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Where History Meets Industry



SLOPING down from Myrtle Avenue to the walled fortress of the [Brooklyn Navy Yard Industrial Park](#), and bisected by the rumbling equator of the elevated Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the two-block-wide semi-industrial neighborhood of Wallabout would seem to have some unenviable physical challenges. It lacks subways, and although it shares a name with nearby Wallabout Bay, its residents are cut off by the Navy Yard from the tantalizingly close waterfront.

But for all of the neighborhood's isolation and industrial grit, and perhaps because of these characteristics, many of its residents describe it with immense pride and fondness.

"To live there, you're a little bit of a risk taker and an adventurer, because you're off the grid a little bit," said Gary Hattem, a chairman of the Historic Wallabout Association, who since 1976 has lived on Vanderbilt Avenue in an Italianate 1850s row house with a wooden porch. "And there's more of a romantic quality to living there, because the houses are a bit more random."

Among outsiders, the area has typically been viewed as simply the northern fringe of Clinton Hill and Fort Greene. But Wallabout has been coming into its own of late, attracting developers and preservation agencies alike.

The Wallabout distinction, local preservationists say, is intended to summon up an awareness of the area as something more than just a poorer version of its neighbors. Its history and streetscape are certainly textured. Its name can be traced to the 17th century, when a group of Walloons, French-speaking Protestants from what is now Belgium, settled along the nearby bay, which came to be called “Waal-bogt,” or “bend in the harbor.” The Navy Yard dates to 1801, and the Wallabout Market operated north of Flushing Avenue from the 1880s until it was gobbled up by the Navy Yard in [World War II](#).

The Historic Wallabout Association, a preservation group, defines the neighborhood as the 22 blocks between Classon and Carlton Avenues from Flushing Avenue to Myrtle. Some blocks are mixed-use, but buildings south of the B. Q. E. are generally residential, while those north of it are industrial. Some industrial buildings are honeycombed with artists’ studios.

Wallabout contains the largest concentration of pre-Civil War wood-frame houses in the city, many with early porches and cornices. This was a big draw for Dina Rosenbloom, a marketing executive. Last year she and her husband, Brice, paid \$1.3 million for a two-family 1850s house in the new city historic district on Vanderbilt Avenue. As with many old Wallabout houses, its wood facade had been covered with vinyl siding. But it retained plenty of charm.

“It doesn’t feel like you’re in [Brooklyn](#) when you walk in,” Ms. Rosenbloom said. “You feel transported to an old wood-frame house in a country town.” The four-bedroom house had been widened to 25 feet by the enclosure of a side walkway, so that an internal bathroom wall is the former exterior of the house, complete with antique wooden siding. “It’s unique, not cookie cutter,” she said.

Although the city bestowed landmark protection on only one block of Wallabout last year, a wider area between Myrtle and Park Avenues was placed on the state and federal historic registers. These designations could bring tax credits to owners like the Rosenblooms if they restored their facade.

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

The area has long been populated by members of the working and creative classes, joined recently by professionals. The nearby [Pratt Institute](#) has brought in artistic types like Jim Morehand, an interior designer turned massage therapist who graduated from Pratt in 1993 and shares a Vanderbilt Avenue row house with Dave Polazzo, a retired teacher. The couple host a salon, Parlor Jazz, out of the house.

Census data covering Wallabout, as well as one block to its east and three to its west, showed that the estimated 7,613 residents in 2009 were 43 percent African-American, 35 percent Hispanic and

17 percent white. The proportion of whites rose 6 percent from 2000, as the share of blacks shrank by about the same amount. Mr. Morehand, who is of mixed heritage but says he is perceived as black, said he had sensed resentment among black renters toward white newcomers, “but there haven’t been any neighborhood conflicts that I’ve seen.”

The area is home to many gay and biracial couples. “We wanted to raise a family in a place where the child sees the differences in people,” said Luan Cox, an Internet entrepreneur who in 2009, along with her partner, Eliane Bugod, paid \$654,000 for a condo unit in a town house north of the B. Q. E.

Navy Green, a 458-unit housing complex, is rising on the site of a former naval prison on Clermont and Flushing Avenues. It will include 4 apartment buildings and 23 town houses, with three-quarters of the units for low- and middle-income tenants. Residents began moving into the first completed building last month. A “supportive housing” building that includes 59 units for the homeless is to open in the spring.

For decades Wallabout was so bereft of high-quality shops that residents “dreamed of buying a head of lettuce” nearby, said Mr. Hattem, a board member of Myrtle Avenue’s local development corporation. But all that has changed, largely because of Pratt and the Navy Yard. In recent years Myrtle’s bulletproof-glass liquor store has been joined by organic groceries like Greene-Ville Garden and restaurants like Putnam’s Pub and Cooker. A pedestrian plaza is in the works. And last year Pratt opened a building on Myrtle Avenue, deepening its commitment to a strip once nicknamed Murder Avenue.

“I remember running gun battles down Myrtle, probably in ’02 or ’03,” said an officer with the 88th Precinct, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak publicly. “But that doesn’t happen anymore,” he added, describing crime as minimal on Myrtle and in Wallabout generally.

“It does feel like the area is primed,” said Adam Friedman, director of the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#), “but we want to make sure the development doesn’t lead to displacement.” He said that Pratt graduate students would begin a land-use study this semester as a first step toward the possible creation of an “innovation corridor” between Pratt and the Navy Yard.

The success of the Navy Yard, with 275 businesses employing 6,000, among them 695 from Wallabout and surrounding blocks, has helped rejuvenate Washington Avenue. [Steiner Studios](#), doubling its space within the yard, is remaking a building to house the Brooklyn College Graduate School of Cinema.

As Wallabout continues to heat up, the future seems very much up for grabs.

“North of the B. Q. E., I think there will be enormous, exponentially increasing pressure to convert more and more of that to residential,” said Andrew Kimball, the president of the [Brooklyn Navy Yard](#). “Certainly Pratt and the Navy Yard are aligned in wanting to make sure there’s a balance kept between residential and industrial.”

WHAT YOU’LL PAY

Doug Bowen, a resident and senior vice president of CORE real estate, said the average house price last year was \$975,000 or \$395 per square foot, virtually unchanged from 2010. Andrea Yarrington, a vice president of the Corcoran Group, said houses took an average of 136 days to sell, versus 347 in 2010.

Ms. Yarrington added that 15 condos sold in 2011, for an average of \$452 per square foot. A search on Streeteasy.com showed four co-ops, three condos and three town houses on the market.

WHAT TO DO

Washington Avenue has Il Porto, an Italian restaurant, as well as a gourmet grocery, a Cuban restaurant and an art gallery. J. J.’s Navy Yard Cocktail Lounge, a stalwart of seediness, closed in 2010; its new owner plans to lease to a Dunkin’ Donuts and a Subway.

Fort Greene Park is a short walk. The Brooklyn Navy Yard Center at Building 92, a museum devoted to the yard’s previous occupants and current tenants, opened late last year. It will soon house an employment center.

THE SCHOOLS

Public School 46 on Clermont Avenue received an A on its most recent city progress report. No. 157, on Kent Avenue, earned a B.

Middle School 113 on Adelphi Street in Fort Greene teaches Grades 6 through 8. It scored a D.

Nearby public high schools include the selective [Brooklyn Technical High School](#) in Fort Greene, where SAT averages last year were 583, 659, and 579, versus 436, 460, and 431 citywide.

THE COMMUTE

The closest train is the G, which runs along Lafayette Avenue in Clinton Hill, stopping at the Classon Avenue and Clinton-Washington Avenues stations.

Buses take under 20 minutes to stops a short walk from the 2,3,4, 5, N and R trains at Court Street-Borough Hall. Some residents take the B62 from Park Avenue; others catch the B57 on Flushing. The B54 runs along Myrtle to the A, C, F and R trains at Jay Street/MetroTech. The B69 bus travels Vanderbilt and reaches the A and C trains at High Street within 10 minutes; residents grumble about infrequent service.

THE HISTORY

Walt Whitman completed "Leaves of Grass" while living at 99 Ryerson Street, according to "Brooklyn's Historic Clinton Hill and Wallabout," by Brian Merlis.