

February 25, 2011

Southern Pride, of a Kind

By JAKE MOONEY

WHEN Jennifer Aziz told her father she was thinking of buying an apartment on East 29th Street near Park Avenue South, he was worried. As Ms. Aziz recalls it, his concern went beyond the standard fatherly protectiveness. As a rug dealer, he had owned a store decades ago in the commercial district south of Midtown Manhattan, which he remembered as it had been then: drably commercial, dead at night and a little seedy.

Fortunately for Aziz family harmony, her father was reassured when he came for a look around.

The area is livelier than ever, and in recent years Park Avenue South in particular — the stretch between East 17th and East 32nd Streets — has experienced a wave of residential construction and, hence, lots of new foot traffic.

Long a poor relation of the “real” Park Avenue to the north, and later an emerging bargain district, the area has come into its own as a distinct place to live and socialize.

With that emergence have come higher housing prices. Ms. Aziz, 32, who is a nursery school teacher, closed on her one-bedroom apartment this month. Although she declined to say how much she paid, data compiled by [StreetEasy.com](#) indicate that similar units in the building, at [39 East 29th Street](#), have sold recently for \$1,400 to \$1,500 a square foot, or more than \$1.1 million. Farther downtown, agents say, units in recent condominium developments like 240 and 260 Park Avenue South are closer to \$1,700 per square foot and up.

The street has always had a certain appeal, even in worse times: “Locationwise,” Ms. Aziz said, “it’s perfect to get anywhere. You’re not far from any neighborhood. Never a cab ride that’s more than \$10.”

But now there is less reason to leave. The [Gansevoort Park Avenue hotel](#), an offshoot of the meatpacking district hot spot, opened across East 29th Street from Ms. Aziz’s building in November, and a string of prosaic but essential neighborhood services have fallen into place. Among them, said Jennifer Brown, executive director of the [Flatiron 23rd Street Partnership](#), are child-care facilities like Appleseeds and the New York Kids’ Club, and several gyms.

Ms. Brown says her group, a business improvement district oriented toward commercial development, applauds the avenue’s growing residential character. The changes, she said, have helped make the avenue into a functioning live/work neighborhood, allowing residents to walk to jobs at companies like New York Life Insurance, Credit Suisse and Grey advertising.

“We’ve really found that more residents in the neighborhood have only helped us in terms of what we’re trying to do,” she said, adding that more people meant more customers for an increasingly diverse array of businesses.

Some of those are trendy restaurants and bars that, like the Ace Hotel on East 29th Street a few blocks to the

west, are experiencing a bit of a moment.

“You’re really drawing a very young, hip crowd,” said Richard Steinberg, an executive managing director of the Warburg Realty Partnership.

“The same crowd that would normally go down to the meatpacking district or TriBeCa, is now staying in Midtown Manhattan because it’s so much more convenient.”

Beyond trendiness, the area’s housing stock, much of it former office or commercial space, also has much to offer. Kimberly Lyn Pressman, a vice president of the Corcoran Group, said Park Avenue South drew people seeking a certain kind of dwelling.

“They want high ceilings, they want voluminous rooms, they want oversized windows,” Ms. Pressman said, “and because of the history of the neighborhood and when these buildings were built, the apartments have a lot of these factors.”

Ms. Aziz, who will be living in a new unit, said her personal history with the avenue — stemming in part from her father’s old store — made it feel like home. If anything, she said, she might get frustrated as the warm weather draws bigger crowds to the Gansevoort’s rooftop bar.

But she added: “I actually don’t mind. I prefer a lively neighborhood to a quiet, dark street.”

WHAT YOU’LL FIND

The liveliest stretch of the avenue — and the best-established residentially — is below East 23rd Street. Larger buildings include the 259-unit 280 Park Avenue South, which was built in the 1980s, and 260 Park Avenue South, the former [United Federation of Teachers](#) headquarters, which opened as condominiums in 2006 with 86 apartments.

Frances Katzen, a managing director of Prudential Douglas Elliman, described the conversion of the teachers’ building as a milestone in establishing the avenue as a residential area, and said sales there had continued even through the economic slowdown.

“This is now a destination location,” she said. “It’s not a sort of fringe neighborhood trying to emerge. It’s arrived. It has its own cachet.”

The blocks above East 23rd, agents said, have generally lagged behind in value, linked in many minds with unromantic Midtown. Yet that association is loose. “You ask 10 different people and you’ll get 10 different answers about where Midtown starts,” said Ms. Pressman, the Corcoran broker.

In any case, those blocks in the upper 20s have lately gained in allure, thanks in part to new restaurants and hotels. Paul Zweben, a senior vice president of Prudential Douglas Elliman, said the biggest changes had happened a couple of blocks to the west, where the Ace Hotel, with its Stumptown coffee shop and restaurants by the chef [April Bloomfield](#), opened in 2009.

“I think they’re completely changing that entire section of Broadway over, and it’s basically rolling onto Park Avenue,” Mr. Zweben said, adding that, as in TriBeCa in the 1990s, “I’ve seen neighborhoods change because of food.”

He predicts that the upper blocks of Park Avenue South will continue their metamorphosis as more eating and drinking establishments come to surround the Gansevoort, which has the makings of a neighborhood hub. Indeed, Mr. Zweben said, the hotel seems to have developed into a scene already. Asked what types of hanging out, exactly, go on there, he replied, "I'm not cool enough, so I don't know."

WHAT YOU'LL PAY

Ms. Pressman says East 23rd Street is still a line of demarcation when it comes to price.

Between 19th and 20th Streets, the 54-unit [240 Park Avenue South](#), designed by [Gwathmey Siegel and Associates Architects](#), is one of the area's more desirable buildings, she said. Prices there were around \$1,700 a square foot when the building opened, and have since settled around \$1,600 a square foot. For units of all kinds on the avenue, she said, average prices below 23rd Street exceed \$1,100 a square foot. By contrast, averages per square foot above 23rd Street are under \$800. There are, of course, exceptions and outliers on both sides, Ms. Pressman said. One reason for the disparity, she added, is that most of Park Avenue South's recent luxury condo developments have been built toward the avenue's southern end.

Ms. Katzen says prices on the lower part of the avenue remain high in part because of scant inventory in the avenue's more popular blocks. "There's a lack of really good-quality product right now," she said, "so there seems to be a lot of pent-up aggression."

By way of example, she cited a unit she had been marketing as a rental in [260 Park Avenue South](#), the Teachers' Federation building, a two-bedroom two-and-a-half-bath unit advertised for \$8,700 a month. "We didn't even have time to rent it," she said, "because we sold it within a week." The asking price had been \$2.25 million, and the unit sold for \$2.15 million, she said.

Rentals, then, can be hard to find, but according to [StreetEasy](#), one-bedroom units in the avenue's condo buildings tend to rent for \$4,000 and up. Two-bedroom units typically start at \$6,500. In both cases, depending on the building, prices can be much higher.

WHAT TO DO

The avenue passes within a block of [Madison Square Park](#), to the west, and the private Gramercy Park, to the east. To the south is Union Square, where the [Greenmarket](#) now operates all day on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. There are dozens of restaurants on the avenue and on the surrounding blocks; two established favorites are the Gramercy Tavern, on East 20th Street, and BLT Prime, on East 22nd.

THE COMMUTE

The 6 train makes local stops under the avenue at 23rd and 28th, as well as just north of Park Avenue South's boundaries at 33rd Street. To the south, the N, Q, R and L are also accessible from Union Square.

THE SCHOOLS

Primary students south of 25th Street attend Public School 40, on East 19th Street. The school got an A on its most recent city progress report; 83.9 percent were proficient in English, 86.4 percent in math. North of 25th, students are zoned for P.S. 116 on 33rd Street. That school got a B on its progress report; 75.6 percent were

proficient in English, 86.6 percent in math.

The nearest middle school is Junior High School 104, on East 21st Street. It scored a B on its progress report, with 58.7 percent proficient in English and 68.5 percent in math.

[Baruch College Campus High School](#), just west of the avenue on East 25th Street, has a little over 400 students. In 2010, SAT averages were 523 in reading, 583 in math and 528 in writing, versus 439, 462 and 434 citywide.

THE HISTORY

The New York and Harlem Railroad began running under the avenue in the 1830s, when the line beginning at Prince Street was extended northward. Though the northern blocks of Park Avenue first got their name in 1860, Park Avenue South was still known as Fourth Avenue until 1959, when the city renamed it.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 28, 2011

An earlier version of this article gave incorrect information about the subway trains stopping at 33rd Street. The 4 and 5 express trains do not stop there.