

THE NEIGHBORHOODS OF NEW YORK CITY

Hell's Kitchen a heaven for young renters

Young professionals flock to the neighborhood as luxury high rises go up; vacancies abound

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Don Corleone—the Godfather—got his start here in the Mario Puzo classic. A young Marlon Brando struggled against union corruption on the docks in *On the Waterfront*. Puerto Rican and second-generation European street gangs battled it out here in *West Side Story*.

These days, Hell's Kitchen—or Midtown West or Clinton, as it's been dubbed by others—is probably more accurately captured by actor Colin Farrell in the recent movie *Phone Booth*. In it, a fast-talking young public relations professional is targeted by a stalker in a phone booth just west of Times Square in an area that is still slightly seedy, yet increasingly gentrified.

We don't see any of the new residential rental high-rises that dot the area in the movie, but maybe that is where Farrell would have lived in the neighborhood, which runs from 34th Street to 59th Street, and from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson River. At least 15 luxury residential buildings have opened in the last four years, largely catering to young professionals, amid the traditional tenement buildings with a tub in the kitchen where the fictional Corleone lived.

"The neighborhood is still a little bit offbeat, though don't read anything into the phrase 'offbeat,'" said Guy Caterina, a vice president at DJ Knight residential brokerage. "It's a quickly developing neighborhood. Younger professionals are moving in—Wall Streeters and young attorneys who can walk to work in Midtown."

Caterina said four or five new luxury residential buildings have opened up in the last year alone—most with fancy condo finishes like grandiose lobbies, high-speed Internet access and health clubs—and that there is now a glut of rental units on the market that is only expected to get worse. Sales have been relatively stable, however, other brokers say. The main corridor of development is along and around 42nd Street.

"They are expecting 6,000 new rental units in Manhattan in the next six to nine months, and that's going to affect this area," Caterina said. "The major landlords, because of the glut, and because of the neighborhood being a little out of the way, are offering

phenomenal deals," like three months' free rent and no broker's fee on two-year rental agreements.

The area—which Caterina says was "overlooked" by a lot of the brokerage community as recently as five years ago—is also drawing its share of upscale amenities as the new high-rises open up. Hot restaurants include Ilo, French-Moroccan Marseille, Mediterranean-fare Molyvos, Baldoria and Town.

"Take a walk up and down Ninth Avenue, and go into restaurants at 5 or 6 p.m. at night," said Caterina. "It's a lot more upscale than it was two or three years ago."

Finance companies moving to Midtown since Sept. 11 have also been drawing renters, who can walk to work, to the area.

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Caterina also said newcomers moving to New York for the first time "have much less of a problem going into the neighborhood."

Not everyone is happy with the changes, however.

Long-time residents and activists have been vocal about maintaining the area's colorful past.

The area is dominated by tenements, some dating to the 1850s. The basic design is the railroad flat with all the rooms in a row, the bathtub in the kitchen and the toilet in an adjacent closet.

The neighborhood got its "Hell's Kitchen" moniker in the 1880s, though the origin of the name is uncertain. Clinton, the other name by which the area is known, is traceable to two of the community's founders—George Clinton, New York's first governor, in 1777, and his nephew, DeWitt, who also served as mayor and later governor.

In the 19th century, Hell's Kitchen was home to street gangs like The Parlor Mob, the Dead Rabbits and the Gorillas, and the "strong-arm squad" of police from the 37th Street station that battled them. Neighborhood residents knew enough to avoid the dangerous alley on 41st Street between 9th and 10th Avenues that was known as the League of Nations.

By the turn of the last century, as the tenements rose, the community was also becoming home to the city's cleaning people, servants, restaurant and hotel workers, Broadway ushers and stagehands. These days, the tenements remain alongside parking lots, body shops and warehouses, a heritage that many locals want to maintain.

"The old timers aren't too happy," said Caterina. "Personally, I don't put much credence in that local action. Parking garages and body shops don't make sense in the middle of Manhattan anymore."

In the future, there are huge development possibilities for Hell's Kitchen as well as major obstacles.

The proposed Hudson Yards project—which calls for transforming the far West Side, from 28th Street to 41st Street and Eight Avenue to the Hudson River, into an office district—could radically alter the area. The New York Jets professional football team is also proposing a \$1 billion stadium between 30th and 33rd Street

near the river.

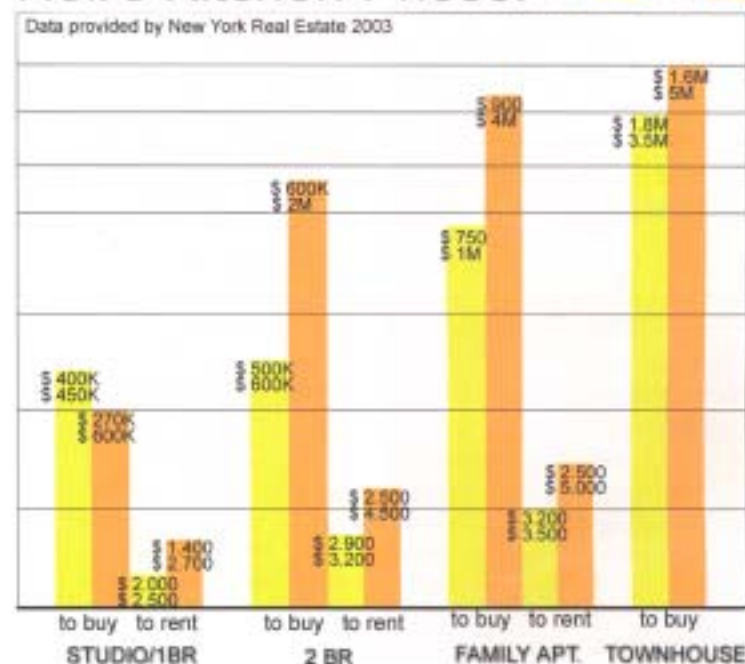
But Caterina said the most important development would be the extension of the No. 7 subway line, which ends at Eighth Avenue, a giant project that is currently being looked at by city officials.

"You've got to improve public transportation," said

the brokers told them that the reason units weren't renting was because of transportation," he said. "Now they have a shuttle that runs back and forth to the subway during rush hour."

In addition to high-rises, there is also a bevy of midblock projects that blend in with neighboring ten-

Hell's Kitchen Prices: 2001 2003



Caterina, noting that remoteness from the subway is hurting high-rises on the far West Side. "Walking from 12th Avenue to 8th Avenue in the middle of the winter is brutal."

Some residential towers have come up with novel solutions. The One Riverplace project at 12th Avenue and 42nd Street was having problems drawing renters.

"They called some brokers and

ements going up, as well as a push to renovate townhouses and the existing toilet-in-a-closet tenements.

"I get phone calls from investors all day long who want to renovate tenement buildings," said Caterina. "They are generally renovating to rent. And you generally don't see low-end renovations. They want the renovations to last." ■