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HOUSING VARIETY A view of Cincinnatus Avenue between Castle Hill and Havemeyer Avenues. Housing in Castle Hill includes large developments as well as single-family and multifamily houses. [More Photos >](#)

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By JOSEPH PLAMBECK
Published: January 16, 2009

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IT wasn't so long ago that Castle Hill was, by and large, a place to avoid. Crime was rampant. Properties were in shambles and abandoned. The outlook was bleak.

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But things have changed in the last decade. The neighborhood has largely shaken off its past, with the help of drastically reduced crime rates and a spate of new development. On some blocks in the area now, there's even a suburban feel.

In fact, says Francisco Gonzalez, who for the last 16 years has been the district manager of Community Board 9, which includes Castle Hill, some of the people who had fled for the suburbs 25 years ago are coming back.

"Now it's a real quiet neighborhood," Mr. Gonzalez said. The problems facing Castle Hill these days include matters like traffic congestion.

"And I'd rather have that as an issue than crime, 10 times over," he said.

But cleaning up the area, which covers about two square miles in the southeastern [Bronx](#), wasn't easy — especially in the 40-plus-acre 14-building complex known as Castle Hill Houses. Gunshots were heard regularly, and drugs were freely available, according to Mr. Gonzalez.

In 1990, there were 50 murders and nearly 2,000 burglaries within the 43rd Police Precinct, which includes Castle Hill. By 1998, murders had dropped to 13, burglaries below 750. Since then, the crime figures have stayed the same or improved.

Among the beneficiaries of the rebirth is José Paez, a property manager who has lived in the Bronx for 25 years

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but bought his first house in Castle Hill just four years ago: a two-family building that cost \$550,000.

He lives in one of the units, each of which has three bedrooms, with his wife and the youngest of his three children.

“All of the new buildings have helped raise the value of the homes,” he said. “And the neighborhood is so convenient” — a subway and two expressways pass through it — “you can get anywhere you need to go in no time.”

Not that there’s far to go. The 168,000 residents of Community Board 9, mostly middle- and working-class, have a variety of opportunities for recreation.

Shopping is easily accessible both on Castle Hill Avenue and on the west side of White Plains Avenue, just south of the Bruckner Expressway, where there are a number of stores, including an Old Navy.

For Benny Melendez, who has worked as a real estate agent for Bob Magro Realty since 1978, the neighborhood’s latest transformation has restored some of its original appeal.

“When we first started business here, it was mostly white,” he said. “Then the Hispanics came. Then Indians, then Asians.”

Later, starting in about 2003, people who had moved out long ago began to move back in, enticed in part, he said, by the prospect of lower property taxes than in many suburbs and the easy access to public transportation.

“I have experienced it all,” he said. “It’s a real turnaround here.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

Castle Hill is roughly bordered by [Westchester](#) Avenue to the north, Westchester Creek to the east and south, and White Plains Road to the west. The Bronx-Whitestone Bridge and the East River are part of the panorama from the southern tip of the neighborhood.



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The main street, Castle Hill Avenue, which runs north to south, essentially divides the neighborhood. Stores, restaurants and other local businesses, including a handful of real estate offices, line both sides of the avenue.

A stroll down that street exposes the neighborhood's diversity. While Italians used to dominate the area, today there is a wide mix of people, including Latinos, African-Americans, Asians and Italians. According to the 2000 census, a little over half the residents of Community Board 9 describe themselves as Hispanic. Community Board 9 also serves Clason Point, Soundview and Parkchester.

Except for a small slice of industry on the far east side of the neighborhood, Castle Hill is largely residential, with two-family homes, often detached, dominating the housing stock. Single-family homes, along with larger apartment buildings, dot the area.

Much of the housing dates back before World War II, and new housing that has sprouted up in the last 10 years has freshened up the look of the area. The southern part of the neighborhood has experienced the greatest surge in development. There, buyers will find numerous two-family, two-story colonials, often with an attached garage.

The economic downturn, Mr. Melendez said, has broadened the kinds of properties available to buyers. "If you're looking for a house, you certainly can find it," he said.

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

After several years of rising with the real estate boom, home prices in Castle Hill are now falling with the real estate slump. Brokers in the area say that prices have dropped 10 to 20 percent since the middle of 2007.

Buyers can generally find single-family homes, of which there are now at least 10 on the market, for \$350,000 to \$400,000, and two-family homes, at least 14 of which are available, for \$450,000 to \$500,000.

According to agents, buyers pay a little bit of a premium for

living on the north side of the neighborhood, closer to the subway line. But Jose M. Soto, an agent for Century 21 Future Homes Realty, said that demand was keenest for a detached home with a driveway and a garage. “Buyers in this market are very picky,” he said.

Luis Coriano, the owner of Wide Realty, said he had seen single-family homes take the biggest hit in the downturn, because fewer people can afford to pay their mortgage without receiving the rental income from a multifamily home.

As for rental prices, they have actually increased in recent years. Mr. Melendez said that one-bedroom apartments rent for about \$1,200 a month, a couple of hundred dollars more than a few years ago. Two-bedroom apartments rent for about \$1,450.

WHAT TO DO

Castle Hill is the home of the Bronx [Y.M.C.A.](#) — the only one in the Bronx — as well as the Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club. The newest part of the Y.M.C.A., a 27,000-square-foot facility that opened in 2003, sits on five acres on the southern tip of the neighborhood. Elizabeth Toledo, the executive director, said many of its 2,700 members were from the surrounding five ZIP codes. Among the amenities are indoor and outdoor pools.

The Kips Bay Boys and Girls Club, meanwhile, has an outdoor ice-skating rink and a dome that provides a year-round athletic field for children.

Residents praise the variety and quality of the area’s restaurants. Two local favorites are Sabrosura, which offers an Asian-Latino mix, and Brisas del Caribe, a West Indian restaurant. Both are on Castle Hill Avenue.

THE SCHOOLS

Academically, Castle Hill has a mixed record. At Public School 36, the Unionport School, which teaches prekindergarten through Grade 5, a little more than 70

percent of fourth graders met standards in reading, and more than 87 percent in math. The citywide averages were 61 and 80.

The Eugene T. Maleska School — Intermediate School 174 — will be closing at the end of this year because of poor performance, according to Andrew Jacob, a spokesman for the city's Education Department. Because of the planned closing, the school has only eighth graders this year, 19 percent of whom have met proficiency requirements in English and 21 percent in math. Citywide averages for eighth graders are 43 and 60 percent.

Adlai E. Stevenson High School will also close at the end of the year. A handful of smaller schools have already opened on its campus.

THE COMMUTE

The No. 6 train makes three stops along Westchester Avenue near Castle Hill. The main one for residents is at Castle Hill Avenue; from there it takes about 45 minutes to get to [Grand Central Terminal](#). On the west side of the neighborhood, the train stops at White Plains Avenue; on the east side it stops at Zerega Avenue.

The neighborhood has nearby access to two highways, the Cross Bronx and the Bruckner Expressways, and is close to the Hutchinson River Parkway — all of these ease travel around [New York City](#) and surrounding suburbs.

Bus service includes Bx22, which runs north and south along Castle Hill Avenue, as well as the Bx5, and the Bx36 and Bx39. There is also express bus service to [Manhattan](#).

THE HISTORY

English settlers named the area Castle Hill Neck, because when they arrived in the late 1600s, they found a fortified Indian village that overlooked the East River.

And, yes, Jenny's from this block: the entertainer [Jennifer Lopez](#) grew up on Blackrock Avenue, before finding

superstardom and singing a song reminding people where she came from.

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A version of this article appeared in print on January 18, 2009, on page RE7 of the New York edition.

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