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The Apollo Theater
Where Stars are Born
and Legends are Made

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Celebrating Harlem

By Steve Cutler

Photographs by Atsushi Tomioka

A revitalizing energy—like the cultural revolution that produced the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s—is transforming Upper Manhattan into one of the most vibrant and compelling area of New York City.

The neighborhood has always been one of the most beautiful. “Harlem has the fabulous architecture that has been here since the late 1800s and early 1900s,” notes developer and community advocate Gerald Migdol. “Harlem was built when the railroads and subways came in, as a suburb to Midtown.”

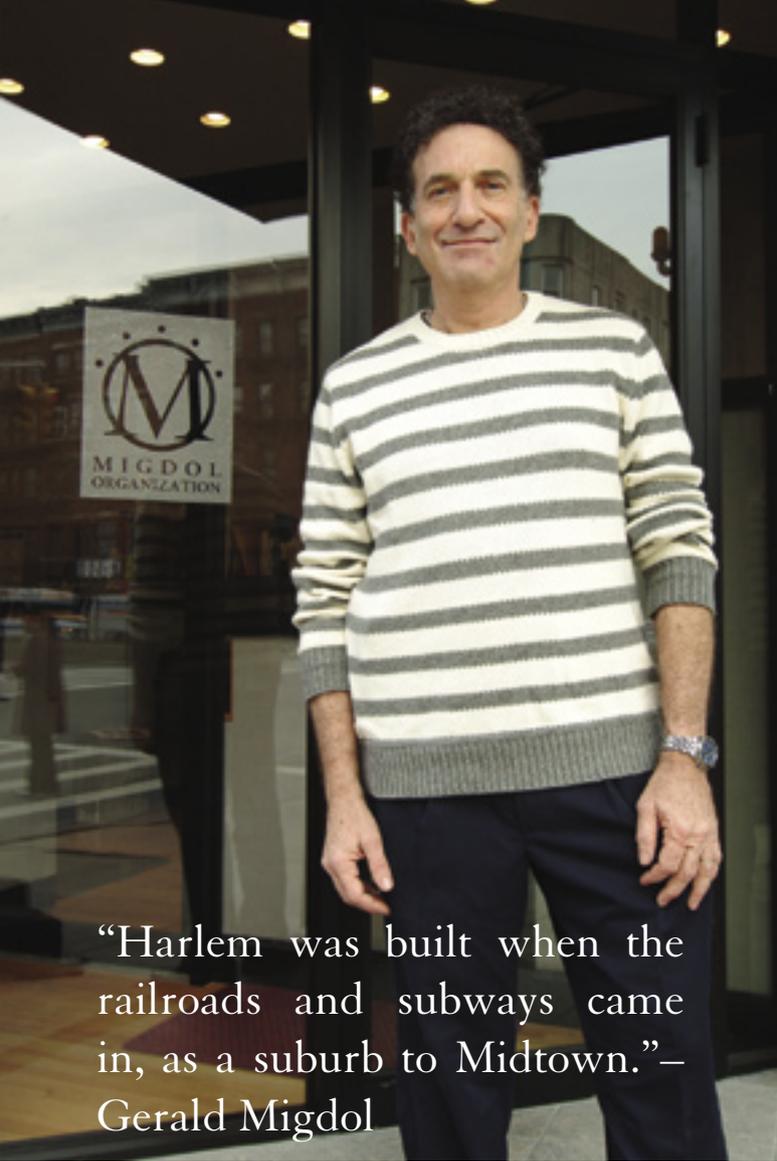
Endless rows of beautifully detailed brownstones were constructed during that boom time, designed by the finest architects of the day, including James Renwick, William Tutthill, Charles Buck, and Francis Kimball, and McKim, Mead and White. “We have a housing stock that is ripe for rebuilding,” says Migdol.

And the rebuilding is rampant. “When I bought here five years ago,” recalls Eric McLenden, a Corcoran agent who lives on 118th Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenues,

“I had two Dumpsters on that block and there must have been another six. It was a block full of Dumpsters.”

Mostly, the new settlers have come for the space, the opportunity to own a brownstone—live in a townhouse!—for the price of a two-bedroom apartment anywhere else in Manhattan. “I had one customer who told me three times, flat out, ‘I am not looking in Harlem,’” recalls Brown, Harris, Stevens agent Julia Boland, herself a Harlem brownstone owner. “But everything in Murray Hill was more than he felt comfortable paying. After we looked for many months, I said, ‘Look, this is what you can get for your money in Harlem.’ Once we started looking up here and he understood the neighborhood and saw the value in it, he got excited and jumped. He got a fantastic brownstone.”

Boland adds, “The people who come here love Manhattan but just can’t afford the space they need or want. The first baby is coming, or the second. They’re quite realistic. They look around and say, ‘Okay, there’s only one big basic grocery store and there isn’t a bunch of restaurants



“Harlem was built when the railroads and subways came in, as a suburb to Midtown.”—Gerald Migdol

to choose from or boutiques to shop in, but what I do have is double the square footage.” And anywhere you settle in Harlem you’re right near a subway that’ll express you to Midtown in 10 to 15 minutes.

A Real Neighborhood

Once settled, people realize they’ve gotten so much more than they bargained for. Foremost, they find that for the first time ever in Manhattan, they live in a real neighborhood. “When I first got here I thought, Wow, this is what it feels like to be part of a community,” recalls four-year Mt. Morris resident Herve Aimable, interior designer and principal of OrganizeMe. “I didn’t get that feeling in Chelsea. People know who you are and they interact with you. It’s the little talks, the interacting—that’s what’s magical about Harlem.”

Sometimes it comes as a shock. “I’m looking out my window one morning,” recalls Boland, “and I see two ladies I know from the street digging through my garbage. I go outside and they say, ‘Honey, you were going to get a ticket from Sanitation if your garbage wasn’t sorted the right way.’ They were fixing it for me. That’s the deep level of caring people have in this neighborhood that you don’t find anywhere else in the city.”

Boland paid \$1 million in the fall of 2004 for a shell, the common term for “nothing but the outside walls,” on 119th Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard. “The place had been empty for 20 years and the roof had leaked for ten, which we didn’t know at the time because we couldn’t get beyond the parlor floors because they were rotted out so badly.”

Now, a couple of years and several Dumpsters later, Boland lives in a spacious duplex within the brownstone and rents out the floors above her. She didn’t know what sort of reaction to expect from lifelong residents of the neighborhood to newcomers sinking so much money into these properties. “I certainly understood that there could have been some negative feelings,” she recalls, “but frankly, it is rare that I encounter that. Most people are friendly and caring.” Soon after they moved in, she says, “my husband was sweeping the sidewalk and an old man walked by and said, ‘I’ve lived on this block my entire life and my first girlfriend lived in your house and I’m so happy you’re fixing it up.’”

“There’s a small-townness to it,” says Halstead agent Sid Whalen, who owns a brownstone on Edgecomb Avenue, off 145th Street. “When we first moved in, I started working in the garden and a neighbor who had been living in a townhouse on the block for years wandered over with a bunch of rose bushes. It’s deeply rooted in the African-American culture, to say, ‘Hello, how are you, God bless you.’”

A Richly Diverse Community

“There’s a lot of diversity,” says attorney Marianne Soohoo, who owns a spacious duplex apartment on West 124th Street with her husband, who is originally from Norway. “It’s a mix of cultures.”

While predominantly African-American, Harlem is one of the most richly diversified communities in the city. “It’s becoming more international,” says Aimable, “with a mixed group of people and cultures and Europeans and Asians moving in. People assume we’re pioneers by moving up here,” says Soohoo. “We always laugh at people who say that. That happened a long time ago. There are lots of families here, people sitting on stoops, kids playing ball on the street. It reminds me of my own upbringing in the South End of Boston, which was also going through gentrification.”

Hilary Rovins, a Brown Harris Stevens agent specializing in Harlem, says of the people coming up to the area now, “These are the New Yorkers who are still left, the creative people—architects, people starting businesses, and working dancers, musicians, and actors. It’s a big mixture of people.”

The Uptown Thing

Those concerned about sacrificing some cultural advantage by choosing Uptown over Downtown often find a much deeper cultural experience in Harlem.



“With the combination of low buildings and wide streets, the sky in Harlem is so present, so grand.”— Herve Aimable

“A lot of people from Downtown don’t understand the Uptown thing,” observes Michael Downy, an English professor at Westchester Community College. Downy founded Renaissance in Motion, a cultural events program in Harlem, along with his wife, Katrin Zimmerman, a jewelry designer whose work is exhibited in MOMA and the Louvre. “When I go to a place Downtown, what I get is, did you get this new thing?” says Downy. “If you are Downtown, sure, you can go out to a trendy place and have a cocktail and look at someone. But Uptown you can have a serious conversation about culture, the arts, what’s happening in the world, and the future.”

In 2003, the couple decided to institutionalize the kind of richly intimate cultural encounter that happens spontaneously on the streets and in the homes of Harlem. Renaissance in Motion is a salon series of sorts, held mostly in their brownstone townhouse on 118th Street and Lenox Avenue, presenting evenings of music, lecture, readings, and wine tasting.

“There is so much talent up here that goes unrecognized,” says Downy. “We wanted to open a venue for people who are not that well known to become more well known and for people who are extremely well known to have a forum for the people of Harlem.”

One last-minute guest was Eartha Kitt. “Two days before the event, we sent out e-mails to everyone asking if they were going to be around and everyone said, ‘If Eartha Kitt is going to be there, I will.’ We had a hundred people here in one or two days’ notice.” How did the evening go? Two words, says Downy: “She sang.”

Other events have included an evening with English professor Gordon Thompson, lecturing on Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the first African-American poet to support himself with his own work; Grammy Award-winning musician Gordon Chambers; and City College professor and oft-published poet Barry Wallenstein. A wine tasting was hosted by the only African-American sommelier in North America.

Downy notes that people in Harlem have refined taste. For example, he recalls, “I used to go to a liquor store on 145th Street and the owner said, ‘You see people who come in, they don’t have much, but when they entertain, they serve the best. Moët & Chandon, Veuve Clicquot.’

Interior designer Roderick Shade is another Harlemiter who doesn’t miss the Downtown scene. “When I lived Downtown,” he recalls, “it was always about going out to some place. Here you wind up going to dinner parties and cocktail parties. It’s really nice to get a phone call on Friday



Above left: Bill Rohlfing of Uptown Townhouse on the steps of 737 St. Nicholas Avenue, an immaculately restored 1887 limestone townhouse, the interior of the two-family home (shown above right) has loft-like interiors, consisting of an owners triplex, five bedrooms and 2.5 baths, chef's kitchen, working wood-burning fireplace, roof deck and garden. Offered by Hilary Rovins of Brown Harris Stevens.

night: 'Hey, c'mon over, bring a bottle,' and you arrive and there's 30 people there. That's fun. It's more personal."

Rethinking the Brownstone

Shade says his design work is influenced by the cues he gets from the neighborhood. "There's an African-American thing, a Latin thing, a new urbanization. People are treating their brownstone renovations in a different way. With the volumes inside, as opposed to four straight floors, they might do half of a floor two stories high. Or maybe they'll blow out the whole back of the building and replace it with a glass wall. They're rethinking the brownstone experience."

Conversely, he's learning what not to do with a townhouse. "So many people are taking all of the detailing out, all the stuff people think of when they think of a Harlem brownstone. They rip it out and wind up with this white box what could be anywhere." But, he adds, "I'd rather have people doing something with the places than have nothing happening."

Woody Allen wondered how anyone could live in L.A., where making a right turn on a red light was the sole cultural contribution. Harlem offers a much more serious advantage: the option to have a car and use it. Parking on the street—in front of your home!—is no big deal, and some people have garages in their homes.

The brownstones on Strivers Row each have private

driveways in the back, connected by an alley that leads to the street. It's a mixed blessing, according to Bill Rohlfing, owner of Uptown Townhouse, which does high-end brownstone rehabs in Harlem. "I think people buy in Strivers Row because they can pull into their backyard, get out, and go into their house, all without having to interface with the neighborhood."

"We have a garage in our building," says Lisetta Koe, principal of the Think Tank, a public relations firm. Koe lives in and keeps an office in the Hamilton, one of the oldest condominiums in Harlem. "We drive everywhere, even in Manhattan. You end up having an almost suburban lifestyle."

Two other phenomena up in Harlem help foster delusions of suburban living. One is the big open sky, which many residents report being in awe of. "With the combination of low buildings and wide streets," says Aimable, "the sky in Harlem is so present, so grand." The preponderance of low-rise buildings also makes it possible for even some four-story brownstones to have Central Park and city views.

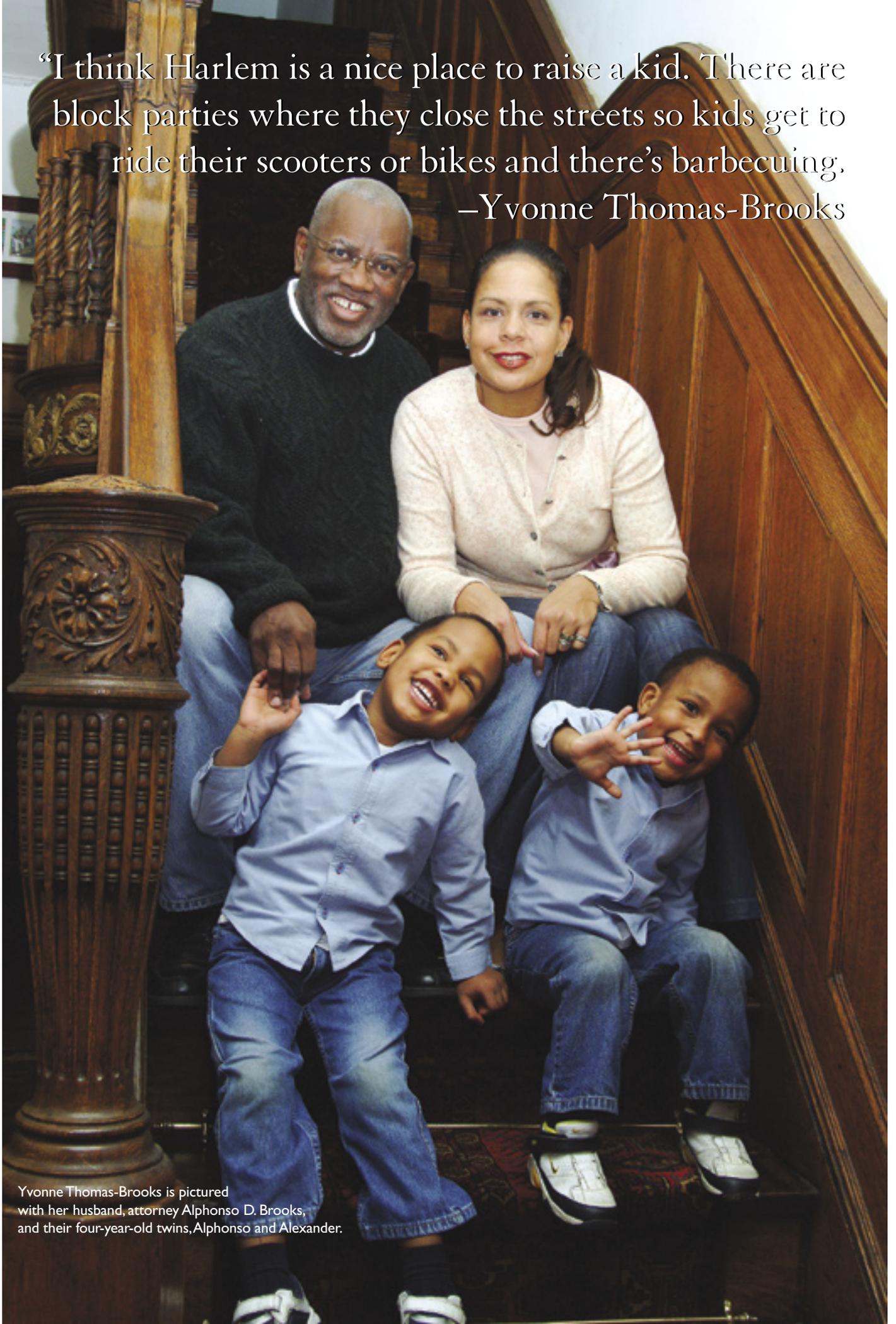
The other is the quiet. "Before we moved here," recalls Boland, "I kept thinking we would hear a lot of music and parties. But you don't! In the warm weather, we feel like we're in the Hamptons, it's so quiet."

Sounds like a nice place to raise a family, doesn't it? "I can't tell you how many pregnant women I see on the street," says McLenden. "People are coming here to start families or expand their family."

“There’s an African-American thing, a Latin thing, a new urbanization... they’re rethinking the brownstone experience.”— Roderick Shade



“I think Harlem is a nice place to raise a kid. There are block parties where they close the streets so kids get to ride their scooters or bikes and there’s barbecuing.
—Yvonne Thomas-Brooks



Yvonne Thomas-Brooks is pictured with her husband, attorney Alphonso D. Brooks, and their four-year-old twins, Alphonso and Alexander.



Joyce Hanly, the new proud owner of a townhouse on West 123rd Street; the Hanly family previously lived at the Osborne on West 57th Street



Lisetta Koe of the Think Tank

Growing Up Harlem

“I think Harlem is a nice place to raise a kid,” says Yvonne Thomas-Brooks, a financial planner for Penn Plaza Associates, who lives in an immaculately restored brownstone on West 119th Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard with her husband, attorney Alphonso D. Brooks, and their four-year-old twins, Alphonso and Alexander. “A lot more working professionals are starting to move in with their kids,” she says, which means more opportunities for playdates and birthday parties close by. Plus, says Brooks-Thomas, “there are block parties where they close the streets so kids get to ride their scooters or bikes and there’s barbecuing. People are really trying to make it like the community we had growing up in the suburbs.”

The couple bought the brownstone, a 16-room former boarding house, in 2001, through independent broker Yolanda Chang, one of the first and most successful brokers specializing in Harlem. “My thought was to restore it to its original grandeur,” says Alfonso Brooks, which took a crew of four or five men a year and a half. They replaced almost all the walls and ceilings and the heating, plumbing, and electrical systems. Some of the floors were redone, but, recalls Brooks, “we tried to keep as much as possible. The original wood is very thick, comes from a stock that was probably a hundred years old when it was cut,” which was a hundred years ago. “It’s a much better stock than you can buy now,” he adds.

As for the hundred years of paint on the walls, “the stripping was a nightmare,” recalls Brooks. “It took two guys a year,” using an extra-strong, hugely toxic stripper produced by an outfit in Brooklyn. “They would make deliveries every month,” he recalls. According to Brooks, “one of the most interesting aspects of Harlem is the backyards.” He says he’s kept his simple, just a play area for the kids and a space for the occasional party or cookout. But others are going all out. “There are no pools yet, because the backyards are really small, but the hot tubs are on the way.”

Harlem Development

“When we built Harlem USA,” says David Pickett, president of the Gotham Organization, “we couldn’t understand why Harlem hadn’t taken off earlier.” Harlem USA, which includes the Magic Johnson Theaters, is the entertainment/retail complex on West 125th Street credited with helping to turn Harlem around. After all, adds Pickett, “it is on the island, and has a tremendous infrastructure, transportation, and terrific boulevards. It’s a lot like the Upper West Side 20 years ago, just starting to come around.”

Corcoran senior vice president Vie Wilson switched her focus to Harlem eight years ago, “and I was a lucky girl to do that,” she says. “When I first started selling in Harlem, developments would come on one or two at a

Brownstones on the Market



This mint-condition two-family home is located in the historic Hamilton area. The owners triplex features four bedrooms and two baths. The chef's eat-in kitchen and living room are on the parlor floor. The home has two woodburning fireplaces, one in the kitchen/dining and one in the master bedroom. The garden level features a one bedroom rental unit. The house will be delivered vacant. Contact Hilary Rovins of Brown Harris Stevens. www.brownharrisstevens.com Listing ID: 528250



1890 Brownstone

This circa 1890 brownstone at 133 West 122nd Street at Lenox and 7th Avenues features original details such as seven decorative fireplace mantels, pocket doors, grand stairs, original floors, built-in cabinets and an elegant parlor. The home is configured as a one-family consisting of five bedrooms and three baths. Contact Lisa Laney and Yolanda Chang of HOMENYC. www.homenyc.com





“You need to invest in cultural institutions and retail infrastructure that will create a quality of life and the lifestyle that people really want.”— Carlton Brown

A mural sculpture by El Anatsui, a Ghanaian artist, will grace the lobby of Kalahari.

time and because of the zoning there were never any big projects. They were ten units, twelve units. You’d have this influx of people without any product. Now there are 35 to 40 developments, taller buildings with larger apartments. People have options.”

As for prices, says Wilson, “initially the projects I sold were one- and two-bedrooms in the \$200,000-to-\$300,000 range. Now my two-bedrooms are \$500,000 to \$600,000.” Sid Whalen, sales agent for the Langton, a new condominium on 145th Street, recalls, “When I first moved here three years ago, there was one full-service building, the Hillview Towers, an old beat-up co-op. Now there are five doorman buildings in the area.”

The emergence of larger-scale new condominium construction has encouraged the top brokerages houses to open offices in Harlem over the past couple of years. Prudential Douglas Elliman opened its Harlem branch a year ago. “We thought our first year we’d be doing primarily rentals for people who are testing the community before committing to it,” says sales manager Gary Cannata, “but sales are moving briskly.”

Until very recently large-scale apartments buildings in Harlem were developed with government subsidy. One of the first condominium developments to offer a sizable number of market-rate apartments, in addition to income-restricted units, was 1400 on Fifth, developed by the Harlem-based, African-American-owned Full Spectrum Building and Development.

“Our project was successful,” says Full Spectrum principal Carlton Brown. “A lot of people were surprised.” And a lot of developers were encouraged to invest Uptown.

Full Spectrum, which has recently opened sales for the Kalahari complex on 116th Street, builds environmentally responsible, “green” apartment buildings, “a new paradigm for Harlem,” says Brown, and includes cultural and retail components in its projects.

“When you start to invest in communities like Harlem, which has had a 50-year absence of capital investment in it,” observes Brown, “you have to think about the institutions that during the first Harlem Renaissance made it the place to be. You need to invest in cultural institutions and retail infrastructure that will create a quality of life and the lifestyle that people really want.”

Full Spectrum projects have health clubs, restaurants, grocery stores, and theaters within. The 1400 Fifth Avenue condominium contains BBraxton, a full-service men’s spa and hair salon owned by Broadway star Brenda Braxton, of Dreamgirls fame. The Kalahari will contain the My Image complex, which will include three theaters, a full-service restaurant, bar, and café and will show films focusing on the Latino and African-American experience.

“None of these businesses would have had a snowflake’s chance in hell of surviving in Harlem in 1999,” says Full Spectrum CEO Walter Edwards. “It’s the small businesses like these, the majority of which are African-American owned, that drive the local economy.” ■