

# From the South Bronx to Sobro: Gentrification in Mott Haven, The Bronx

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Over the past 20 years, numerous New York City low-income minority neighborhoods have undergone dramatic social and economic changes. Areas such as Harlem, East Harlem, Washington Heights, Fort Greene and Williamsburg have gone through significant transformations as a result of gentrification. Many of the aforementioned communities have or had a significant number of Latino residents. Latino neighborhoods, as well as African American communities, have been especially vulnerable to the effects of gentrification. This interdisciplinary study examines the effects of gentrification in Mott Haven, a Latino neighborhood in the borough of the Bronx which, according to the 2000 census, is 72% Hispanic (31% of New York City's Hispanic population resides in the Bronx).<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this study is to assess the perceived positive and negative changes of this phenomenon on the inhabitants of this community. Most studies of neighborhood transformation due to gentrification have examined the end stages of this process (communities which have undergone gentrification). As an alternative approach, we examine the process of gentrification during its early stage. We are particularly interested in social and ethno-cultural changes, both perceived and real, when first wave gentrifiers (students, artists, low level entrepreneurs), move into a low income Latino enclave. Our main purpose is to study the impact of impending neighborhood diversity (income, race, housing prices) on ethnic, cultural, and social attachment to urban "place."

Studying neighborhood change is a relevant topic for social theorists. Our primary research question is: Does neighborhood identity change, and is that change positive or negative, as the first stages of gentrification become apparent? To reach this goal we apply several research methods: statistical analysis, survey questionnaires, structured and unstructured interviews, newspaper articles, and participant observation. Our research design has citywide significance as its bases are the social and economic realities of contemporary life in the metropolitan area. Housing markets, population shifts, and job loss have real impact on ethnic areas throughout the metropolitan area, and Latino Mott Haven is one among many neighborhoods where this change is taking place. The changes in Mott Haven are relevant to metropolitan New York and other urban communities where similar change may occur.

## BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of gentrification has been widely studied since the early 1970s when it became a major process in large metropolitan areas.<sup>2</sup> Urban researchers have come to varied conclusions regarding the pros and cons resulting from this process. Supporters have argued that gentrification, with its influx of higher income residents, increased taxable income and higher property values stimulates neighborhood economic activity such as retail stores, restaurants, bars, banks, and realty offices.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, gentrification increases a neighborhoods' diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> This diversity can, in turn, improve the living standards for the existing low-income minority residents in a variety of ways. For example, new businesses brought in by gentrification can create job opportunities for the neighborhood's residents.

1 Astrid S. Rodríguez, *Demographic, Economic and Social Transformations in the South Bronx: 1990-2005*, CUNY - Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies, 2007. <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/lastudies/>

2 Lance Freeman and Frank Braconi, "Gentrification and Displacement: New York City in the 1990s," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 70:1 (Winter 2004):39-52.

3 Peter Meiskowski and Edwin Mills, "The Causes of Metropolitan Suburbanization," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (1993): 135-147.

4 Barret A. Lee, Daphne Spain, and Deborah Umberson, "Neighborhood Revitalization and Racial Change: The Case of Washington, D.C.," *Demography* 22: 4 (1985): 581-601.



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Other scholars have argued that gentrification has a negative effect on the original population of poor minorities in the gentrifying neighborhood. One major argument against gentrification is the potential displacement of lower-income minority households in gentrifying communities due to the dramatic increase of housing prices and rent.<sup>5</sup> The conversions of loft or commercial buildings into multi-unit apartments, subsequent rent increases, and the loss of small manufacturing space and the jobs they provide all produce significant and negative changes in the ethno-cultural composition of urban communities.<sup>6</sup>

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

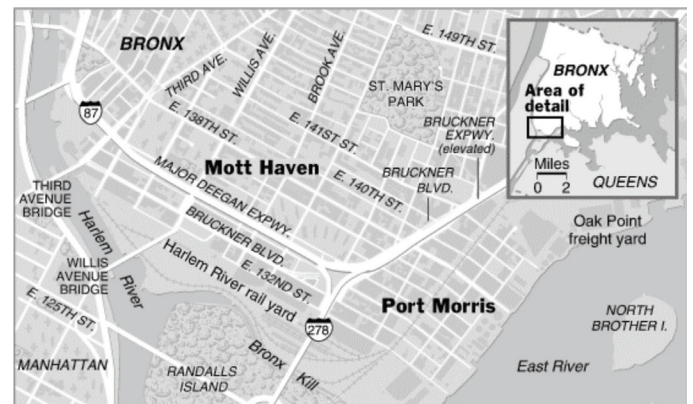
Most research assessing the impact of neighborhood transformation due to gentrification relies on two approaches: (1) studies of succession which examine the demographic profile of in-movers compared to out-movers; and (2) surveys which ask residents the reasons for movement outside of a specific locale.<sup>7</sup> This study is conducted in two steps. The first step, a longitudinal study of neighborhood change looks at the demographic profile and change of the neighborhood. Using census data and newspaper articles we examine demographic changes in population size, race/ethnicity, income, rent, and housing.

The second, qualitative step, uses ethnographic methods of inquiry including interviews and questionnaires. Since the process of neighborhood change can be slow and often difficult to notice at its earliest stages, ethnographic research allows for perceptual, impressionistic, and empirical observation and analysis. Interviews and local observation bring about a greater understanding of how social actors in various socio-economic categories view neighborhood change. The target population of respondents, both incoming residents, long-term residents and outgoing residents, included persons who own businesses, community leaders, and politicians. This method allowed us to better understand how gentrification affects one’s relationship to city-as-place socially, ethnically, and economically. The purpose of our ethnographic approach is twofold: to gauge perceptions on neighborhood change and to cover a broad range of urban “place” variables. In order to understand the relationship of these variables our research considers the importance of perceptions on change and attachment to community.<sup>8</sup>

The Mott Haven section of the Bronx was selected for research since it has attributes which make it a prime area for gentrification. In 2006 and 2007, numerous city newspapers printed articles on the changes beginning to take place in Mott Haven, including *NYC Life*, *The New York Times* and the *New York Post*. With the gentrification process firmly established in New York’s urban neighborhoods such as Harlem, Williamsburg, and Fort Greene and well underway in Spanish Harlem, changes were beginning to happen across the

Harlem River in the once untouchable Bronx. The South Bronx, dubbed “SoBro,” was recently described as the latest “hot” border neighborhood. Still, there are many indications that change is coming slowly to Mott Haven. Mott Haven is a low rent neighborhood located in the southern portion of the Bronx, in Bronx Community Board District 1, an area bounded from North to South, East to West by 149th street, 135th Street, Southern Boulevard and Third Avenue. (See Figure 1). It is close to Manhattan via subway, bus, and numerous highways. Mott Haven also has low rent, a large manufacturing district with factories and warehouse space available for conversion, and a substantial number of low-income residents, most of whom are Puerto Rican and Dominican.

**FIGURE 1**



Source: *The New York Times*

**POPULATION AND LAND USE**

New York City is the largest Latino populated city, with a population of over 2 million Latinos according to the 2000 Census.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 shows the total population change in Mott Haven from 1980 – 2000. From 1980 to 1990 the neighborhood lost 1,227 residents or 1.6 % of its population. By 2000 the population increased by 4,945 residents or 6.4% growth. Population decline during the 1980’s could be attributed to an overall decline in the population of New York City, the closing of numerous industrial sites in the Bronx or housing abandonment, arson, crime and economic disinvestment.

**TABLE 1.**  
**TOTAL POPULATION AND CHANGE 1980, 1990, 2000, IN MOTT HAVEN**

	1980	1990	2000
Total Numbers	79,44	77,214	82159
Percent Change	-----	-1.6	6.4

Source: *New York City Department of City Planning, 2005*

Seventy-three percent of the population of Mott Haven is Hispanic (compared with a borough-wide 48% Hispanic population) with a 1990 median household income of \$15,600, increasing to \$20,000 in

5 Freeman and Braconi, 2004.

6 Christopher Mele, "Neighborhood 'Burn-out': Puerto Ricans at the End of the Queue," in *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower Eastside*, edited by Janet L. Abu-Lughod, 125-148 (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1994); Arlene Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

7 Freeman and Braconi, 2004.

8 David Harvey, "Class Relations, Social Justice and the Politics of Difference," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Michael Keith and Steven Pile, 41-66 (New York: Routledge, 1993).

9 U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey, 2004. American Community Survey.,

2000 and then decreasing to \$15,000 in 2005, making it the poorest neighborhood in the metropolitan area.<sup>10</sup> Nearly 65% of the families in Mott Haven live below the poverty line, the highest in any area of metropolitan New York.<sup>11</sup> Fifty percent of all rental units are charge less than \$300 per month, and nearly 85% of all houses are valued at less than \$200,000. These figures lend proof to the rationale behind why Mott Haven may be on the brink of a substantial change in composition. It is a neighborhood priced well below the averages in the borough and the city at large.

Table 2 describes land usage in Mott Haven Community District One. Our primary interest in land usage is to determine the amount of available housing and the percentage of the area designated for industry. The amount of housing, specifically rental, is important in terms of gentrification, particularly if rents are low. However, industrial areas are also important in the gentrification process. Many gentrifying neighborhoods have vacant industrial areas such as warehouses, factories, and commercial space which have been converted (both legally and illegally) into apartments and lofts. Close to 30% of the area is used for some type of family or multi-family dwelling. Over 20% of the area is industrial and another 5% is zoned mixed commercial and residential. In March 2005, the New York City Council for the second time (the first was in 1997) rezoned portions of the area from industrial to mixed residential/commercial to allow for new apartment conversions, adding hundreds of new apartments. While some protested that apartment construction needed to include set-asides for low-income families, the City Planning Commission overruled their request saying any set-asides would discourage further development.<sup>12</sup>

**TABLE 2. LAND USE PATTERN FOR COMMUNITY DISTRICT ONE**

LAND USAGE	PERCENT
1-2 Family Residential	7%
Multi-Family Residential	22%
Mixed Residential/Commercial	5%
Commercial/Office	5%
Industrial	21%
Transportation/Utility	6%
Institutions	11%
Open space/Recreational	7%
Parking Facilities	6%
Vacant Land	6%
Miscellaneous	4%

Source: New York City Department of City Planning, 2005

## HOUSING: SALES AND RENTALS

A primary factor contributing to the gentrification of an area is the availability of inexpensive housing, including apartments. Table 3 shows the percentage of owner occupied housing compared to rentals. Mott Haven is dominated by rentals, with roughly 93% of housing categorized as such. Home ownership represents a smaller fraction of housing, roughly 7%. Affordable apartments may be on the decline as newer units are priced higher than the neighborhood average.

**TABLE 3. RENTAL AND OWNER OCCUPIED HOUSING**

Renter	93%
Owner	6%

Source: STF 3, 2000 Census. U.S. Census Bureau.

Table 4 presents changes in rents and housing values from 1990 to 2005. In terms of median gross rents, between 1990 and 2000, rents decreased from \$367 to \$349. However, rents increased to \$511 in 2005. While rents have increased overall, the average rent is low compared to the rest of New York City. Rents in the area have been increasing at approximately 4% per year according to local brokers. Rental units, particularly in the most desirable area of Mott Haven, came about through the renovation of former factories including the Clock Tower on Lincoln Avenue and Bruckner Boulevard, where 75 loft apartments rent for between \$1200 to \$2200 monthly.

**TABLE 4. MEDIAN HOUSING VALUES AND MEDIAN GROSS RENTS, 1990 - 2005**

	1990	2000	2005
Median Gross Rents	\$367	\$349	\$511
Median Housing Value	\$79,927	\$120,359	\$347,900

Source: New York City Department of City Planning; American Community Survey.

Rents in the area are still reasonable in comparison to other sections of the city. Table 5 indicates the percentage of rental units in specific price ranges in Mott Haven, Manhattan, and New York City. Rent levels are low compared to Manhattan and metropolitan New York City. At 64%, Mott Haven has the largest percentage of rental units in the \$200-\$749 range. The percentage of rental units at this level in Manhattan is smaller, only 39%. Mott Haven still has a smaller percentage of rental units in the \$1,000 and higher range (only 2%) compared to the same rental costs in Manhattan and New York City. Clearly, a higher percentage of rentals in Mott Haven remain at the lower rates compared to other parts of the city.<sup>13</sup> According to our own sample survey, 47% of respondents reported paying between \$500-\$700 per month in rent, which is in line with the average monthly rents paid in the Bronx by Puerto Rican and Dominicans (\$635 per month).<sup>14</sup>

10 Rodríguez, *Demographic, Economic and Social Transformations...*, p. 8.

11 Cedric L. Loftin, "Statement of Community District Needs 2006," Bronx Community Board 1.

12 Joseph Berger, "Goodbye South Bronx Blight, Hello Sobro," *The New York Times*, June 25, 2005.

13 Interviews with recent residents confirm this fact. A newly arrived renter stated that a major reason for her moving to Mott Haven was that rents were cheaper. Her monthly rent was over a \$1,000, yet this was significantly less than what she would pay in Manhattan or Brooklyn.

14 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, 2005.

**TABLE 5.**  
**PERCENTAGE OF RENTER OCCUPIED UNITS**  
**FOR SELECTED BOROUGHES, 2000**

GROSS RENTS	MOTT HAVEN	MANHATTAN	NEW YORK CITY
Less than \$200	26%	6%	6%
\$200 to \$499	41%	17%	17%
\$500 to \$749	23%	22%	32%
\$750 to \$999	7%	15%	23%
\$1000 or more	2%	37%	20%
No Cash Rent	2%	2%	2%
Median Gross Rent	\$349	\$796	\$712

Source: New York City Department of City Planning.

Another indication of rising rents in Mott Haven can be seen in Table 6 where we compare rents from 1990-2000, looking at changes in rent costs by percentages.<sup>15</sup> The lower end of the rental market, less than \$500 per month, decreased by 17% while the middle range (\$500 - \$999) grew by 16%. Most interesting for our project was the increase in renters paying over \$1,000 per month. While 2% is not necessarily a significant amount in the overall rental market, the important fact is that there was a significant increase in the absolute number of apartments renting for \$1,000 or more during this period (from 11 to 228 units).

**TABLE 6.**  
**RENT LEVELS FOR RESIDENTS OF THE MOTT HAVEN SECTION**  
**OF THE BRONX**

	1990	PERCENTAGE	2000	PERCENTAGE	% CHANGE
\$100 - \$499	11,109	88%	9,132	71%	-17%
\$500 - \$999	1,464	12%	3,549	27%	16%
\$1000 or more	4	.08%	228	1.8	2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. STF3, 1990 Census and STF4, 2000 Census; Authors' tabulations.

Another indicator of gentrification is increasing housing cost and value. Turning to housing values, the value of housing increased from 1990 to 2005. This increase is similar to the overall trend in the city. Recent real estate transactions in Mott Haven include privately financed condos with prices ranging from \$395,000 to \$795,000. The impact of an initially privately financed condominium project, like the Clock Tower, is significant in that future bank development will then use this project as the comparable investment example. For people interested in brownstones, Mott Haven has fewer than Brooklyn or Harlem, but the prices are far below the sale prices in these boroughs. According to recent information from local Mott Haven realty company, Cactus Properties, habitable brownstones in one of the three historic districts in the area (from 133rd to 144th Streets, between Alexander and Brook Avenue) are selling for between \$600,000 and \$800,000 compared to over 1 million dollars for uninhabitable buildings in either Brooklyn or Harlem. A real estate broker for The Corcoran Group, suggested that Mott Haven "reminds me of Fort

Greene (Brooklyn) in 1982."<sup>16</sup> According to the New York City Department of Finance, from 2004 to 2006 the Bronx has seen the highest increase (27.6%) in the market value of all property.

### RACE AND ETHNICITY

An important factor contributing to the gentrification process is the redistribution of the racial/ethnic composition of the neighborhood. Table 7 examines the change in racial/ethnic composition between 1990 and 2000. In Mott Haven, the number of white and black residents decreased 17 and 10% respectively. Hispanics, the largest ethnic group in the area at 71%, experienced 13% growth during this period. When we examine specific Hispanic groups, Puerto Ricans are the group which experienced decline. Among Hispanics, the two groups which have experienced growth are Dominicans and Mexicans, 45 and 143% respectively. Although in decline, the second largest ethnic group is African-Americans, representing roughly 26% of the population. Since we are using Census data, an undercount of undocumented individuals and the poor who live in the area is likely.

In terms of percentage of the overall population in this section of the Bronx, whites are the smallest group. They represent only 1.3% of the overall population. This group has also experienced a decrease since 1990, when they represented 1.7% of the total. While whites represent a small segment of the population in this area, this does not mean that gentrification by whites is not taking place. Our census data is over five years old and continued (in)migration of whites may have occurred after this time. Also the popularity of Mott Haven as a section for gentrification is relatively recent (about 4-5 years), hence the neighborhood presently may be undergoing early stages of racial/ethnic transition. According to an interview by the Columbia Radio News, a 30-year resident of the area argues, "There are rumors that the white people are coming back to the area. People are worried about the neighborhood. It's going to change in the way that people can't afford to live here."<sup>17</sup> And another life-long resident of the neighborhood says "I welcome gentrification because the standard of education goes up; however rents are ridiculously high and residents are being priced out. I feel protective of the ethnic, Latino flavor which could change in the future."<sup>18</sup>

**TABLE 7.**  
**PERCENT CHANGE IN RACIAL/ETHNIC RACIAL COMPOSITION,**  
**1990 - 2000**

RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP	1990	2000	PERCENT CHANGE
White	2	1	-17
Black	30	26	-10
Hispanic	67	71	13
Puerto Rican	77	58	-12
Dominican	9	11	46
Mexican	4	8	143

Source: New York Department of City Planning, 2005

<sup>16</sup> Joy Armstrong, "Mott Haven on Earth," *New York Magazine*, August 9, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Mariah Blake, "Is the South Bronx Becoming the Next East Village?," *Columbia Radio News*, April 30, 2005.

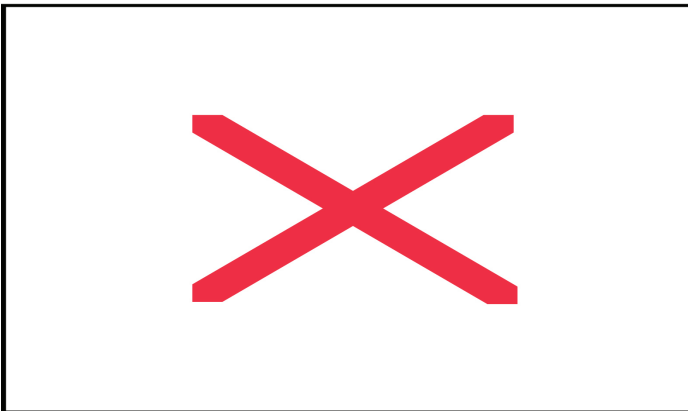
<sup>18</sup> Robert Waddell, "Is Gentrification turning the South Bronx into SoBro?," *Independent Press NY*, January 4, 2005.

## HOUSING: CONSTRUCTION

One possible indication of gentrification is the construction of new housing. During the 1970's and 1980's the neighborhood was suffering from both physical and social decline. Drug use, narcotics trafficking, crime, arson, landlord abandonment, and other social ills added to the perception of the Bronx as an area of urban decay. Since 1990 construction starts in the neighborhood added over 3,800 units of new and rehabilitated housing.<sup>19</sup> According to land use and geographic data since 2002, 3 billion dollars has been invested in residential, commercial, and institutional development in the Bronx. The borough is going through a significant building boom, including the adding of 1,352 new Bronx addresses, nearly double the figure from 2001.<sup>20</sup>

Narrowing the focus back to Mott Haven, Figure 2 indicates the number of building permits issued from 1996 to 2003. From 1996 to 1997 few housing permits were issued. However, from 1998 on, the number of buildings has steadily increased, peaking in 2000. The area experienced a decline from 2002 to 2003. Through private and public monies, the neighborhood experienced an increase in single- and multi-family dwellings. Walking tours conducted by these researchers attest to the high levels of construction activity in areas that were once vacant lots.

FIGURE 2



Source: New York Department of Buildings, 2005

Source: New York Department of City Planning, 2003

## HOUSEHOLD INCOME, EDUCATION, OCCUPATION

As neighborhoods undergo gentrification, one major change is the influx of new affluent residents. An increase in household income is an indicator of gentrification. Besides household income, change in education levels of residents may also indicate gentrification. Table 8 examines college graduates in Mott Haven. Educational levels have increased. From 1990-2000 the percentage of college graduates increased two percentage points. Increases have occurred in terms of Bachelor, Graduate and Professional degrees. This factor may indicate a new movement of professionals into the neighborhood.

TABLE 8.  
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND PERCENT COLLEGE GRADUATES, 1990 – 2000

	1990	2000
Median Household Income	\$12,688	\$16,000
College Graduates	3%	5%
Bachelor Degrees	2%	4%
Graduate or Professional	.8%	2%

Source: New York City Department of City Planning, 2005

Figure 3 shows the occupational distribution of residents in Mott Haven during the period from 1990 to 2000. In 1990, most residents worked in retail, manufacturing, and health care. However, by 2000 the majority of residents were in health services. The decline in manufacturing mirrors the decline in this industry throughout the city. The Bronx has the highest concentration of health service workers compared to other boroughs in the city. The area is also the home of Lincoln Hospital, one of the city's busiest hospitals and the largest health care provider in the South Bronx. Lincoln Hospital, with nearly 600 beds and 3000 full time employees is the 3rd busiest hospital in the nation with 144,000 emergency room visits in 2007.

FIGURE 3

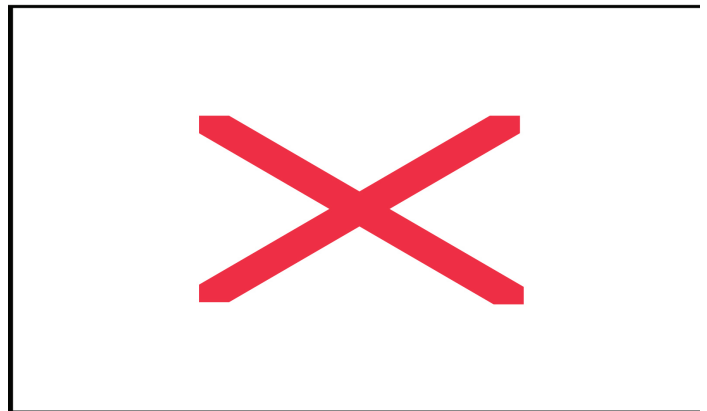


Table 9 illustrates median household income and percent living below poverty. For this table we looked at Mott Haven census tracts. In terms of household income, resident income has increased by roughly \$4,000. While median household income varies for this area, it is mostly low compared with a 2005 citywide median income level of \$34,000 for Hispanics and \$45,000 for African Americans.<sup>21</sup> In the Mott Haven district census tracts, Bronx CD 1, has the highest median household income at \$27,330 (in census tract 31), however, most of the incomes are in the \$11,000 to \$12,000 range. The neighborhood's lowest level of poverty is in census tract 31 where 23% of residents are below the poverty level. Overall, Mott Haven's poverty levels are among the highest in both the city and the nation.

19 [www.bronxmall.com/commboards/needsb1](http://www.bronxmall.com/commboards/needsb1)

20 Manny Fernández, "Vacant Lot Was Their Paradise," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2006.

21 Howard Caro-López, *Socioeconomic and Cost of Living Indicators Among Foreign and Domestic Born Latinos in the New York Metropolitan Area*, 2005. CUNY- Center for Latin American, Caribbean and Latino Studies, 2007. <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/lastudies/>

**TABLE 9**  
**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME, PERCENT BELOW POVERTY,**  
**AND UNEMPLOYMENT STATUS BY CENSUS TRACK,**  
**2000 CENSUS MOTT HAVEN**

CENSUS TRACK	MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME	PERCENT BELOW POVERTY	UNEMPLOYMENT STATUS
23	\$14,112	40%	30%
24	\$12,221	49%	22%
27.01	\$12,898	62%	26%
27.02	\$12,654	62%	36%
31	\$27,330	23.4%	9%
33	\$11,322	59.7%	25%
35	\$18,736	43.4%	20%
39	\$15,893	42.3%	19%
41	\$12,970	50%	20%
47	\$11,817	58%	34%

U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. NYC Department of Planning, 2003.

We conclude that due to the low levels of median income and high percentage of people living below the poverty level, one of the reasons why rents are not expensive is that the population of the neighborhood could simply not afford to pay more. A major attraction to a neighborhood for first-wave gentrifiers is the affordability of the area in terms of rents. For example, artists are typically the advance guard in terms of neighborhood transition. Most artists have moderate incomes and for them cheap rent, in terms of housing and square footage, is a priority.

In addition, realtors appear eager to rent to artists, believing “they add value to whatever building or neighborhood they come to.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, Mott Haven is not an area that lends itself to the same type of neighborhood-wide gentrification process as seen in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or the East Village in Manhattan. Mott Haven has fixed boundaries, including the Major Deegan Expressway and the Harlem River, as well as rows of public housing projects which limit the ability of neighborhood gentrification to “link up” with already gentrified areas. Geographically, if one were to consider gentrified Ft. Greene in Brooklyn as an extension of Park Slope, Greenpoint as an extension of gentrified Williamsburg or Spanish Harlem as an extension of gentrified Harlem, the geographic and spatial difficulties of linking Mott Haven to Spanish Harlem or further east into Harlem becomes apparent. Nonetheless, artists have moved into the area, claiming “little nooks and crannies” amongst the pre-existing structure of the neighborhood. One optimistic recent arrival said, “Is it a shame (that rents are increasing)? Yes and no. The world is organic, and things keep evolving.”<sup>23</sup>

For the most part, those who have recently arrived to the area express two dominant sentiments; first a sense of solidarity with other recent arrivals and secondly a sense that they are “pioneers.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally,

<sup>22</sup> Nadine Brozan, “Artists Canvassing for Space,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Brozan, “Artists Canvassing...”

<sup>24</sup> William Neuman, “With Manhattan too Costly, Outsiders Tiptoe into the Bronx,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2006.

there is a sense that urban areas are open to new residents, particularly those seeking lower rents and a larger living space. The Vice President of the South Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation, arguing for an open-minded attitude toward (in)migration said, “What you don’t want to do is relegate an area that has finally achieved a place in the market only to the poor. This [Mott Haven] should be available for everybody.”<sup>25</sup>

## RESIDENT VIEWS

Instead of simply reaffirming the common sense or stereotyped views of gentrification, that it is either “good” or “bad,” we prefer to locate the perceptions of Mott Haven’s residents in a more fluid context of attitudes and concerns. Ideally, this will help us understand broad definitions of urban place and how change orients the practices and beliefs of its residents. Our qualitative study tries to address the perceived pros and cons of gentrification.

Our sample of 25 respondents includes people from a broad range of backgrounds. We saw no signs of interracial conflict or any signs of a community in opposition to change. The results suggest that the majority of respondents have a favorable view of how their neighborhood is changing and believe it will improve more in the future.

Table 10 presents the socio-demographic profile of respondents to our survey. The majority of the respondents are Hispanic (92%). Among Hispanics, Puerto Ricans are the dominant group (60%) followed by other Hispanic (24%) and Dominican (12%). Over 80% of the respondents are female. Turning to employment status, we see a high percentage working full time (64%). Income levels vary. While 43% have incomes below \$30,000, more than 22% have incomes over \$40,000. Education levels for this group also vary with 16% having less than a high school education and 36% having a college degree.

**TABLE 10**  
**SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS**

RACE/ETHNICITY	
White	8%
Hispanic	92%
N=25	
Puerto Rican	61%
Dominican	12%
Other Hispanic	24%
N=24	
GENDER	
Male	20%
Female	80%
N=25	
EMPLOYMENT STATUS	
Working Full Time	64%
Working Part Time or Seasonally	8%
Unemployed	20%
Retired	8%

<sup>25</sup> Berger, “Goodbye South Bronx...”

**INCOME LEVEL**

Less Than \$10,000	17%
\$10,001 TO \$20,000	22%
\$20,001 TO \$30,000	4%
\$30,001 TO \$40,000	26%
More Than \$40,001	22%
Did Not Report	9%

**EDUCATION LEVEL**

Less Than High School	16%
High School	20%
Some College	28%
College Degree	36%

Our discussions with Mott Haven residents suggest that the influx of professionals can provide the community with an informal employment network including light construction, maintenance, laundry, child care, and personal assistant work. Higher income residents, typically more politically engaged, may also have political experience and resources which can provide the community with increased public services. The aforementioned processes lead to a distinctive, positive, change in terms of a gentrifying community's social, ethno-cultural identity.

Table 11 presents respondents' answers to question pertaining to neighborhood improvement. In terms of crime, the majority of the respondents stated that the quality of life in Mott Haven improved due to a decline in crime. A smaller percentage (32%) answered that the neighborhood improved due to an increase in area businesses. Similarly, a smaller percentage (24%) believed that affordable housing improved in Mott Haven. Also, it appears that people moving in did not make Mott Haven a better place to live (56% answered "No" to this question). While the majority of our respondents stated that new businesses, affordable housing, and more people moving in did not make Mott Haven better, this does not imply that the residents are against these changes. In fact, our analysis of their responses to open-ended questions pertaining to what they liked about the neighborhood and what would make it better suggested otherwise.

However, the majority of respondents believed that Mott Haven will, in the next 5 years, improve (See Table 12).

**TABLE 11****SURVEY ANSWERS PERTAINING TO NEIGHBORHOOD IMPROVEMENT**

	YES	NO
Mott Haven Gotten Better Due to Less Crime	52%	48%
Mott Haven Gotten Better Due to More Businesses	32%	68%
Mott Haven Gotten Better Due to More Affordable Housing	24%	76%
Mott Haven Gotten Better Due to More People Moving In	44%	56%

N=24

**TABLE 12****SURVEY ANSWERS PERTAINING TO FUTURE OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

	IMPROVE	STAY THE SAME	GET WORSE
Mott Haven in the Next 5 Years	76%	12%	8%

N=24

When we asked in our survey for open-ended, descriptive information about Mott Haven we found nearly unanimous appreciation of Mott Haven as a good neighborhood and a nearly unanimous belief that the changes in the area were positive. When we asked what our sample liked about Mott Haven respondents mentioned the decrease in crime, how there's a neighborhood feeling to the area because people know one another, the existence of a "proud" sense of community, and the working-class feeling of the area. They also felt that the neighborhood is more livable now than in prior years. We were also told that Mott Haven had excellent access to public transportation and parks as well as low rents. There was a commonly held belief that the new houses being built (including rehabs of older buildings) made the neighborhood look better; this added to our respondents' sense of pride in Mott Haven's character and composition. When we asked, "what do you like least about Mott Haven?," respondents mentioned dirty streets, the (negative) stereotypes about the area, high rates of unemployment, open drug dealing, and abandoned or vacant buildings.

Among our respondents, the feeling is that the influx of people willing to pay higher rents and rehabilitate vacant buildings is a sign of good things to come. When we asked what would make Mott Haven a better place in the future, some said more income and ethnic diversity and others specifically expressed a desire to see more Manhattanites move into the area. Many of the residents clearly welcome the prospects for development in Mott Haven, seeking more of the very elements proponents of gentrification desire: decreased crime, increase in investments, retail sector growth, increased municipal services (trash, police), more theaters and entertainment options, and greater neighborhood revitalization.

Missing from the survey responses are the typical concerns over gentrification such as increased housing costs, displacement, and changes in neighborhood identity. Because many of the apartments rented by first-wave gentrifiers are warehouse conversions rather than rehab and eviction conversions, the long-term low-rent residents may not see these changes as having an impact on their immediate rental situation. For these residents, gentrification at this stage simply means a decrease in vacant buildings, an increase in private investment, and greater diversity.

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to much of the literature on gentrification, we did not see any displacement of lower income renters by higher income residents nor can we testify to a fundamental change in the basic character of Mott Haven. Rather, the first-wave gentrifiers are seen as a complement to the neighborhood rather than unwelcome interlopers. A resident who recently bought a brownstone on Alexander Avenue defensively remarked, "Being a Puerto Rican I don't see myself gentrifying anything. This is my house." At this stage, our findings appear to support the positive view of gentrification as expressed in other similar studies.<sup>26</sup> As one resident stated, "I would be glad not just for the Bronx to improve, but for it to turn out better than it ever was."<sup>27</sup>

At this early stage, we are seeing a process of revitalization taking place rather than gentrification per se, which is seen as enhancing the neighborhood's social, economic, and physical dimensions. If the revitalization process continues to upgrade pre-existing vacant buildings and land, improves the cleanliness of the streets, creates more viable businesses and services, and reduces crime, the changes will be embraced.<sup>28</sup> The recent downturn in both the banking and real estate economies may have slowed down—if not halted—the process of gentrification, leaving behind only small-scale area improvements which have been welcomed precisely because they are small-scale.

Still, for Mott Haven, all the features that increase the likelihood of gentrification remain: proximity to public transit and Manhattan, low housing and rental prices, a high percentage of renters, a small-scale arts community, a vibrant culture, and historic (below market) brownstones. Of the stages of gentrification outlined earlier, changes have slowed-down—if not stopped altogether—after the first stage. A small number of newcomers have arrived, vacant buildings have been rehabilitated, a small number of new shops, bars, restaurants and galleries have opened but displacement and resentment are not apparent. If and when the gentrification process resumes, bringing in higher rents, displacement, new residents who may be less tolerant of the old ways, then we may be able to measure resentment and report conflict.<sup>29</sup> If Mott Haven is a community and there is a sense of neighborhood or place to the area, this sense is clearly not static and unalterable but rather amenable to change.

Our study suggests that when urban change happens, issues are raised relating to cultural, economic, and spatial interactions. This should remind us that gentrification is not just an economic but a social, cultural, and civic process. The respondents to our survey and those we interviewed repeatedly spoke of their belief in the authenticity of Mott Haven; its rich history, architecture, out-of-the-way location and class composition as organic, attractive, and ready for improvements via

gentrification. The complex social thing called "place" already exists within the attachments and concerns for the neighborhood. If gentrification begins with revitalization and proceeds slowly and incrementally while minimizing the downside of area change we assume it will continue to be welcomed. The prevalent view among our informants was that development efforts were not destabilizing the community and that change was instead welcome, producing nice complements to the already rich fabric of the area.

Ideally, if the dominant actors in the change process, that is, policy-makers at the city level, neighborhood residents and community groups, and business and development interests, could establish formal or informal communication networks, the possibility for continued gentrification with neighborhood input would be maximized. At this point, development is welcomed in Mott Haven. The issue is how equitable it will be over time and whether it will come at the expense of the area's long-term residents. The question will be whether Mott Haven will be able to maintain its sense of place after seemingly inevitable changes.

Mott Haven is an extremely low income, economically distressed part of the Bronx and greater metropolitan New York. While this may sound crass, the area, with its high poverty and unemployment rates, may sorely need a little gentrification. The people we surveyed seem to believe this and therefore welcomed the changes in their neighborhood. Gentrification, or neighborhood change between low and high income residents and changes in the cost of real estate, is not new in the history of New York City neighborhoods. The important thing is not to be "for" or "against" gentrification but rather to know the consequences of the process and to organize to manage change. What emerges from this study is the awareness that the process of gentrification in Mott Haven has slowed-down. We believe this is a momentary pause. Mott Haven provides an opportunity to "do" gentrification right. Since all parties already know and anticipate that changes are in the making, the process of gentrification should be managed to minimize—if not wholly avoid—the adverse aspects of neighborhood change. Mott Haven's slow process of change lends itself to planned, coordinated revitalization. If those who stand to be most impacted by the process can somehow come together to mutually discuss their vision of how Mott Haven should be developed, the process of change may continue to be favorably received by its residents.

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26 Freeman and Braconi, 2004; John Vigdor, *Does Gentrification Harm the Poor?* Unpublished manuscript, Duke University, 2001. <http://www.pps.aas.duke.edu/~jvigdor/dghttp5.pdf>; Lance Freeman, *There Goes the 'Hood: Gentrification from the Ground Up*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

27 Cited in C.J. Hughes, "Square Feet/The Bronx" *The New York Times*, October 17, 2004.

28 Crime statistics from the 40th Precinct in Mott Haven indicate a decrease in various crimes from 1990 to 2005. The greatest decrease occurred among felonies and assaults, decreasing 82% from 1990. This is followed by an 86% decrease in the murder rate. These crime statistics paint a different picture of the South Bronx from what it was in the 1970s and 1980's when its high crime rate was legendary.

29 Brian Berry, "Islands of Renewal in Seas of Decay," in *The New Urban Reality*, edited by Paul E. Peterson, pp. 69-98 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Press, 1985).