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Three cheers for the blossoming Bronx

Borough overcomes old stigmas to post big gains in people, jobs and wages; prospects are bright.

By [Daniel Massey](#)

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If there was any doubt that the Bronx has put its infamous past behind it, consider this: Queens native Bill Long decided to call his new Maspeth, Queens-based company Bronx Toys.

"I'm not from the Bronx, but what's more New York than the Bronx?" he said. "It just rings of New York."

The launch of Mr. Long's company, which makes NYPD- and FDNY-licensed toys, is just one sign of the Bronx's shifting fortunes. The borough that lost 21% of its population in the 1970s added 52,458 people last decade, topping each of the other four, census figures show. Much of the growth occurred in southern sections of the Bronx that once were devastated.

"There was a time when people were running away from this borough," said Radame Perez, president of Mastermind Development. "But that's an old story."

The story of today's Bronx has been overshadowed by fallout from the City Council's rejection in 2009 of a plan to redevelop the Kingsbridge Armory. The mall project would have created 2,200 jobs, but its developer would not agree to "living wage" mandates.

The controversial rejection prompted criticism of how such a poor borough could turn down a chance to add jobs of any kind, but in the meantime, the Bronx has quietly made gains. Wages are growing faster than in any other borough, job growth is outpacing the city's as a whole, and the Bronx has become a mecca for immigrants, adding more foreign-born residents in the last decade than any other borough.

It would be a mistake to assume all is rosy, as deep pockets of poverty persist. Personal income climbed 54% between 2000 and 2009, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, but at \$28,500, it was still 71% lower than the level for the city overall. And more than 40% of the jobs created in the borough in the past decade were in the low-paying fields of retail and home health care, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show.

But prospects are brighter than they have been for many years.



Fueled by its relative affordability, its proximity to Manhattan and its transportation links, the Bronx is "the last bastion of opportunity in the city," said Marlene Cintron, president of the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp. "The Bronx is the place that is ripe for development."

Housing has played a vital role in the borough's turnaround, attracting people to a borough they once fled and setting the stage for a gradual economic revitalization.

The Koch administration kicked off the effort by pouring money into rehabbing run-down buildings and constructing multifamily houses. Between 1986 and 1997, the number of apartments in vacant buildings shrank 78%, to 4,832—largely as the result of city-financed gut rehabs, according to unpublished city data cited by Alex Schwartz, an associate professor at Milano The New School for Management and Urban Policy.

That investment continued through subsequent administrations, culminating in the last decade in construction of the first new co-ops and condos in the Bronx in more than 30 years. Under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the city has created or preserved nearly 35,000 units of affordable housing in the borough. They don't stay empty for long.

"Some South Bronx census tracts showed among the highest population increases in the city," said Ted Weinstein, director of Bronx planning at the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. "You look at those tracts and in almost every case, there's been new housing built through our programs."

Morrisania-Melrose, for example, gained 2,815 housing units and 8,068 people. Melrose South-Mott Haven North added 2,064 occupied units and 6,019 people. Les Bluestone, principal of Blue Sea Development, built roughly 500 of the new units in Melrose-Morrisania.

"When we started in Melrose in 2000, 2001, it looked like Dresden," he said. "You could stand on one corner and easily see the other side of the neighborhood without a building in your way. Now you go up there, and it's just wall-to-wall buildings. The change is dramatic."

Mr. Bluestone attributes the resurgence in part to price pressure from the south, extending into Harlem and driving people into the Bronx. The borough's affordability has helped it grow. The Bronx also benefited from reductions in crime and an influx of immigrants—including large numbers of West Africans, but also Dominicans priced out of Washington Heights.

Lynn Gore, 60, an administrative assistant who grew up in Manhattan, never thought she'd live in the Bronx. But when her home borough became too expensive, she moved into The Eltona—a 63-unit green building, with wind turbines on the roof, that Mr. Bluestone began renting in 2009.

"Affordability, that's what it was," said Ms. Gore, who pays \$782 a month for a one-bedroom in the Melrose building, which is the first affordable LEED Platinum building in the state. She said "the building is run beautifully and the block is clean," but she'd love a more upscale mix of local retail and restaurants.

It might be just a matter of time. The borough's new housing has already opened the door to other development, including supermarkets and a 1 million-square-foot mall. And Bronx officials believe that the time is ripe for the first full-service hotel.

In the past year and a half, the city has solicited proposals for four development sites in the Bronx.

Multiple firms vied to develop the Hub at 149th Street. Officials chose Queens-based Triangle Equities, which will construct a \$35 million, two-building project with commercial and retail space and a school. The company's director of development, Elysa Goldman, said the area's population density and the "significant amount of disposable income, regardless of the fact that it's a low-income area" made the project attractive. A supermarket and a sit-down restaurant are among the amenities planned.

RANGE OF NEW BUSINESSES

Separately, a new 35,000-square-foot Western Beef is set to open on Webster Avenue, as part of a city program to lure supermarkets to underserved areas. Atlantis Management Group is slated to begin construction of an alternative-fuel station in Hunts Point by 2013. And the city is offering \$100 million to help revitalize the Hunts Point produce market.

"We are very active in luring private investment to the Bronx right now," said a spokesman for the city's Economic Development Corp. "We're working to attract new industrial facilities as well as retaining existing businesses, and activating city-owned sites with dense job-creating uses, supermarkets and community facilities."

Ms. Cintron, of the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corp., notes that a major food company is looking at a 424,000-square-foot site in Hunts Point, an electric car company is mulling two possible locations in the borough and major hotel chains are eyeing the Yankee Stadium area.

"Computer chips are being generated right here in the Bronx," she said, referring to a recent expansion by G.A.L. Manufacturing Corp., an 84-year-old elevator-component company with a 100,000-square-foot facility in the shadows of the ballpark.

Much work still needs to be done, said Wilhelm Ronda, director of planning and development in the office of the Bronx borough president, but people and businesses are now making the decision to call the borough home rather than leave it.

"The hemorrhage stopped—the hemorrhage of people and institutions and amenities," he said. "The Bronx has stabilized, giving people assurances that, 'Wait a minute; we can live and do business here.' "



Buck Ennis

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