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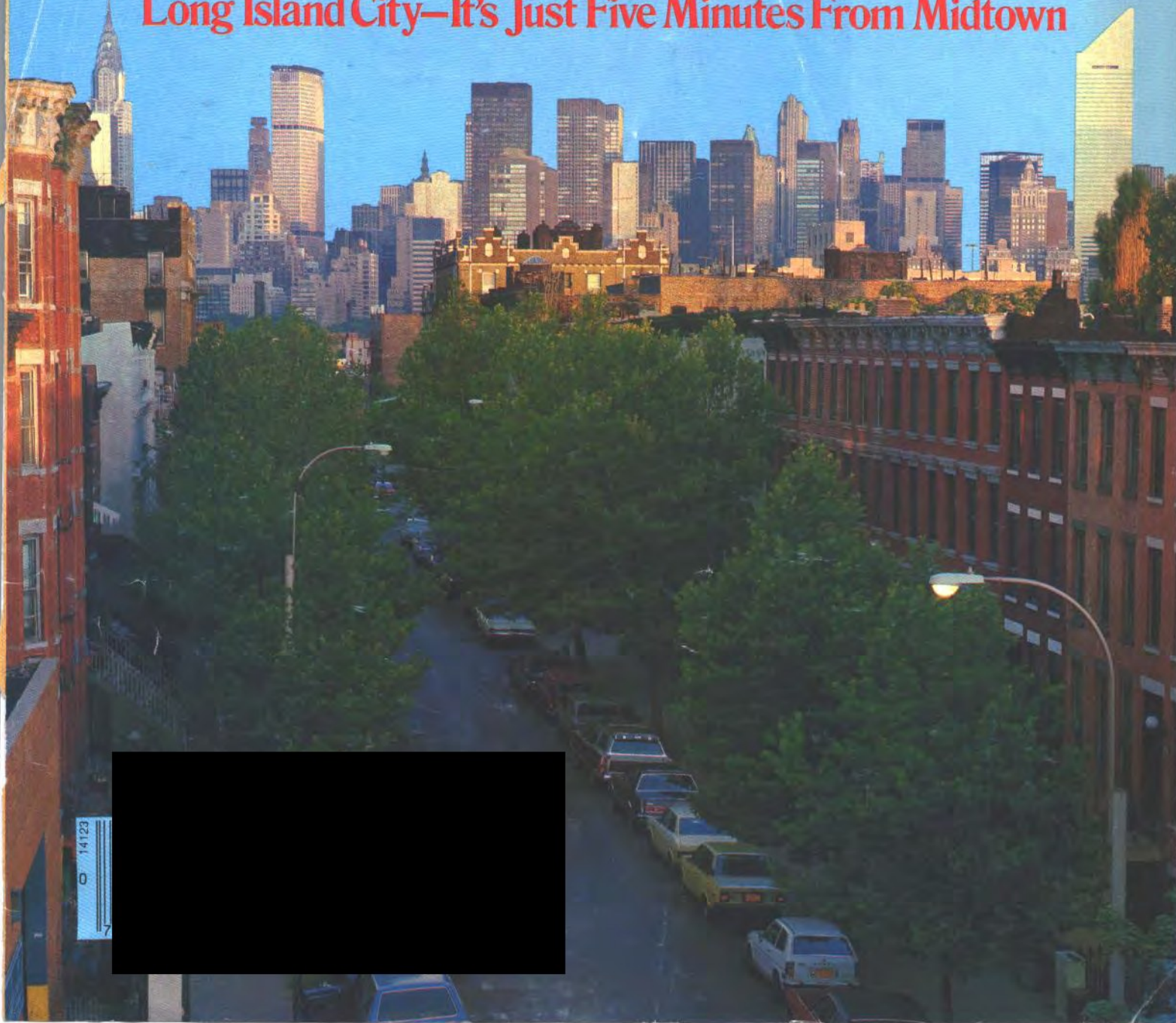
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NEW YORK

The Next Hot Neighborhood

Long Island City—It's Just Five Minutes From Midtown



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The Next Neighborhood:

By Bob Keating

FORTY-FOUR FLOORS ABOVE THIRD AVENUE, TWO PUBLISHING executives peer with binoculars through their conference-room window. Panning past the United Nations building and across the East River, they home in on 500 acres of Queens marked by a giant PepsiCola sign and known as Long Island City.

The two men cover the waterfront from the 59th Street Bridge, Long Island City's northern border, one and a half miles south to Greenpoint, the Brooklyn frontier. As they go, they recite aloud the name of the owner of each parcel of land. Since stumbling on Long Island City by accident a few years ago, these executives have walked each of the region's dreary industrial streets and the scattered pockets of residential blocks with an obsessive passion. They know the vacant buildings. The title shifts. What's new, what's old. When a tennis club opened, they joined. A new restaurant? They'd frequent it. Often, the two entrepreneurs take the IRT No. 7 train one stop from Grand Central Station to have lunch in Queens.

Unlike some other well-to-do Manhattanites who consider Long Island City's industrial skyline an eyesore, these publishing executives revel in the sight. With its underutilized waterfront, postcard view of the Manhattan skyline, low property values, and the best transportation in the city, Long Island City just has to take off, or so these men think.

Plainly, *something* is happening in Long Island City. It's time to buy in. Next week they're going for a drive with some of their backers.

One of them whispers, "It's like an oil field."

WHAT EXACTLY IS GOING ON IN LONG ISLAND City? Most New Yorkers don't even know where it is. And those who do, know it best for the wrong things: the Ely Avenue subway slasher, the napalm-like explosion at the Chiclets-gum factory, or as the spawning ground for half the delivery trucks in New York.

"When I tell people that I live in Long Island City," says one newcomer, "they think I'm fooling."

But they won't for long. This largely industrial and manufacturing area of Queens, known to locals as Hunter's Point, is undergoing a massive urban face-lift. The oldest developed section of Queens—settled in the early seventeenth century—it is bounded by the East River on the west, Newtown Creek on the south, the Long Island Rail Road's Sunnyside Yards on the east, and the bridge on the north.

Once considered the small-industry center of the country, Long Island City is also the home of about 2,000 largely low-income families, nearly all of whom are white. Half



Long Island City

the area's total population of 7,500 are of foreign descent, and more than half of these were born outside the United States. Only one in twenty graduated from college, and more than half never finished high school.

The upgrading of Long Island City involves at least eight major projects. Speculators are busily accumulating properties. Park Avenue lawyers are literally going door to door looking for anyone who'll sell. "Five years ago, you couldn't get a taker for property in Long Island City," says one homeowner. "Now it's like the Klondike. You're sitting on top of a gold mine." But the surest sign of a neighborhood marked for revitalization (read gentrification) is the beginning of quiet displacement of small businesses and low-income families. Already, these major projects are either under way or on the drawing board:

□ A twin-tower waterfront condominium complex. Each tower will have 80 condo units. The towers will be equipped with a pool, sauna, and recreational facilities. According to the developer, Tino Scarpa, who owns Tino's restaurant, on 58th Street, a second phase will put a large marina with a restaurant and nightclub on the river in front of the complex. Scarpa says the condo complex will sell its \$190,000 and \$230,000 apartments "exclusively to executives and corporations." Total cost: \$20 million.

□ A floating restaurant. It will be constructed on a barge beside the 44th Drive pier, just opposite the Citicorp building. Tom Quinn, who owns restaurants in Connecticut and Lake Placid, will spend \$1.4 million on the two-level establishment, which will seat 316—over twice as many as the River Café in Brooklyn. Seafood and Italian and French cuisine will be served in the downstairs dining room. Upstairs will be a piano bar and outdoor terrace. Outside, there will be a promenade, bandstand, floating dock, and snack bar.

□ The Queens Performing Arts Center (QPAC). Built on three city blocks, QPAC will buy then lease a portion of a projected "arts district" surrounding the center. The proposed QPAC performance space includes a 3,000-seat indoor pavilion expandable to hold 5,000, a 2,000-seat theater, two smaller theaters, and studio space. The envisioned arts district will include artists' housing, loft space, video facilities, studios, galleries, restaurants, and shops—all "a catalyst for substantial private development." The projected budget of \$67 million, most of which would come from the federal government, has yet to be approved.

□ A new Queens Plaza subway station. A key facet of the still-uncompleted 63rd Street line from Central Park to Jamaica Center, the \$175-million station will tie together three transit lines. The project calls for the upgrading of the surrounding Queens Plaza business district as well.

landscaping, traffic routing, and development of local shops and businesses.

□ *Queens Plaza South.* The old West Chemical factory, on Jackson Avenue at the corner of Queens Boulevard, is being converted into a farmers'-market-style food-manufacturing-and-distribution center. Called QP's Marketplace, this project is currently slated to bring four of New York City's major food wholesalers to the location, including a seafood importer, a macaroni company from Brooklyn, and a pork-and-sausage distributor. Shawn Development foresees selling merchandise directly from boxcars on the railway that leads right to the abandoned factory and bringing in a variety of shops and restaurants. This conversion of West Chemical is being done in two stages. A third phase will place a Designers Outlet in the municipal parking garage across the street on Queens Boulevard. Bill Modell, one of the men behind Shawn Development, has already put up over \$1 million in cash and expects to spend at least twice that much.

□ *Star Journal newspaper building conversion.* This old newspaper building will be turned into commercial space, with a newspaper museum/restaurant.

Other plans call for a further expansion of LaGuardia Community College and more brownstone renovation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LONG ISLAND CITY IS MORE sensitive and complicated than that of any neighborhood in New York. Long Island City is not a declining area. Nor an advancing one. It's a healthy small-manufacturing and low-income working-class community. But it's stagnant. And given City Hall's current bent toward gentrification—the conversion of poor, working-class areas into middle-class refuges—choice neighborhoods convenient to midtown can't be allowed to stagnate.

What is going on now in Long Island City strongly resembles what happened in SoHo fifteen years ago. Indeed, the current state of the two communities is intertwined: Once rural settlements well removed from the bustle of New York's center, both have long since been overrun by the city's expansion. Still, they have survived the years as stubborn, working-class, ethnic communities in areas saturated with small "incubator" industries. Walking through the 100-year-old Italian section at the southern tip of Long Island City known as St. Mary's Parish is much like strolling through the south Village. One local man describes it as "a little bit of small town, a little bit of Old World."

St. Mary's Parish was founded in the late nineteenth century, at about the time the south Village and SoHo were nearly overwhelmed by the textile industry. The south Village and SoHo finally found relief in the early 1960s, when the City Planning Commission talked of revamping the area. Nervous industries fled—many to Long Island City. Artists began moving into SoHo. But with city policy and media attention driving prices up in SoHo, many of its new artist residents left, often also for Long Island City. There, rent was cheap, loft space handy, and proximity to Manhattan excellent.

While this was occurring, roughly at the start of the seventies, the city abandoned its efforts to utilize St. Mary's Parish for industrial expansion. By 1976, with the establishment of an artists' studio space—P.S. 1—in an abandoned elementary school, these displaced SoHo artists found legitimacy. Since then, in what one urban planner terms "an unplannable phenomenon," art, industry, and blue-collar residents have amicably co-existed.

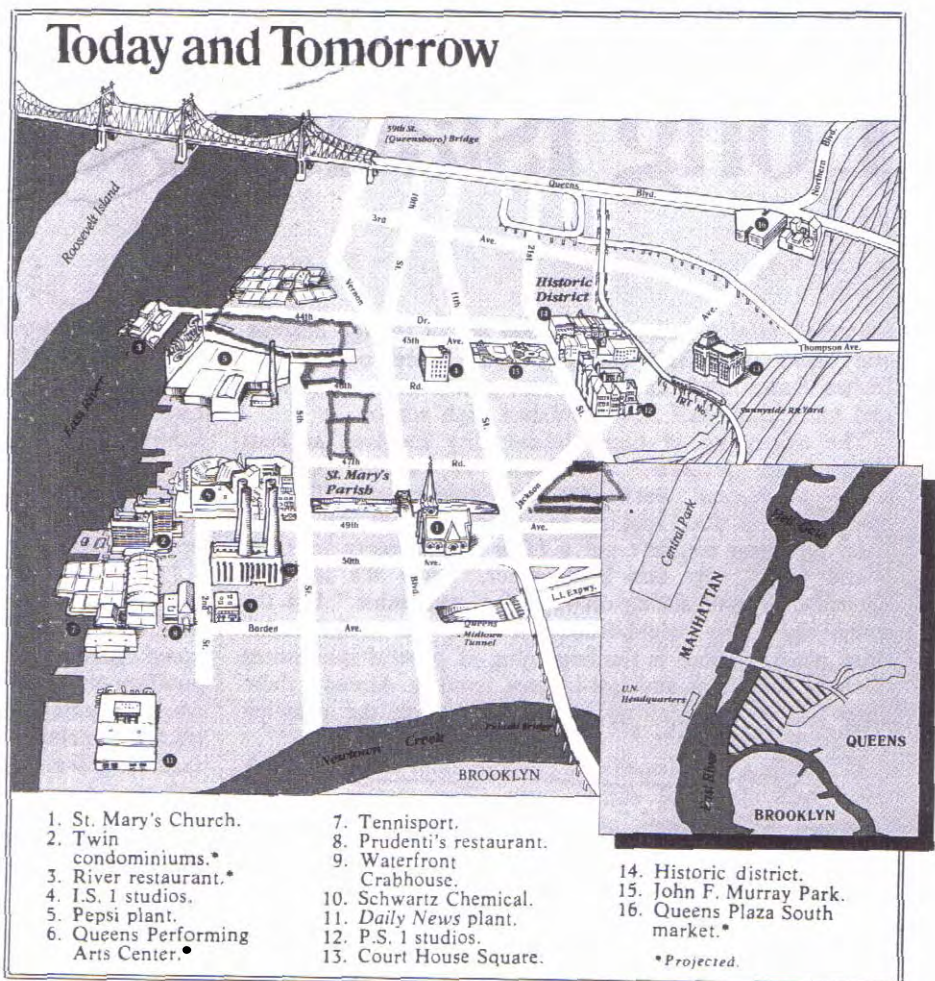
But those days are over.

Suddenly, the rumors and inside dope that Long Island City would be developed have become real. The idea was always brushed off in the past because, unlike Manhattan and Brooklyn Heights with their sound brownstones and SoHo with its spacious cast-irons, Long Island City consists largely of shanty storage sheds, low-quality housing stock, and oddly located areas of underdevelopment. Long Island City could never be renovated on any large scale; it would have to be reconstructed. And that's just what is about to happen. To speculators, it's SoHo-plus, with the East River waterfront thrown in. Judging by the swiftness with which blueprints are being drawn up, earlier concerns over changing the character of a stable neighborhood and jeopardizing a vital industrial base have fallen by the wayside. And the local power blocs are beginning to take sides.

"It's essential that we keep Long Island City a thriving business and manufacturing region," says the director of business development of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, Al Bruchac. "The city has suffered enough companies' moving out. The name of the game is jobs."

"The days of New York as an industrial center are over," says Trent Jones, an actor and recent arrival in Long Island City. "We have to concentrate on the arts."

"The Spanish people in Long Island City are terrified,"



"...Though most New Yorkers don't even know where Long Island City is, speculators see it as SoHo-plus with an East River view..."

says Rene Cruz. "They moved in when the whites moved out, but now the poor have to go."

The prevailing attitude, however, belongs to people like Freddie Botur, the owner of the private-membership Tennisport, right on the riverfront. "The city should develop Long Island City as a recreational area," he says. "Sort of like Manhattan's playground with some high-class housing."

Lunching on broiled chicken on the sunny deck of his tennis club, Freddie Botur knows that Manhattan is watching him. A tall, trim man with white hair and a tan as deep as his Czech accent, he likes to cast his gaze back toward midtown. He twists in the chair and points past the bow of a freighter moving up the East River just past his club. Freddie seems to touch the peak of the Empire State Building with the tip of his fork.

"I had to leave Manhattan," says Freddie, who once ran the West Park Racquet Club, on 96th Street, and the enclosed bubble courts under the Queensboro Bridge, "because the rents jumped so high. A real-estate agent brought me here when this was just a 70-foot-high pile of rubble. As soon as I saw it, I knew."

In his six years in Long Island City, Botur's business and membership have grown. It's easier to get to his courts from midtown than to most in Manhattan; Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, and Barbara Sinatra do.

"Originally I had wanted to see a combination tennis club and apartment houses," Botur says, reaching to the next table for the blueprints of a fifteen-story, \$10-million hotel he's had drawn up, "but financially we had to hold back a bit. I'll build soon myself, because as soon as what's going on here is visible from the other side, it's going to take off."

FREDDIE BOTUR'S TENNISPORT ISN'T THE ONLY HOT spot in Long Island City. For instance, there's Exile (a new punk-rock nightclub) and the East River Tennis Club.

Getting there is a breeze. Long Island City is one subway stop from Manhattan on the IND and IRT lines. Exile's Manhattan patrons enjoy the convenience of a shuttle bus that runs through the night from the Kiev restaurant on Second Avenue in the East Village. Those living around Bloomingdale's may shuttle over to the East River Tennis Club on hourly buses that leave from the Sutton Theater, on East 57th Street. But there are those with an aversion to turnstiles and busing, and most afternoons the tennis clubs' parking lots are filled with an assortment of Porsches and 450 SL's. Downstream, at the parking lot Botur shares with the expensive Prudenti's Vicin-o-Mare restaurant—housed in an old red brick building that still bears the name of the Queens County Bank—there is an attendant to ward off the less chic cars of the locals.

Here, at the foot of Borden Avenue, where the 34th Street ferry once docked, is the heart of Long Island City's breakthrough to real-estate development. Across from Prudenti's, and complete with an outdoor sidewalk café, is the

newest arrival, the Waterfront Crabhouse. And right next door is the soon to be converted Schwartz Chemical factory, which once put out noxious fumes and still scars the view east from Manhattan with four towering brown smokestacks.

"We started the whole thing," Freddie Botur says about the factory project. "And maybe now they'll finally take down those ugly smokestacks."

Four blocks from Prudenti's lot and the resurgent waterfront, you find yourself inside Blessinger's Tavern. It might as well be 400 blocks away. The friendly, comfortable bar on Jackson Avenue is in the heart of St. Mary's Parish, the



Love in Long Island City: Tennis entrepreneur Botur left Manhattan behind.

area that Freddie Botur predicts will eventually be developed "by the big boys." But neither the noonday crowd nor the Blessinger brothers sense it coming. Their tavern, the oldest in the neighborhood, has a corner door entrance, high, thick glass windows, tables in the back, and a meat-and-potatoes menu. Local bars like Blessinger's began springing up in the 1870s to accommodate commuters passing from the 34th Street ferry to the Hunter's Point LIRR station. This was the beginning of St. Mary's Parish.

"My father was born here, and his father before him," 65-year-old Buzzy Blessinger says as he goes down the floor hatch behind the bar to take inventory in the cellar. His 67-year-old brother, Bill, comes in to count the money in the register and talk to the regulars at the counter. It's like a family here. The beers are 30 cents.

Bill Blessinger remembers when Queens Borough Hall, now in Kew Gardens, used to be nearby. "The borough presidents used to come over for lunch." But as the borough grew, its center moved, and Hunter's Point—once nothing more than a ledge of rocks in the East River—was soon abandoned by the city as a residential neighborhood. One planning report stated, "The residential community as a whole is quite stable, but it does present a problem for the city. The industries in the area need to expand." The solution was to rezone all of Hunter's Point for manufacturing. After this was done in 1960, Long Island City was heralded as "New York's strongest and best hope for halting the persistent drift of manufacturing firms away from the city." The rezoning allowed the mod-

"...Robert Redford plays tennis in Long Island City; a floating restaurant, a 2,000-seat theater, and condominiums are planned..."

erate number of residential buildings to remain as such, but led to the deterioration of neighborhood services and made it nearly impossible to obtain mortgages or home-improvement loans. The city assumed that the residential community would disappear. But it didn't. And now the stable industrial base, like the residential base before, is threatened.

This state of affairs stems from a decision made by the Board of Education seventeen years ago. In 1963, the board closed the old First Ward School, on 21st Avenue, and turned it into a warehouse. As recently as 1975 there was talk of turning the 88-year-old Romanesque red brick fortress—a massive structure as large as the Plaza Hotel—into a factory. Finally, though, in 1976, it was taken over by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

Renamed Project Studios One (P.S. 1), the building now provides 24 low-rent—\$40 to \$90 a month—studios to artists for a period of one to two years. Inside, there is space for exhibitions and seminars, and a cultural center for poetry readings and performances. Now known internationally, P.S. 1 has helped settle many artists into the local community and by its presence has attracted many others. That P.S. 1 has the distinction of being a key catalyst for Long Island City's revitalization is a fact the artists, strongly opposed to any SoHo-ization, would rather not dwell on. It was with appropriate irony that not long ago P.S. 1 mounted a show of photographs of Long Island City called "Subject to Change."

ONE OF THE OFFSHOOTS OF P.S. 1 IS I.S. 1, INDEPENDENT Studios One, a cooperative venture by a group of artists whose leases had expired at P.S. 1. Now ensconced on the top floor of a furniture factory, these artists are worried about new development's preventing renewal of their five-year lease.

"When I first came here," says photographer Phyllis Bilick, "I thought, *Oh great*, I can play tennis, but I'd go broke in one set. Now I just hope the residential neighborhood is strong enough not to change. The artists here just want Long Island City to stay the same." But as one artist once said, "People like me are ruining my neighborhood."

Bill Blessinger, on the other hand, welcomes the change. "It's about time people started moving *into* St. Mary's instead of out," he says. "I don't care if the people moving here are gay or hippies or whatever. I don't care because they're going to make it better. Artists will bring in new shops and money and rich people. All that has got to help the neighborhood. Families and kids are starting to move in. It'll be good to see the schools and churches go back in business."

Other residents feel the same way. After years of being ignored by the city, there is a "you owe me" sentiment. The neighborhood has no library and has lost both a school and a hospital. No one would even chance putting a Laundromat in what was considered a doomed neighborhood. Any investment in the area is met by some with blind welcome.

When Bill Blessinger first caught drift of this SoHo-ization, he attempted to cash in by trying to sell his house, around the corner from the tavern. He put a sign out front that read NEWHO in large lettering, and began placing NewHo newspaper ads that said, "One stop from midtown." The offers poured in. This time, he realized, the talk of revitalization was more than a rumor. He took the

house off the market and is still waiting for the rising prices to peak.

But Barbara Tancredi, the daughter of Blessinger's waitress, doesn't like this developmental lust. "This neighborhood's not sophisticated like Manhattan," she says. "The older people just don't realize what's going on. They didn't know twenty years ago when they let the city rezone this to manufacturing, and they don't know today."

"I'm not saying that I like it the way it is. There's nothing to do in this place. It's beat. After six you can't even buy a pack of cigarettes except in a bar. There's nothing here but bars and restaurants. I'd like nice things too, but I'd hate to see this neighborhood destroyed."

"The rents in St. Mary's Parish are from \$150 to \$225. Now people are getting \$700 to \$800 a month. More with a view of the skyline. When you're talking \$800 for a studio, you're talking Upper East Side. You're talking for the rich, not the poor. And this neighborhood is poor."

Sal Saraceno bought his first brownstone on Long Island City's "White Collar Row"—Queens' only historic district—for \$10,000 in 1958. "For the poorer classes," he says, "this was the bottom of the barrel. The Bronx was a step up." But today this treelined block of brownstones with steep stoops, wrought-iron rails, and pedimented doorways that stretches one block west of the 23rd Street elevated stop on 45th Avenue is a magnet for young professionals, writers, and artists. Today, White Collar Row could be in Brooklyn Heights or the West Village rather than Long Island City.

But while the seven brownstones that Saraceno owns on the block and the two he manages for a friend have risen in value to over \$100,000 today, life for its poorer inhabitants has hardened. Inside a three-story building on 45th Avenue, Mrs. Silvio Berrio tells of how she and her husband struggled to pay their \$260-a-month rent and raise their family for the past five years. After taking care of the building the landlord had consistently neglected, the Berrios, unprotected by any rent laws or guidelines, were given 30 days to move. The landlord entered their apartment, saw Mrs. Berrio putting away her laundry, and said, "Good. Keep packing, because I want you out."

AT AN EMERGENCY SUMMER MEETING OF COMMUNITY Planning Board 2, concern about such incidents is being aired. Bill Modell, a big, slouching man with gray hair, sits in the back of a transformed classroom at P.S. 1. The meeting has been called for his sake. Modell's Shawn Development firm is the one that is planning Queens Plaza South Marketplace and is trying to get a dead-end street rezoned to complete a mall. Up front in the classroom, which now outshines many of the galleries in SoHo, stands Joe Traina, a slick young Shawn Development executive in a dark double-breasted suit. He is soft-selling the amenity-hungry community.

"Landscaping," says Traina, "and hopefully chasing the pimps and prostitutes out of the plaza area are two of our primary concerns. We are talking about producing at the minimum 80 to 100 jobs. And when we open all the way, we should triple that."

Traina wins them over. The money that Modell will pay the strapped city to close the roads seals it. And anyway, as Traina says, he could do it without their approval if he wanted to. The vote is unanimous.

"It's nice to see that for those of us who stuck it out here in New York City instead of running to Suffolk or Nassau the investors are finally coming back," says board vice-chairman Walter McCaffrey.

Board member Sal Anzilone, a restaurant owner, is a little less trusting. "I'm worried," he says, "about what happened with other developers who, once they get what they want from us, are never seen again. You can send them hundreds of registered letters and never get a response.

"Just remember," says Anzilone, his eyes cutting through the crowd to Bill Modell, who sits beside the open door, "we live here. And we've been good to you."

Anzilone's concern is echoed by the chairperson of the community board. "What makes stable communities," says Karen Berger Morello, "is the stable people living there. If you want to keep a community, that means young kids, two-family houses, and a little grass around them. I'm afraid that in the future a St. Mary's child won't be able to buy into or afford to stay in the neighborhood. I'm not so much afraid of what happened to SoHo as of what happened to the residential Lincoln Center area."

The architect of the proposed Queens Performing Arts Center, Maurice Finegold, has anticipated that concern. "I'm against gentrification," he says, arguing that what Long Island City needs is a master plan. "This neighborhood is in a state of transition. We either have to help it along or keep it from slipping. With a master plan, there's a chance for controlled development."

While speaking out against gentrification, however, Finegold happily details how the performing-arts center will "stimulate the area with lofts, artist lofts, condominiums, and higher-rent apartments." A check into the past work of his firm, Anderson Notter Finegold, of Boston, shows that it was in fact born in gentrification. "Our first recycling project was the conversion of the Prince Macaroni factory on Boston's waterfront into luxury housing units," reads the firm's promotional material. "This led to additional projects on the waterfront, which include renovation of the Customs House Block and Gardiner Building on Long Wharf for residential and commercial uses." While soothing to the eye, the Boston waterfront has caused controversy because of its wholesale displacement of industry and the poor.

Eva Hanhardt, who does liaison work for the Queens Planning Board, offers a solution different from Finegold's. But it involves action by the City Planning Commission, which has generally permitted uncontrolled gentrification.

"There is a tremendous interest in developing that waterfront—with its view of Sutton Place and the U.N.—into a very sexy kind of area," she says. "But we have to look not just at the waterfront but at a community. My concern is that the luxury development on the waterfront be such that it not interfere with the industrial and residential communities behind it."

Inside her office, overlooking Queens Plaza, Eva Hanhardt has sketched out various sections of Long

Island City, noting their present and projected uses. Having divided Hunter's Point into six distinct areas, such as light and heavy industrial or residential, she has considered the appropriate zoning and restrictions necessary to preserve their qualities while allowing new growth.

"So much of the development is still speculation," she says, "but it is inevitable. My concern is that when the time comes we already have our boundaries and perimeters very well drawn."

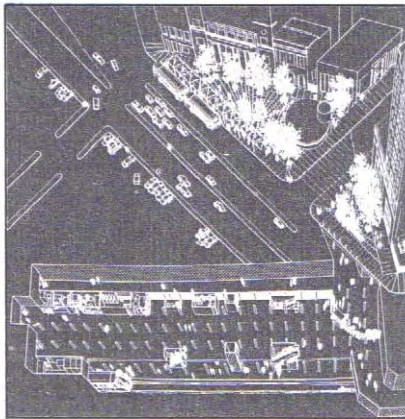
Hanhardt stresses that the fate of Long Island City is not out of the hands of the people who live there now. Many of the area residents own their own property, and their decisions will dictate the neighborhood's direction. As tight-knit and impenetrable as the old-timers like to believe they are, their bonds will be put to a stringent test.

"It will be very hard," says Eva Hanhardt. "If someone knows that he can sell his property for double or three times what he paid for it, well. . ."

Tom Quinn puts it more succinctly. The 34-year-old developer of the planned \$1.4-million waterfront restaurant grew up in the Queensbridge projects, worked in the local factories, and drove a cab for a neighborhood taxi company while going to college. All the while he was eyeing the Manhattan skyline, thinking about the potential.

"Unfortunately," he says, "in any development there are certain innocent people who get hurt. I just hope that the neighborhood can survive. Planned growth won't do it. It's up to them. But sooner or later we all bow to the almighty dollar."

On the Boards



Future Queens: New projects include (clockwise from above) revamped subway station, river restaurant, performing-arts center, and condominiums.

