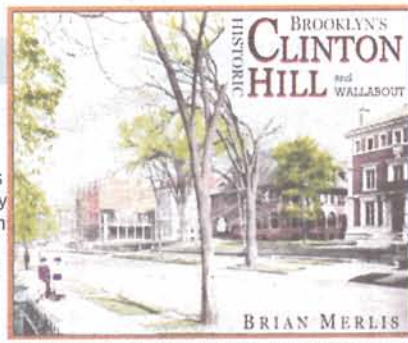
services and other administrative affairs, Myrtle Hall is full of light. With gray concrete floors, open spaces and white walls, the building is perfect for hosting Pratt's art exhibits.

It's equipped with a green roof to reclaim and circulate rainwater and solar-voltaic panels that generate electricity. One building away is **PrattStore**, which counts as Brooklyn's largest art store, selling painting and drawing supplies, books and Pratt gear. To see Myrtle Hall, go to 536 Myrtle Ave.

✿ In line with Myrtle Ave.'s eco-friendly growth spurt, **Green in BKLYN** is a boutique specializing in all things good for the environment. From home accessories to cleaning supplies to cups, towels and sculptures made of vintage bits called **FOBOTs** by artist **Amy Flynn**, the store is a one-stop shop for living an environmentally friendly life.

Owner **Elissa Olin** opened the store on Earth Day in 2009 despite negative views from people who said the location "won't work."

"I remember someone asking me who my target was," says Olin, who grew up in the East Village but now lives on



Clinton Ave. in 1904 on the cover of Merlis' book

the Clinton Hill and Bedford-Stuyvesant border. "She was saying young, white, probably women, when an older black guy comes in smiling because he's happy I carry the Soda Stream."

Olin says she feels like she's in an "urban hometown." The Soda Stream is one of her most popular products. At the push of a button it turns regular water into soda or carbonated water. The Penguin Starter Kit costs \$250, with carbon canisters priced at \$18.95.

If you're worried about the eco-friendliness of the canisters, don't. According to Olin, "customers bring in empty cartridges in exchange for a full one. I send the empty cartridges back to the company, which cleans, refills and reuses them."

Go to greeninbklyn.com for more information, or stop by the store at 432 Myrtle Ave.

✿ At the store, pick up a copy of **Brian Merlis'** new book, "Brooklyn's Historic Clinton Hill

and Wallabout," his 20th work. Merlis calls himself a "localist and photo archivist." He's much more than that. He's a treasure to New York City, having accumulated, researched, dug up, purchased, found and preserved some of the most historically significant photographs of Brooklyn that exist. Some are 140 years old.

Like his books on Park Slope, East New York and Flatbush, the Clinton Hill edition is full of photos, interviews and anecdotes.

Merlis will be signing books at Green in BKLYN on Saturday, Feb. 5 from 2-5 p.m. The book costs \$50. Go to Brooklynpix.com for more information

— and have your mind blown by things you learn in Merlis' archive about old Brooklyn (such as in 1928, a pair of ladies' shoes cost \$2.88 at Roxy's Shoe Store on Smith St.) Prints start at \$30.

The FOBOT at Green in BKLYN



The north side of Myrtle Hall, Pratt Institute's newest building

ALEXANDER SEVIRIN

GREEN IN BKLYN

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