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Revitalization in Harlem indicates second renaissance



Faith Hope Consolo

No other neighborhood in Manhattan is as celebrated in song and story as Harlem. Recognized for many decades as a site of creativity and historical significance, this famous Manhattan neighborhood is rich in literary, musical and artistic culture. Today, this celebrated community is humming with new business of all kinds! An upper-class Dutch settlement in colonial times, Harlem is home to some of the city's toniest mansions. Through the 19th Century, it remained a high-end residential area; in the 20th Century it gained currency as an exciting submarket for the fashion and entertainment industries. Here's where the "Harlem Renaissance" revolutionized the American artistic scene in the 1930s through the '50s. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, and other Harlemites placed their distinctive imprint on American music and literature—and today, Harlem is still thought of as one of the top creative centers of the U.S. sports stars like Willie Mays and Sugar Ray Robinson added to Harlem's excitement in those heady times.

New York City in general took a long economic downside from the 1950s into the early 1980s, and during that period both the reality and the reputation of Harlem suffered severely. But you can't keep a great neighborhood down forever!

Fast forward to today—Harlem is transforming as residential developments are revealed, clubs and restaurants multiply, and the shopping landscape is following suit. The Apollo Theater, on 125th St., remains the hub of Harlem's entertainment district, and a host of fashionable retailers are setting up shop within a radius of a few blocks.

Notable among these is House of Hoops, which blends the trendy athletic shoes of Nike and Foot Locker, just opened at 125th St. and Eighth Ave. Baby Phat will have a shop on 125th later this year. Shoes bought there can get broken in at Planet Fitness, on 126th St. at Martin Luther King Blvd. You can expect to see other name-brand retailers of fashionable casual wear in Harlem before long: Levi's, J. Crew, Hollister, and others are currently looking for space in the neighborhood. American Apparel is looking to expand into this market, with a store at 250 West 125th St.

A number of upscale retail developments in Harlem have increased the demand for home stores there. N, which offers both cutting-edge home décor and the latest apparel and accessories, has taken two floors at 116th St. and Seventh Ave.; Soha Style offers eye-catching items for the home just two blocks to the East, at 116th St. and Fifth Ave. Macky Dancy, car-dealer to the stars, has opened a new showroom for his Dancy-Power Automotive Group on the ground floor of the Lenox condo development, at 129th Street and Lenox Avenue. There he'll lure stars from the worlds of sports and music with his collection of six-figure exotic vehicles.

Harlem has long been known for its first-rate dining options, and traditionally the emphasis in that neighborhood was on Southern, Caribbean, Latino, and African restaurants. Those cuisines still dominate, but a more eclectic and gourmet-oriented selection is coming into the neighborhood now. Restaurateur Danny Meyer is being openly courted by the community to open a restaurant there, and so is Keith McNally, who has recently been so successful farther downtown. Rumor has it that two celebrity chefs—Emeril Lagasse and Mario Batali are also looking for space in Harlem. On the convenience end of the spectrum, Starbuck's already has one location in Harlem, and is planning several others, including one at 2195 Frederick Douglass Blvd. and another at 201 West 125th St.

Banks are also showing considerable impact on the neighborhood, Citibank, Chase, Washington Mutual, and Capital One have all opened new branches in Harlem, and Wachovia Bank will move into East Harlem with a branch at The Bridges NYC, a new luxury condo development. The Bridges will also house a veterans center, and both Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association are considering taking large blocks of office space in Harlem.

Two new hotels are also going up in Harlem. Hotel 124, located at 125th St. and Fifth Ave., will be one of Harlem's first new hotels since the 1960s, and several big-name hoteliers have been mentioned in connection with the new construction at 124th St. and Eighth Ave.—W, most notably.

Retail is changing in a very big way. Just north of Central Park, at the southern end of Harlem: 15 buildings, 75 stores and 125,000 s/f along Central Park North, Fifth and Seventh Aves. are available. Harlem's big advantage has over the rest of Manhattan, in terms of retail leasing, is price. You can find space for as little as \$50 per s/f, and premium space is around \$125 per s/f. Harlem is an unusual neighborhood in that it has a combination of very long-term residents—people who've been there for generations—incomers, and tourists. It's the only neighborhood in Manhattan, aside from Greenwich Village, that's primarily residential and yet attracts an upscale tourist trade. Everybody wants to see Harlem—and they all want to come home with the T-shirt, so to speak.

This is an exciting time for Harlem—perhaps the most exciting time in more than half a century. It's a second Harlem renaissance: the restoration of the once and future trendiest neighborhood in New York.

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