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Growing Pains Come and Go in Bed-Stuy

By [MANNY FERNANDEZ](#)

Dakota Blair acknowledges that both he and the apartment building where he lives are somewhat out of place.

Mr. Blair, 23, a software engineer from East Texas, pays \$1,700 a month for a studio in what he calls the Yuppie Spaceship: a new luxury apartment building on an unluxurious corner in Bedford-Stuyvesant, [Brooklyn](#). After nine months in the neighborhood, which New York magazine labeled the city's "next hipster enclave," Mr. Blair is considering moving out.

He figures that for \$1,700, he could be living in Manhattan. There is a subway station down the street from his building at Myrtle and Nostrand Avenues, but it is for the G train, which does not go into Manhattan. Other neighborhoods eagerly anticipate the arrival of new cafes or restaurants, but on Myrtle Avenue, the biggest news is the opening of a Duane Reade pharmacy.

"The only thing keeping me here is my lease," Mr. Blair said.

Even for hipsters, life in one of [New York City](#)'s frontier neighborhoods — long-troubled places at the fringes of gentrification — can be anything but smooth, particularly in these uncertain economic times.

New residents like Mr. Blair have grown frustrated waiting for change to come to Bed-Stuy, a north-central Brooklyn neighborhood with high rates of crime and foreclosures, trash-strewn streets and limited night life. And the owners of businesses that have recently opened to cater to this new population wait, in turn, for a surge that has not yet arrived.

Longtime residents concerned about the architectural and cultural fate of Bed-Stuy, the largest predominantly black neighborhood in New York City, relish the slow speed of change. But they still worry about rising rents and have become weary of living and working next to buildings that are new, sleek and, in their eyes, ugly.

Myrtle Avenue, which cuts across the northern edge of the neighborhood, is at a crossroads of the gentrified and the ungentrified. Down the street from where a shoeless man lay on a piece of cardboard on the sidewalk one recent afternoon, a two-bedroom condo was for sale at 609 Myrtle Avenue for \$675,000. On one side of Myrtle Avenue are the Marcy Houses, one of Brooklyn's biggest public housing projects and the former home

of the rapper [Jay-Z](#), where the average monthly rent, subsidized by the federal government, is \$334. Across the street is the luxury building where Mr. Blair lives, the Mynt, at 756 Myrtle Avenue.

Along the avenue, there are building and roofing supply stores, auto shops and the twin red-brick smokestacks of the Cascade linen and uniform plant. There is a liquor store that advertises a “Birthday Special” — 5 percent off spirits and 10 percent off wines on a customer’s birthday. Into this mix came FreshDirect, the online grocery delivery service, which officially started delivering in April in Bed-Stuy.

There used to be a 12-foot-wide, blue-colored mural at Myrtle and Nostrand Avenues, diagonal from the Mynt. The painting listed the names of neighborhood murder victims inside the chalk outline of a body, an inevitable memorial in a police precinct where homicide was once a weekly occurrence.

Mr. Blair took a picture of the mural in January, but the snapshot is already an antique: Someone covered it up with a thin layer of concrete, and now only one side of it remains, a tribute to lives cut short — Hollywood, Danny Dan, Rocky — itself cut short. It reads “Rest in.”

The half-covered mural is an apt symbol of Bed-Stuy today: a changing neighborhood not quite changed, transforming not in broad strokes but in half-steps.

The average sales price of residential property and the number of sales in Bed-Stuy, Bushwick and other nearby neighborhoods have dropped sharply, according to a recent report released by the brokerage firm Prudential Douglas Elliman. The report found that from April 1 to June 30, the average sales price in the area was \$500,925, down from \$539,187 in the same period a year ago. The situation was different in the Greenpoint and Williamsburg area, where the average sales price was \$663,946, a 13 percent increase from the same period last year.

There have been other signs of stalled growth.

Bed-Stuy had the second-highest number of foreclosure filings in Brooklyn last year and the fourth-highest of any neighborhood in the city, according to an analysis by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at [New York University](#). Building permits have also dropped. In the first two quarters of this year, 50 permits for new residential buildings were issued by the city’s Department of Buildings in Community District 3, which includes Bed-Stuy. In the first two quarters of 2005, 93 such permits were issued.

Jonathan J. Miller, the president and chief executive of Miller Samuel Inc., a real estate appraisal company that prepared the Prudential Douglas Elliman report, said the impact of the credit crunch — tighter lending standards imposed by banks that have made it hard for many people to secure credit — is felt more severely in “emerging markets” like Bed-Stuy.

“The pace has slowed considerably,” Mr. Miller said.

Cafe Naico, which opened at 705 Myrtle Avenue in 2006 offering lattes, smoothies and free Wi-Fi, tried staying open late for dinner for a few

months, but then scaled back its evening hours. “It wasn’t feasible to keep the kitchen open later hours,” said the owner, Ocian Dailly, 33. “There wasn’t enough business.”

Petra Symister, 36, a psychology professor at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, is a regular patron of the cafe, one of the few establishments within walking distance of her condo where customers do not order from behind bulletproof glass.

Ms. Symister moved to Bed-Stuy nearly three years ago from Chelsea in Manhattan, buying a condo on Myrtle Avenue for less than \$400,000. One recent Friday night, about two blocks from her home, a teenager was shot and killed. The next day, her pleasant afternoon at home was briefly interrupted when two detectives from the 79th Precinct asked her if she had heard anything unusual the morning of July 12, when there was a burglary downstairs.

“It’s happening in fits and starts, kind of a jerky progression,” Ms. Symister said of the neighborhood’s rebirth. “But it is happening.”

Indeed, a number of empty lots have been developed for the first time in decades, and there is far less crime than in years past. Private developers, community development corporations like the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation and the city’s housing agency are planning new co-op, rental and condo units, including several projects that allow developers to build at greater than usual density in exchange for setting aside units for low- or middle-income tenants.

But evidence of a slowdown can be seen. The Mynt was originally planned as condominiums, but the developer converted it to rentals, a move other developers in Bed-Stuy have made or are considering.

“There’s not a long tradition for condo development in Bed-Stuy,” said Wendell Walters, an assistant commissioner at the housing agency, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. “We’re trying to make them happen, but the financing has proven to be a little challenging.”

Bed-Stuy’s growing pains have become a public affair. A group of bloggers, mostly newcomers to the neighborhood, draw attention to the best real estate picks and block parties, but also document the setbacks and victories on the path to revitalization.

On Ms. Symister’s blog, www.bedstuyblog.com, she has written about the abrupt closing of a corner gas station and the opening of the Duane Reade. A run-in Mr. Blair had in December with two men on Myrtle Avenue turned into a sizable post on his blog, www.antbed.com. He got the nickname he uses for his building, Yuppie Spaceship, from another neighborhood blog, bedstuybanana.blogspot.com.

The Mynt’s Web site describes the building as being in the “Clinton Hill/Bedford-Stuyvesant area.” The boundaries of Bed-Stuy in the Encyclopedia of New York City place the building well inside Bed-Stuy and blocks outside Clinton Hill. Zipcar, the popular car-sharing company, has several cars in the northern end of Bed-Stuy, but it refers to the area on its Web site not as Bed-Stuy but as Williamsburg.

This reshaping of Bed-Stuy’s boundaries, character and affordability to poor and middle-income families has concerned residents and community

leaders of this predominantly black neighborhood. On Myrtle Avenue, several men and women in the Marcy Houses and the surrounding area worried that buildings like the Mynt, where a one-bedroom rental can cost \$1,900 a month, were the future of Bed-Stuy.

“Most of us can’t afford that,” said Ronald Alston, 63, a semiretired painter who lives on Vernon Avenue.

Matthew Warner, 25, a law student at New York University, has lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a brownstone at the southern end of Bed-Stuy for a little more than a year. He plans to move in a few months to the East Village in Manhattan. “We just wish there was more variety nearby, for places to go out,” he said. “You just wish you could go out and have different types of bars and night life nearby.”

Mr. Warner and Mr. Blair are white, and they said that their decisions to leave or consider leaving had nothing to do with living in a largely black neighborhood. But they and other recent arrivals described being the targets of hostile racial remarks, isolated incidents that they said detracted from the positive reaction they received from others in the neighborhood.

Henry L. Butler, 41, a longtime Bed-Stuy resident and the chairman of Community Board 3, said the race of the newcomers was not the issue. “It’s about income,” said Mr. Butler, who wants to see more housing that is affordable to working-class tenants. “I’m not looking to Harlemize Bedford-Stuyvesant. My emphasis is on the working people.”

Roy Vanasco, 82, calls his home-appliance store on Myrtle Avenue, quite accurately, the “house of a million parts.” Lined with stove burners, newspaper clippings and signed photographs of the actor Harry Guardino, there is nothing modern about All Appliance Refrigerator, which he opened at 610 Myrtle Avenue in 1953. The shop is hard to miss: It is the one with the flag-draped washing machine out front.

Across the street — Mr. Vanasco remembers when the street had elevated train tracks — is the new condo building at 609 Myrtle Avenue. “It doesn’t have the mood of the community,” he said of the building. “It’s just sad that money can change a neighborhood, can destroy a neighborhood.”

He said he was offered \$1.5 million for his three-story building and the narrow lot next door. He said he had turned it down, for now.

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