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### **In Brownsville, a Struggle for Revitalization Without Displacement**

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## **In Brownsville, a Struggle for Revitalization Without Displacement**

*By Katie Warren*

As many parts of Brooklyn buzz with a startling rate of economic resurgence, Brownsville seems like a neighborhood left behind.

Struggling with poverty, poor health statistics, unemployment and high crime rates, and with the highest concentration of public housing in the city, it has not seen the same commercial and real estate revival as Williamsburg, Bushwick, Crown Heights and other areas of Brooklyn.

“In Brownsville, which has had challenges battling negative perceptions of this community, most of the residents are lower income and investors in the past have deemed this community as not being as good as an investment as other areas,” said Pernell Brice, executive director of the Dream Big Foundation, which funds and mentors local entrepreneurs.

But new development and investment on the horizon is giving Brownsville hope that it can attract new businesses and shed its reputation as one of Brooklyn’s grittiest neighborhoods. At the same time, these plans, along with last year’s rezoning of East New York — part of Mayor Bill de Blasio’s push for affordable housing — have sparked fears that commercial revitalization could bring with it the most dreaded side-effect of gentrification: displacement of longtime residents.

Some community leaders believe that it’s only a matter of time before Brownsville turns around.

“I believe that gentrification is inevitable in Brownsville,” said Viola Greene Walker, district manager of Brownsville’s local community board. “As businesses are priced out of the real estate market in other neighborhoods, they will seek to locate where real estate prices are less.”

Such moves could bring welcome new goods and services to the neighborhood, Walker said.

“However, it can also have a negative effect if the goods and services are not affordable to the existing residents or if they are not what the consumers desire,” she added.

## **After rezoning of East New York, is Brownsville next?**

The long-term effects of zoning changes in East New York, implemented in the spring of 2016, are not yet clear, but some officials are advocating that Brownsville should be next.

Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, who was born in Brownsville, suggested in an August [press release](#) that the city look at possibly rezoning parts of the neighborhood, given its accessibility on the number 3 subway line.

“I believe that the neighborhood’s 3 line corridor may be a possible site for beneficial transit-oriented affordable housing, and I encourage DCP (Department of City Planning) to study the impact of such potential development,” Adams said.

Critics of rezoning are wary of its spread to Brownsville, saying that attracting higher-income residents into the neighborhood to rent or purchase housing may fuel gentrification.

“Rezoning spur private investment — which may or may not be speculative -- and this spurs displacement,” said Celia Weaver, a spokesperson for New York Communities for Change.

But local leaders remain optimistic.

State Assemblywoman Latrice Walker, who represents the area in Albany, said that Brownsville hasn’t seen any spillover effects from the East New York rezoning.

“Brownsville is on the path to its own economic resurgence,” said State Assemblywoman Latrice Walker, who serves Brownsville. “The residents in the community have no desire for gentrification in Brownsville, and the neighborhood will continue to grow fiscally without the effects of gentrification.”

### **Belmont Avenue**

One of the neighborhood’s central streets, Belmont Avenue, illustrates the challenges that face Brownsville’s path to this resurgence.

Until about 20 years ago, small businesses and marketplaces thrived on Belmont.

Voncel Dowd, 61, who lived in Brownsville's Howard Houses public housing development from 1956 to 1976 and now lives in North Carolina, remembers the street as a bustling hub of business and activity.

"Every Sunday since I was a child, I accompanied my mom to the Belmont Avenue market to shop for fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, fish and some of the best pickles that was sold in big barrels," Dowd said. "All the merchants knew us because we shopped there every week."

As crime began to plague the neighborhood in the 1990s, more and more businesses closed their doors on Belmont Avenue, leaving behind a street full of empty storefronts.

But community organizations are fighting to restore Belmont to its former glory and elevate the rest of the neighborhood along with it.

In 2014, the Brownsville Community Justice Center (BCJC) launched the Belmont Revitalization Project, working with city agencies such as the Department of Transportation and Small Business Services. The plan was born from a public safety perspective. The center had identified Belmont Avenue, along with other areas of the neighborhood such as the public housing developments, as crime hot spots, said executive director James Brodick.

"It was a neglected commercial corridor for years and years and years," Brodick said. "And it doesn't have a BID (Business Improvement District) like Pitkin Avenue does."

The center started working to clean up Belmont Avenue, beautifying the street and removing graffiti. They created the Osborn Street Plaza, a colorful, flower-bedecked public space for residents to socialize. They started holding street festivals to help residents re-imagine the street as a safe area to socialize and also to drive foot traffic to the businesses there.

"If people felt safe to walk up and down Belmont Avenue and folks were willing to spend money on Belmont Avenue, businesses would move in," Brodick said. "As a result, the economy would benefit."

## **Signs of an economic renaissance**

One of the first businesses to move into the new Belmont was 3 Black Cats Cafe and Cakery in the summer of 2016.

One of the community justice center's own former employees, Ionna Jimenez, opened the cafe with her two sisters, Diana and Melissa. The cafe was funded by the Dream Big Foundation, a non-profit organization that empowers underserved communities by investing in local entrepreneurs.

"We were extremely focused on selecting entrepreneurs who had a passion to own their own café, obviously had a great product with their existing business, and were not only from Brownsville but had a strong connection to the community," said Pernel Brice, executive director of Dream Big. "The Jimenez sisters overwhelmingly fit these criteria."

Residents were wary of 3 Black Cats at first, confused as to why a shiny new cafe that looked like it belonged in hipster Williamsburg had popped up in their neighborhood. At first, some called it one of the first signs of gentrification, unaware that it was created by three of Brownsville's own.

But over time, as the three Jimenez sisters hosted events from entrepreneurial trainings to fashion shows to open mics, the café has become a gathering point for the neighborhood.

"It makes me happy to see this kind of business in Brownsville; we've had enough nails salons and fast food chains," said Tiffany Infante, who grew up in Brownsville. "We need more places like 3 Black Cats that fosters a sense of community and neighborhood pride."

Infante moved to Bed-Stuy in 2008 but she still spends much of her time in Brownsville because her mother lives there, she said.

Latrice Walker said Belmont Avenue has historically been an economic engine.

"The economic vitality of the neighborhood basically centered on Belmont Avenue," she said. "Over time, Belmont Avenue has seen different resurgences in industries from produce to textile and now businesses such as 3 Black Cats and Made in Brownsville is the start of the economic renaissance of Brownsville, and I'm excited."

Made in Brownsville, a non-profit that offers training in the arts, science and design to youth in Brownsville, has been instrumental in the efforts to revitalize Belmont Avenue, local leaders say.

Founder Quardean Lewis-Allen hopes to tackle Brownsville's grim poverty and unemployment statistics — 14.8 percent of the neighborhood is unemployed — with paid work apprenticeships for 14-to-24 year-olds, school programs including a videography class at a local high school and public workshops, open to all ages.

"We're trying to connect our youth to jobs," said Lewis-Allen. The idea is to give the community access to "tools, technology, and a network of people in creative fields and design, technology, and social entrepreneurship fields," he added.

At the end of 2016, Lewis-Allen moved his organization into its new headquarters on Belmont Avenue. But the space had infrastructure issues, he said, so they have since moved to a temporary location on Rockaway Avenue until they find a new space on Belmont.

### **Public housing: a blessing, a curse, or both?**

Brownsville's abundant public housing, which has struggled with gang violence and other issues, might in fact be its saving grace, local leaders said. The neighborhood has 18 New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments where 60 percent of the neighborhood's residents live.

"I think in some ways that's the safety net in regards to displacement," said Brodick of the Brownsville Community Justice Center.

"Whatever happens, 60 percent of the people who live here in public housing will still live here," he said.

These developments have been blighted by violence over the years. There were 14 murders in Brownsville in 2016 — the highest rate of any city precinct — and many of them occurred in its NYCHA projects. Still, reflecting a citywide trend, crime has been on the decline in recent years. The murder rate has gone down 81 percent since 1993, when there were 74 murders. New York City Police department statistics show. But relations between the police force and the community, which is 75 percent African-American and 20 percent Hispanic, are often still tense.

The remaining 40 percent of Brownsville residents live in private housing, but the neighborhood doesn't have the housing stock to attract wealthy outside buyers, experts say.

"You know, Brownsville doesn't have the brownstones that you find in Bed-Stuy," said Brodick. "So I do think architecture and the lack of real estate is going to somehow limit that [displacement]."

*The below screenshot of a map from real estate website Zillow on Oct. 30 shows housing units for sale in Brownsville as compared to surrounding areas of Brooklyn.*

As of Oct. 30, 2017, 13 homes were listed for sale in Brownsville, as compared to 189 in Bedford-Stuyvesant. That's 93 percent more listings, even though Bed-Stuy is only about twice the size of Brownsville.

The few homes that are for sale in Brownsville tend to be more modern than the 19th century brownstones that attracted outside buyers to Bed-Stuy and Crown Heights.

"There are older townhouses there, but there's a lot of newer housing stock in Brownsville," said Joanna Mayfield Marks, a Brooklyn real estate agent at Halstead Property, who recently sold a house in Brownsville, which was listed for \$450,000.

"The construction on the house is probably from the 1970s versus some of the brownstone Brooklynners," she said.

It's common to find houses for under \$500,000 in Brownsville, Marks said, which can't be said of many other neighborhoods in Brooklyn. She said this price point could attract many to the neighborhood who can't afford to buy anywhere else in Brooklyn.

The median home value is \$337,300 in Brownsville, less than half of that in Bed-Stuy, which is \$819,400, according to Zillow.

### **A neighborhood so long forgotten, finally being noticed**

Despite Brownsville's risky reputation, profusion of public housing and lack of brownstones, big changes are on the way in the neighborhood.

In March, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced a \$1.4 billion plan to bring resources such as new health care services and jobs to Brownsville and parts of central Brooklyn, including East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights.

The city announced in March the creation of a new “Neighborhood Innovation Lab,” which will collect feedback from residents, organizations, and business owners on how the city can improve the area. The city is partnering with organizations such as the justice center, the Dream Big Foundation, and the Pitkin Avenue Business Improvement District, among others.

The city is also investing \$30 million to improve Brownsville’s Betsy Head Park.

“Design is underway for the first phase of renovations to the park, which will address the north parcel of the park at Blake Avenue between Thomas S. Boyland Street and Bristol Street,” said Maeri Ferguson, a spokeswoman for the Parks Department. “Based on community input, the design will include sports courts, a skate park, community gathering areas, synthetic turf, a walking track, adult fitness equipment, parkour, ‘Bankshot’ (basketball hoops at varying heights to encourage all ages to play – this is a fun, new first in Brooklyn), and more.”

“I feel like somebody had to be the trailblazer and now everybody is jumping on the bandwagon,” said Brodick. The city has been doing a better job with sanitation and helping beautify Belmont, he said.

It’s even looking at bringing free wi-fi to parts of Belmont Avenue.

“We see a lot of city investment coming to Belmont as a result of the good work,” said Brodick.

But despite this new investment, affordable private housing remains a concern for residents.

The neighborhood’s community board lists affordable housing as its top priority in its annual statement of needs to the city. But although the city says that all new developments will include affordable housing, the question of what is considered affordable is a crucial one in a neighborhood where the median household income is \$27,166 — one of the lowest in the city — and over a third of the population lives under the poverty line.



## **Brownsville's lacking commercial landscape**

Investment from the city is a good first step for Brownsville, local residents say, but change must also come from within.

"We are just jaded enough by the divestment from our community to be protective over it," said Lewis-Allen of Made in Brownsville. "This makes us mindful and skeptical when someone claims to have the solution. Too much experimenting has left us with a milieu of remnants from failed solutions."

"Now we want to take back our authority over space and place to author a new future that doesn't require a manifesto for someone to approve or deny," he added.

One of the biggest challenges to Brownsville residents taking ownership over their space is how hard it is for locals to start businesses in the neighborhood.

Commercial rents are high and the average resident doesn't make enough money to afford them, said Weaver at New York Communities for Change.

Brodick from the community justice center agreed that it's nearly impossible for Brownsville residents to start businesses without help.

"Brick and mortar stores are not cheap," said Brodick. "You have to have that start-up money for any business and that initial economic risk to open up a business is something that people are weary of and frankly don't have the finances to do."

That's why organizations such as the Dream Big Foundation are essential, he said. Without their backing, the Jimenez sisters could never have opened 3 Black Cats Café.

"Mom and Pop" shops in Brownsville find it nearly impossible to compete with big-brand competitors, said Latrice Walker.

"When I was growing up, there was a sneaker store on Belmont Avenue called Simons," said Walker. "It was my favorite store for the latest sneakers and gear. Unfortunately, Simon and other stores alike ended up closing because of the big name business like Foot Locker or Jimmy Jazz."

Foot Locker is on Pitkin Avenue and Jimmy Jazz has a location on both Pitkin and Belmont.

If Brownsville residents stay in the neighborhood to shop, many of them go to Pitkin Avenue. But although it is a livelier commercial corridor than Belmont, the businesses lining the street tend to be chains such as Foot Locker, Rainbow, Dominos and McDonalds. Small businesses are sorely lacking.

Longtime resident Anita Pierce said that the neighborhood's existing goods and services are not up to par.

"I don't shop in Brownsville because the quality and cost of food," said Pierce, who has lived in Brownsville for 38 years. "I go outside of the neighborhood where I can obtain quality food and service."

Instead, she often shops in Downtown Brooklyn.

"Folks like myself want quality food, restaurants and social activities without going outside of the neighborhood," Pierce said.

Some residents of Brownsville will likely be pushed out of the neighborhood at some point as gentrification makes its mark on the area, as it has throughout Brooklyn, Pierce said. But she has hope that over time, residents will become empowered.

The key to this empowerment may be in thinking of new, creative ways local can start businesses, said Brodick.

The justice center is launching a smartphone app called BCJC Live that will serve as a virtual marketplace for Brownsville entrepreneurs. They're also trying to start a flea market on Belmont Avenue for "small Mom and Pop kind of businesses running out of homes who don't have the wherewithal to open up their own store, but who would love a place where they could get the merchandise out there see if it's viable and then maybe turn that into a long-term business," Brodick said.

Experimenting with these types of low-risk endeavors could be a key part of reviving business in Brownsville, he said.

Brownsville has evolved over the years and will continue to evolve, said Lewis-Allen.

"Neighborhoods change," he said. "Brownsville used to be predominantly Jewish until the mid 1900s. The turnover coincided with the introduction of public housing... That

goes to say that we are no different in spirit than those people that lived here before us that grassroots organized to address social challenges of concentrated poverty.”

Lewis-Allen’s consistent message is one that, despite its flaws and its obstacles, the community seems to embody: “Brownsville is resilient.”