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LIVING IN | DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

Now Open for Living, as Well as Business

By JENNIFER BLEYER

MATTHEW AND LORI RICHMOND were newly married and living in Greenpoint when they began looking for a home to buy in 2005. They yearned to be near multiple subway lines, having spent several years relegated almost exclusively to the L train, and with busy careers as designers and little time to renovate, they wanted a new building that they could move into right away.

They were familiar with [Brooklyn](#)'s stylish brownstone neighborhoods, but less so with its downtown, a shabby-fringed commercial district that bustles during the day with 100,000 workers but is nearly deserted at night. Still, when they were shown an apartment in Boulevard East, an 11-story tawny-brick condominium on Boerum Place on downtown Brooklyn's border, they quickly perceived the area's residential possibilities.

Ms. Richmond's father, Domenic Mozzone, had worked in the nearby MetroTech office complex and advised the couple that with a staggering 12 subway lines within six blocks of Boulevard East, the apartment was most likely a solid investment. They put a deposit on a 900-square-foot unit with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and an open kitchen the same day they saw it. They have been thrilled with their choice ever since.

"We're in the crux of all these amazing neighborhoods," said Ms. Richmond, 30, who gave birth to their first child, Cooper, in January. "I walk two blocks this way, I'm in the heart of Brooklyn Heights. I walk two blocks that way, I'm in Carroll Gardens. And because of the close proximity to all the trains, it was kind of like, 'Why haven't people been living here?'"

Downtown Brooklyn has long been a civic center, retail destination and, with the development of the 16-acre MetroTech complex beginning in 1989, a home for Wall Street back offices.

It hasn't really been known as a place where people live, but a rezoning that took effect in 2004 is poised to change that, because it gave a green light to the construction of larger residential buildings.

The area now teeters on the edge of a building boom, which officials and developers predict will transform it into what they deem a "24 hour" neighborhood.

"If you walk down a street in the commercial core now at 7:30 at night, it's very quiet," said Joseph Chan, the president of the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, an umbrella group overseeing the area's renewal.

"That lack of activity does not convey the sense of a vibrant downtown, and that's going to change extraordinarily quickly with the development here."

By Mr. Chan's estimate, more than 7,000 residential units are in planning stages or under construction in downtown Brooklyn, not including the nearby Atlantic Yards proposal — which calls for eight million square feet of high-rise housing, office space and a basketball arena on 22 acres.

He noted that his organization was working with the [Real Estate Board of New York](#) and local property owners to fill in the neighborhood's retail gaps.

Hal Henenson, the executive director of the development marketing group at Prudential Douglas Elliman, agreed that downtown Brooklyn is on the verge of change, attractive for its transportation options, relative affordability and proximity to borough shopping strips.

"For people who are looking for the next new neighborhood, if you will," he said, "I think in Brooklyn, it's downtown."

What You'll Find

The neighborhood stretches from the rumble of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway south to Schermerhorn Street, and from the busy shops along Court Street and Cadman Plaza West toward Flatbush Avenue to the east, where cars head toward the Manhattan Bridge.

At the area's heart is Borough Hall, a stately Greek Revival structure facing a handsomely landscaped plaza where a farmer's market is available two days a week year round. Farther north, Cadman Plaza Park offers a 10-acre swath of green space popular with dog walkers and office workers.

The neighborhood's civic and commercial character remains prominent, with a heavy concentration of courts and other municipal facilities as well as the boxy MetroTech center, its modern buildings arranged around a manicured commons. Abutting MetroTech is the Fulton Street Mall area, a rollicking destination for electronics, jewelry, hip-hop music and urban street wear.

Housing at this point is limited to scattered rentals and a handful of co-ops and condominiums. An exception is Concord Village, a co-op development of more than 1,000 apartments on the edge of downtown beside the Brooklyn Bridge.

But one need only follow the trail of cranes and cement trucks to see what's in store for the area, much of it within what Mr. Chan identifies as three nodes of development.

The first is a pocket east of the Flatbush Avenue Extension that was included in the 2004 rezoning, where several major high-rises are planned. The Oro, a glassy 40-story condominium with 303 apartments, a 50-foot swimming pool and an indoor basketball court, is already well under way there.

Next are the Schermerhorn and Livingston Street corridors. The former Board of Education headquarters at 110 Livingston is being transformed into a 299-unit condo by David Walentas, who originally envisioned the neighborhood now known as Dumbo. There is also the 158-unit State Renaissance Court on Schermerhorn Street, a mixed-income project financed by the city's Housing Development Corporation. Both are set to open this spring.

Finally, there is a cluster of buildings being planned around the commercial core, including the BellTel

Lofts, in the former Verizon Building on Willoughby Street. The residential future of the Fulton Street Mall itself was confirmed in February with the announcement that its three-story Albee Square Mall will be demolished and rebuilt, topped with 1,000 apartments.

What You'll Pay

Although downtown Brooklyn is in its infant stages as a residential neighborhood, prices can generally be discerned from apartments sold but not yet occupied.

At 110 Livingston, the Walentas condo, 262 units have sold since last summer — from studios starting in the high \$300,000s to three-bedrooms starting above \$900,000. Earlier this month, a three-bedroom penthouse with an 800-square-foot terrace sold for \$1.35 million. Common charges average \$500 a month.

“We found that the more expensive product was what was selling quickly,” said Asher Abehsera, vice president for residential sales at the Two Trees Management Company, the building’s developer, noting that the larger three-bedrooms were almost gone. “It shows that downtown Brooklyn can handle and would like to see more high-end large condominium homes.”

Mr. Henenson of Prudential Douglas Elliman said that the commercial core, where BellTel Lofts are, offered [Manhattan](#)-style luxury at a lower cost. As he put it, “You could buy a loft in Chelsea, and the same loft in downtown Brooklyn would be literally half the price.”

Last month, Mr. Henenson noted, two apartments were bought together in BellTel for \$2.5 million, to be combined into five bedrooms with four and a half bathrooms, with nearly 3,000 square feet of space.

How long prices will remain at this level, however, is a question. “We’re in the echelon of \$1,000 a square foot,” said Jerry Minsky, a senior vice president at the Corcoran Group in nearby Fort Greene. “There’s enough evidence to prove that it’s not turning back.”

What to Do

Like gems in a necklace, some of the borough’s best-known amenities ring downtown. Just beyond its perimeter in Fort Greene is the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#); nearby, a theater and an arts library are to join what is being called the BAM Cultural District.

A stroll south along Smith Street in Carroll Gardens reveals dozens of restaurants, including the Grocery and Saul, as well as bars that brim with life on summer evenings. To the west is Brooklyn Heights, with its promenade.

Closer in, a [Y.M.C.A.](#) opened in 2005 below the Court House Apartments on Atlantic Avenue, offering a six-lane pool and children’s classes. Court Street is a main commercial artery, with a Barnes & Noble store and a 12-screen movie theater.

The History

Near the East River waterfront where Dutch farmers formed the village of Breuckelen in the 17th century, the downtown area grew as the civic heart of independent Brooklyn.

The grand City Hall was completed in 1849 and became known as Borough Hall in 1898, when Brooklyn became part of New York. Schools and churches sprouted, as well as office towers, hotels and theaters. Retailing floundered in the postwar period, although downtown Brooklyn began a new phase in the 1990s with the development of MetroTech.

The Schools

There are no public elementary schools in downtown Brooklyn, but schools in adjacent neighborhoods have received good marks.

One is Public School 8 on Hicks Street in Brooklyn Heights, which has benefited in recent years from new administration and increased parent involvement, 62 percent of students met city and state standards in English in the 2004-2005 school year, versus 61 percent citywide. Sixty-nine percent achieved the math requirements, versus 65 percent citywide.

As for private schools, downtown Brooklyn boasts a well-regarded kindergarten-through-Grade 12 institution: Brooklyn Friends, which opened in 1867 in the Quaker Meeting House on Schermerhorn Street.

The Commute

There are stations on the 2, 3, 4, 5, A, C, F, M, R, B, G and Q subway lines. Some stop twice within the area, and many are one or two stops from Manhattan. Ms. Richmond, the designer, said she and her husband both had door-to-door commutes of under half an hour to the SoHo area.

In addition, the Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges are nearby, as well as the Flatbush Avenue terminal of the Long Island Rail Road.

Going Forward

With thousands of new residents en route, business-centered downtown Brooklyn can swiftly morph into a livable neighborhood.

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