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home > columnists > preservation news

Rundown Seaside Town Enjoys a Renaissance

By LISA SELIN DAVIS

Twenty years ago, residents of Asbury Park, N.J., referred to their coastal city as "Beirut by the shore." Abandoned construction projects rose ghost-like from the litter-covered sand, and you could more readily buy crack cocaine than cotton candy on the city's famous boardwalk. A former mayor went to prison for purchasing drugs in a local bar, and the developer of a multibillion-dollar rehabilitation project filed for bankruptcy. Memories of the 1970 race riots haunted the city. It seemed there was no hope for this once-exclusive seaside resort located 60 miles south of Manhattan, famous for being home to the Stone Pony, the bar where rocker Bruce Springsteen launched his career. "They couldn't give property away," says Robert DiSanto, a 20-year resident.

In the late 1990s, Asbury Park's fortunes began to change. The local government ushered in a \$1.2 billion redevelopment project, including a new boardwalk and oceanfront condominiums. But as you stroll along the wide streets where huge Victorian houses once sat in varying states of disrepair, you see signs of the real reason for this town's turnaround. Look up and you'll likely notice flags flying from newly painted clapboard siding. They're rainbow flags, an emblem of the gay community, whose members have steadily been purchasing property here during the past five years, contributing to the long-awaited renaissance of this city of 17,000 residents.

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Mr. DiSanto, 42 years old, is the general manager of Paradise, a popular gay nightclub in Asbury Park. He says the city has always had a gay community. "There were 13 gay bars here at its height," he says, but most closed during the low period in the 1980s. Beginning in the summer of 1999, with a boost from a New York Times story on how Asbury Park might become "the next gay mecca," the city's gay community began a concerted effort to attract gay professionals from such resort communities as the Pines on Fire Island, N.Y. Mr. DiSanto and some friends created the nonprofit Asbury Park Marketing Fund to promote tourism, homeownership and entrepreneurship in the city and started an annual fundraiser called Road Trip. This year's event will be held July 16, 17 and 18.

The group's efforts worked for a simple reason: rock-bottom real-estate prices. "You could [buy] a house here for the price of a summer rental in Fire Island," says Mr. DiSanto. The campaign quickly gained steam. A few couples purchased houses and invited friends to visit. Their friends were wowed by the wide beachfront, the magnificent homes and the staggeringly low prices for fixer-uppers.

"There are just positive feelings here now," says Deputy Mayor James Bruno. "There's a Dumpster on every block. Everybody's renovating."

These Asbury Park pioneers have been rewarded with handsome home-value appreciation. "There was a buzz going around New York that gay people were moving to Asbury Park," says David Blackwell, a 46-year-old Manhattan resident who bought his four-bedroom Queen Anne Victorian with a carriage house three years ago for \$250,000. "Even if I'd never put a cent into it, it would be worth double," he says. But Mr. Blackwell and his partner have spent the past three years returning this former multifamily house to its single-family splendor and have painted its gingerbread trim fuschia and periwinkle. Even if their home is worth much more than they've invested in it, they say they have no intention of selling.

Huge Victorian houses that sold for between \$70,000 and \$100,000 as late as 1995 are now selling for more than three times as much, says Jim McGlynn, a real-estate agent with Genesis Realty in downtown Asbury Park. "I was begging someone to buy the house next door to mine when it went into foreclosure five years ago. Now that house is worth about \$350,000," says Mr. McGlynn. Indeed, \$350,000 seems to be the minimum price for the multibedroom, in-town Victorian homes most of the new arrivals are seeking, according to real-estate listings on the New Jersey Multiple Listing Service.

Home-value appreciation has helped to battle Asbury Park's blight in another way. Real-estate prices have increased so much that it's often no longer worthwhile for absentee landlords to keep their rental properties. Most of these homes were carved into multifamily dwellings in the 1970s, and renters were primarily low-income households who receive federal financial assistance to help pay their rent. "These days landlords get more from selling their property than holding on to it and renting it," says Mr. McGlynn.

But as in many communities where many multifamily houses are restored to their original single-family status, Asbury Park had to contend with the displacement of long-time residents. Mr. Blackwell's Victorian home, for example, had four apartments when he bought it.

"There will always be a negative side to redevelopment," says Mr. DiSanto. He points out that most of the people profiting from the city's gentrification were absentee landlords with Section 8 tenants.

Mr. McGlynn says many of these renters have moved to less expensive areas south and west of Asbury Park as the neighborhoods changed from rental to owner-occupied. In addition, he says that some long-time property owners have benefited from the city's turnaround simply because they purchased homes years ago that are worth more than they would have imagined. Homeowners who watched their property values decline for more than 30 years have finally had the opportunity to cash in and sell their homes. "People who were barely skimping along, who could barely pay their mortgage, can now sell or refinance if they want. They've tripled their net worth," says Mr. McGlynn.





It's not just the town's residential real estate that has come a long way. Asbury Park's central business district, a ghost town just a few years ago, is booming. Cookman Ave., the city's main drag, is lined with posh restaurants and antique stores. "People are coming from other towns to go to restaurants here now," says Mr. DiSanto. "Our image has definitely changed."

These days, the city's gay community, which is estimated to make up between 5% and 15% of its population, is doing more than purchasing property and painting it pretty colors. Its members are increasing their community involvement. Resident John Loffredo is the first openly gay member of the city council, and Mr. DiSanto recently became the first openly gay school-board member in New Jersey. Earlier this year, Deputy Mayor Bruno officiated at the first same-sex marriage in the state of New Jersey.

While most residents seem to welcome the gay community, there have been a few incidents of intolerance. Two years ago, a rainbow flag was torn down from the side of the house and vandalized, and anti-gay obscenities once were spray-painted on the side of a gay owner's house. But these events only strengthened the gay community. "We really look out for each other here, since there's safety in numbers," says Mr. DiSanto.

As redevelopment continues, there is still a good deal of work to be done in Asbury Park. "The collective memory of people tends to have a 30-year cycle," says Werner Baumgartner, the city's historian. "A generation forgets what happened in the past and looks at Asbury Park with new eyes." If current trends continue, most of those eyes will like what they see.

-- Ms. Davis is a free-lance writer in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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