

LIVING IN/Parkchester, the Bronx

# 129 Acres, Renewed Yet Affordable

By JENNIFER BLEYER

**A**FTER living on a noisy street in Washington Heights for eight years, Evelyn Liston decided in 2004 to search for quieter surroundings. Like many heroic quests, hers was marked by high ideals, momentary defeats and, in the end, redemption.

"I looked all over the city," said Ms. Liston, 50, a consultant to classical music composers and organizations. "I had my heart set on Brooklyn, then I had my heart set on Jackson Heights in Queens, but I couldn't find anything I really liked that I could afford."

During her fruitless search, she spotted an ad on Craigslist, the Web site, for a moderately priced apartment in Parkchester in the East Bronx. Despite low expectations, she rode the No. 6 train there on a brisk autumn day.

"I came to Parkchester thinking I wasn't going to like it, and I fell in love," Ms. Liston recalled. "It was a green oasis, and the people were so nice. They're not yuppies or whatever. They're just

noted that the 55 buildings in her quadrant were all to have new roofs by next year. The terra cotta exterior of the complex's shopping center is being reconditioned. The City Department of Transportation is planning to restore medians on the two main roads.

Along with the renovations, the complex's financial status has recovered, imbuing buyers with confidence and drawing an influx of new residents. Apartment values have more than doubled since the Community Preservation Corporation and its partners stepped in, and according to some, they show no signs of faltering.

"In the six or eight months since the real estate market has become unstable in some places, Parkchester has still been strong," said Zakir Khan, the owner of Parkchester Real Estate. "It's not a very high-profile neighborhood, but it's a good neighborhood."

## What You'll Find

A diverse community of about 42,000, Parkchester is situated on a 129-acre site bordered by East Tremont Avenue on the north, White Plains Road on the west, McGraw and Starling Avenues on the south and Purdy Street on the east.

The scrupulously planned neighborhood is bisected by Metropolitan Avenue and Unionport Road. At their intersection is Metropolitan Oval, with flowers, benches and a fountain where bronze-cast statues spout water.

The buildings, which range from 7 to 12 stories, are arranged in quadrants and separated by walkways, gardens and mature trees. With brick facades and pine-green window frames, they resemble those in Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village in downtown Manhattan. Those complexes, like Parkchester, were developed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. The main exterior difference here is the terra cotta ornamentation, depicting whimsical scenes like a sailor strumming a guitar and a little boy beckoning a dog.

Parkchester's original one-, two- and three-bedrooms have parquet floors and liberal closet space. Baths have pedestal sinks; kitchens have solid wood counters; baths and kitchens throughout are windowed. With ample space between the buildings, most apartments are sunny. Upper-floor units seem to float above the trees.

In May, units with more expensive finishes were introduced by Parkchester Preservation Management, the steward for 6,382 rentals procured in the 1998 deal. Kitchens have maple cabinets, granite counters and backsplashes, stainless steel sinks with gooseneck faucets, and new appliances.

Three parking garages offer more than 1,800 spaces — which, when available, rent for about \$125 a month. But parking "is the biggest problem and biggest complaint," said Margaret Walsh, the president of Parkchester South Condominium, who lives in a three-bedroom she moved into with her



SUZANNE DECHILLO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

**TERRA COTTA WHIMSY** Ornamentation sets Parkchester apart from Stuyvesant Town, also a '40s era MetLife complex.

family in 1943 when she was 15. At that time, she noted, few residents had vehicles. Now many do, Ms. Walsh said, adding, "There just isn't room in the garages or on the city streets."

The area has more than half a million square feet of commercial space, which includes a Macy's, several supermarkets and discount retailers. In recent years midrange retailers have arrived as well, among them Starbucks, Zales Jewelers and Radio Shack.

Shopping was part of what attracted Shaikh Alam. A 31-year-old postal worker who previously lived in Astoria, Queens, Mr. Alam moved into a one-bedroom here in the winter with his wife, Rexona, and their 11-month-old daughter, Reona. "I have the shopping mall almost in my house," he said. "That's why I like the area."

## What You'll Pay

Even though prices have risen in Parkchester, they are still below those elsewhere in the city.

"It's the only place in New York City you're going to be able to purchase a condo for this price," said Lourdes Cartagena, an independent broker.

One-bedrooms typically cost \$115,000 to \$125,000, Ms. Cartagena said. Two-bedrooms range from \$165,000 to \$185,000, three-bedrooms from \$210,000 to \$225,000. Among her recent sales was a one-bedroom for \$119,000, and a two-bedroom in a desirable location facing Metropolitan Oval for \$170,000.

Price variations often depend on the renovations, Ms. Cartagena said, but she added, "Anyone with \$10,000 can upgrade a kitchen and bathroom and it'll still be below market value."

Common charges are \$400 to \$700 a year, Ms. Cartagena said, and annual property taxes are in the range of \$800, though many owners are covered by a tax abatement until at least 2023.

Units leased by Parkchester Preservation Management run \$900 or so for a one-bedroom, \$1,200 for a two-bedroom and \$1,500 for a three-bedroom. The apartments with upgraded kitchens and baths are renting at \$1,300 for a one-bedroom and \$1,600 for a two-bedroom.

Pat Shapiro, the operations director of the management company, noted that the vacancy rate had plummeted since 1998. At that time, she said, there were 800 unoccupied apartments; now the vacancy rate is about 50 a month.

"Since the renovation and revitalization, there's been a tremendous change," Ms. Shapiro said, adding, "As Manhattan's gotten more expensive, more and more people are attracted."

## What to Do

The neighborhood has five basketball courts, four playgrounds, four handball courts and grassy ovals for playing and lolling in the sun. A ball field in the north quadrant underwent a half-million-dollar renovation and reopened in 2004 with AstroTurf and an electric scoreboard. The complex's recreation department offers programs like science workshops, dance classes and aerobics. Summer events in Metropolitan Oval include outdoor movies and concerts.

About half a mile northwest is Bronx Park, the site of the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo. Two miles to the northeast is the 2,766-acre Pelham Bay Park, beyond which are City Island and Orchard Beach.

## The Commute

The No. 6 subway stops on the edge of the neighborhood at the Parkchester-East 177th Street Station. Although a local train, it travels on an express schedule on weekday mornings from Park-

chester to Manhattan, as well as on weekday afternoons in the opposite direction. During hours scheduled for express service, the ride to Midtown Manhattan takes about 35 minutes. The Nos. 2 and 5 trains stop about a half-mile away, at East 180th Street.

The Bronx 14 and 22 buses also traverse Parkchester, as does the Bronx M6 express, which starts and ends in Metropolitan Oval, taking a little under one hour to reach 23rd Street in Manhattan.

## The Schools

Students at Public School 106 on St. Raymond Avenue have received solid scores on city and state tests. In the last school year, 61 percent of fourth graders met English standards and 75 percent met math standards, versus 56 percent and 74 percent in the city. Many students continue on to Junior High School 127 on Purdy Street, and then Lehman High School — where, in 2006, students averaged 428 on the verbal section of the SAT and 445 on the math; city averages were 444 and 467, respectively.

Parochial schools in and around Parkchester include St. Raymond High School for Boys, St. Raymond Academy for Girls, St. Raymond Elementary School, Sacred Heart Private School and the Islamic Leadership School.

## The History

Built by MetLife from 1939 to 1942 on the site of a Catholic home for orphans and troubled boys, Parkchester provided rentals for thousands of middle-class people, including World War II veterans. As in other Met Life developments, racial discrimination restricted access; the complex was almost entirely white in its early years. It skidded into decline starting in the 1960's, a trend that persisted until 1998.



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really good people with solid income who want to invest and have a nice place to live."

A vast, well-groomed complex of 171 buildings, Parkchester has only recently emerged from decades of decline involving an unsuccessful conversion from rentals to condominiums and a confluence of other problems.

The resuscitation started in 1998 when more than 6,000 apartments owned by the condominium's sponsor were sold to the Community Preservation Corporation, a nonprofit housing group, along with real estate investors. The housing group procured \$220 million in loans, channeling it into renovations.

In 1999 to 2005, tens of thousands of outdated windows were replaced with double-pane models. The fragile electrical system was overhauled with wiring that could finally support window air-conditioners. The decrepit plumbing network was replaced.

While the major infrastructural work is now complete, improvements continue. Ms. Liston, who bought her airy one-bedroom for \$74,500 almost three years ago and is now president of Parkchester North Condominium, where she lives,

## On the Market



**1420 PARKCHESTER ROAD**  
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