

NEW YORK POST

This outer-boro locale could be NYC's next big neighborhood

Strolling through Ridgewood, Queens, one doesn't get a sense right away that change is imminent.

The main commercial corridors crisscrossing the neighborhood — Seneca, Myrtle and Fresh Pond avenues — are still a jumble of local businesses, discount retailers and mid-range, mall-style chain stores.

In keeping with Queens' international character, the sidewalks teem with a cross-section of residents and vendors selling DVDs, mobile accessories and street food.

But in the tree-lined grid between the busy corridors, small things are percolating and creating a buzz that has put Ridgewood on the map as the next big thing.

Solidly planted in working-class Queens, it's the shared boundary with Bushwick to the southwest that gives Ridgewood its newfound cool. First, priced-out artists spilled over, with others shortly following.

Lorimoto Gallery, for instance, was an early arrival, setting up in a former knitting factory.

Scene-y restaurants such as Norma's, Houdini Pizza Laboratory and Bunker Vietnamese also popped up.

At the same time, local heritage businesses like the old-time social club Gottscheer Hall, Morscher's Pork Store and Rudy's Bakery are enjoying an infusion of new customers.



The very red, very checkered Julia's Wine Bar.

The march continues as three recently opened businesses demonstrate a vote of confidence in the neighborhood: artisanal coffee shop Milk & Pull, at 778 Seneca Ave., Julia's Wine Bar, at 818 Woodward Ave., and Topos Bookstore Cafe, at 788 Woodward Ave.

Angela Austin, who along with her husband, Joe, owns the original Bushwick location of Milk & Pull, says in Ridgewood, "the microcosm of business openings is still new." But, she says, it's not meant to take over the existing neighborhood fabric.

"We want our place to be open to everyone and we want to be part of the community that is already there," she says. Austin echoes the sentiments of Crystal River Williams, co-owner of Norma's and Julia's Wine Bar, who moved here seven years ago with her family.

"It's a question of how do we preserve Ridgewood and still welcome new people," says Williams.

Expanded M line subway service and lower rents are attracting those priced out of Brooklyn hot spots like Bushwick, Greenpoint and Williamsburg, and other gentrifying Queens neighborhoods like Astoria and Long Island City.

Manhattanites, too, have found the neighborhood amenable to business: Bunker Vietnamese has Eleven Madison Park alum Jimmy Tu in the kitchen, and Topos is run by former book buyers at St. Marks Bookshop.

Samantha Zulch lived in Bushwick for four years before moving to Ridgewood for "less rent and a quieter, better community." She reduced her monthly nut by \$150. Filmmaker Adam Kerchman pays \$1,500 for a one-bedroom that he says "four blocks into

Bushwick would be easily \$2,000.” But more than the lower rent, Kerchman says, he moved across the border for a more real neighborhood.

“There’s a lot of hipster nonsense in Bushwick, and there’s not too much of that in Ridgewood,” says Kerchman.

Not yet, anyway. On blogs, amalgamations like “Quooklyn” and “Ridgewick” are tossed around as hybrid monikers for the newly noticed nabe. And, just last month, “Weird Loners,” a six-episode series set in Ridgewood created by the “King of Queens” producer, premiered on FOX earlier this week.

Christian Wittmann, a broker at Halstead Property and himself a lifelong Ridgewood resident, says, “There seems to be this sort of branding going on. It’s kind of nice it’s been discovered and people recognize it’s in Queens.” But he bristles at the notion that the hipsters or anyone are gentrifying Ridgewood.

“This neighborhood was never abandoned — it was always upheld with care,” he says. “It’s just been under the radar.”

Wittmann’s sales illustrate the new housing fever here.

Last September, he sold a two-family, five-bedroom Federal-style townhouse needing a full gut renovation for \$540,000, which, after renovation, returned to the market in February, listing for \$829,000. Around the same time, he listed a two-bedroom, two-bath condominium built in the 1990s for \$449,000, which sold November 2014 after multiple bids for \$460,000 — in its original condition.

And, Wittmann says, “If we were to bring either of these back to market, I would gather, each one would sell for about 20 percent more ... and probably even higher.”

Ninze Chen-Benchev, 27, the condo buyer, moved to Ridgewood after renting a small two-bedroom in Greenpoint, and a two-year search in neighborhoods like Bushwick, Astoria, Long Island City and Sunnyside. A newlywed freelance art director, she needed more space for her at-home studio.

“I never actually considered Ridgewood until I saw the apartment,” she said, adding that her purchase was “definitely not crazy — like a studio for \$700,000 or \$800,000.”

“I was scared in the beginning but I did research and I knew it was a safe area and I felt more calm,” she said. “You find more up-and-coming restaurants, it’s still comfortable, and there are little places here and there and it’s a surprise to find.”

But Ridgewood’s fast trajectory has left other would-be buyers frustrated.

Both Williams and Austin, the local business owners, say they'd buy if they could find something.

Williams, whose rent for a two-bedroom apartment jumped \$800 in a year, notes house prices jumped \$200,000 in the time she's been looking.

Bob and Randi Sloan, long-time Upper East Side residents, started their search 16 months ago in Jackson Heights, and when priced out of there, shifted their focus to Ridgewood.

"There seems to be very little available," Bob Sloan said. "Open houses are crowded — you can't even get up the stairs. There's a frenzy [with] people clamoring for something."

What they'll get — if they can find or afford it — are mostly multi-family buildings and Federal or Romanesque-style townhouses, which list on StreetEasy from \$1.15 million to \$1.4 million for a six-family building.

Prices for inventory are "amazing," says Joseph V. Crifasi, a longtime Queens broker who has several condominium listings ranging from \$308,000 for a one-bedroom to \$475,000 for a two-bedroom, two-bathroom.

"We've sold two three-families over \$1.1 million each. We're selling six-families in the \$1.5 million price range," says Crifasi.

"In the last 15 to 18 months, prices have gone up considerably — at least a 30 percent increase."

There is little new construction in the area, mainly, according to Crifasi, because "it's hard to create a development site because a lot of people won't sell.

"They're not going to cash out and leave."

But where there is room for development, it's happening, says Andrew Barrocas, CEO of MNS, a residential brokerage firm that's marketing new sites in the neighborhood.

Barrocas cited Essex Capital's 90-unit complex at 16-14 and 16-26 Madison St., two former warehouses under conversion to rentals, as a test ground for things to come.

"For a long time there really wasn't a market — it's so new, it's in the infancy stages," he says. Barrocas's firm will market two other projects currently in the planning stages: a

120-unit rental building at Myrtle and St. Nicholas estimated to break ground in May, and an unnamed site straddling the border of Queens and Brooklyn.

“You’re seeing a lot of pushover from the Bushwick/Ridgewood intersection,” he adds. “There is a huge market for condominiums and I think you’ll see people test that.”