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## Not Hot Just Yet, but Newark Is Starting to Percolate

By [ANDREW JACOBS](#)

NEWARK, May 2 — You live where?

Such is the reaction that Ron Saleh and other new residents of this long-suffering city inevitably get when they tell friends they have moved here from New York, Hoboken or one of the region's manicured suburban bubbles.

But the question, frequently delivered with an expression that combines awe with disgust, is often followed by another: You pay how much?

Mr. Saleh, 37, a public relations executive who most recently had addresses in Washington, Atlanta and Roosevelt Island, takes a certain pleasure in forcing Manhattan-centric friends to cross the Hudson, and watching their skepticism melt to envy as he shows off the smartly restored two-bedroom house he rents for \$1,400 a month — about \$1,000 less than he would pay for a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan.

“When they realize this is 20 minutes from Midtown and they see all the energy and all the hip people living here, they want to make the move, too,” he said last Sunday as he mixed cocktails in his kitchen for a crowd of friends, most of them recent transplants like himself. “It’s not quite there yet, but Newark is about to get hot.”

After four decades of economic stagnation and bad publicity, New Jersey's largest city — stuck in the public imagination as a place of

stolen cars, ailing public schools and a busy international airport — is sprouting stylish new restaurants, art galleries and bars that dispense \$10 cocktails.

A new indie music festival is expected to draw thousands to the heart of downtown next month, and city officials say that applications for 22 condominium projects have poured in since January, twice the number for all of 2006, with [Shaquille O’Neal](#), Queen Latifah and [Tiki Barber](#) among those kicking around development proposals.

Though its struggle against blight and crime is hardly past, some residents say Newark is enjoying the kind of psychic rebirth that has helped transform scores of other downtrodden cities into nesting grounds for the young, the creative, and, with time, the well-heeled. Adjectives like bohemian and funky are increasingly tossed around, and even some skeptics are starting to believe in the moniker Newark adopted two decades ago: Renaissance City.

“I think there’s a growing sense that it’s cool to live here,” said Joseph Aratow, a real estate broker who has persuaded some of his deep-pocketed clients to give their vacant commercial property to gallery owners in the hope of encouraging more artists, and the people who love them, to migrate here.

Last month Mr. Aratow helped deliver — rent free for at least a year — a 30,000-square-foot furniture warehouse on Market Street to Rupert Ravens, a curator who will turn it into New Jersey’s biggest gallery. Mr. Ravens, who helps coordinate the city’s annual artist studio tour, dreams of a Newark Biennial to rival art extravaganzas in Berlin, Venice and Miami.

“This is the first time in my life I feel like I’m in the right place at the right time,” he said.

To describe Newark as Chelsea-on-the-Passaic would, of course, be a bit hyperbolic; in many of the city’s neighborhoods, “funky” is a generous euphemism for dandelion-choked lots, tumbledown houses and

malodorous bodegas. Residents both new and old complain about shattered car windows, sparse population and the lack of decent shopping.

“If you live downtown, you still have to drive to buy a banana,” said Ade Sedita, who opened an arts supply store in the city in March. “If you’re comparing Newark to New York City, it’s still a tough sell. That said, the opportunities here are endless for the right person.”

After decades of depopulation since the 1967 riots, Newark has gained more than 10,000 residents in the past five years, including Jennifer Girardier, a Wall Street hedge fund broker, Rachel Robbins, an actress who moved here from California, and Ms. Robbins’s husband, Michael Saltzman, an urban planner who is working on several local development projects. In a city whose residents are largely poor or working class and more than 70 percent minority, many of the new arrivals are white and upwardly mobile, though neither the [Census Bureau](#) nor city officials have demographics available on the newcomers. “Sometimes I feel like I’m in a foreign country,” said Ms. Robbins, a platinum blonde known for her impolitic humor. “Let’s just say we’re pioneers on our block.”

Last Sunday, Ms. Robbins and a racially diverse mix of two dozen newcomers and old-timers gathered in the courtyard of Mr. Saleh’s home near Lincoln Park, sipping vodka tonics and dragging on Camel lights as a pair of Chihuahuas darted through their legs.

Known as the Beach, Mr. Saleh’s Cape Cod is the scene of frequent soirees that draw rehabilitated gang members, underemployed artists, investment bankers and members of Mayor [Cory A. Booker](#)’s inner circle.

Many who were originally drawn here by the inexpensive housing say they have become gripped by a passion for the city’s resurrection. “I think all of us envision what Newark can be and we all feel we are the seeds of that change,” said Mr. Saltzman, 36, who bought a three-family house near Lincoln Park five years ago that has since doubled in value.

A dozen blocks south of the park on Halsey Street, a low-rise neighborhood that once teemed with small shops now is largely forlorn after nightfall. But boosters have rechristened the area Halsey Village, and city planning officials say five new restaurants are on the way along with 650 condo and rental units.

Ms. Sedita, the owner of Newark Art Supply, imagines the area as New Jersey's version of the East Village, its raggedy brownstones full of artists, office workers and students from Rutgers, [Seton Hall](#) Law School and the [New Jersey Institute of Technology](#). On June 9, the first annual Newark Arts and Music Festival will try its luck along Halsey Street.

David Anstatt, one of the festival organizers, said he thought the time was right to capitalize on the emerging buzz about his new home.

"I think people finally realize Newark is more than just about crime and drugs," said Mr. Anstatt, who is an owner of 27 Mix, one of the city's new high-end restaurants. "Everyone here feels like the city is going to pop in five years."

That popping sound can already be heard around the corner at 1180 Raymond Boulevard, where Cogswell Realty is almost finished carving 317 rental units out of an Art Deco beauty that was once the city's most prominent office tower. Arthur Stern, Cogswell's chief executive, boasts that more than 80 percent of the tenants, most in their 20s and 30s, work in New York City, suggesting that Newark is drawing refugees priced out of Manhattan and Brooklyn.

Many people peg the city's nascent resurgence to the inauguration of the [New Jersey Performing Arts Center](#) in 1997, followed by the opening of a baseball stadium for the Newark Bears, though the minor-league team has never drawn the crowds boosters hoped. While a drop in crime and New York's soaring real estate prices have helped polish the city's appeal, some say the spirit of change was enhanced by last year's election of Mr. Booker after two decades of rule by [Sharpe James](#), who is under investigation by state and federal authorities.

Steve Iglesias, an entrepreneur born and raised here, says the overhaul at City Hall helped persuade him to turn his family's sporting goods store in the Ironbound section into a tapas lounge that has become a popular draw for locals who used to trek to Manhattan for designer meals and late-night revelry.

"There's a feeling here of endless possibilities, and a lot of that has to do with Booker," he said one recent Saturday night, as a D. J. played a medley of music from the 1970s and 80s. "At this point, if you build it, they will come."

The heavily Portuguese and Brazilian Ironbound, with its low crime rate, teeming commercial corridor and proximity to New York-bound trains, has become relatively expensive, and that has been a boon to nearby Lincoln Park on the other side of the tracks.

The young and the intrepid have been filling up a smattering of renovated buildings near the 19th century greensward named for President Lincoln, which was once known for its constellation of jazz clubs but is now dominated by a string of drug-treatment facilities.

The city's oldest gallery, City Without Walls, forms the nucleus of the enclave, which includes apartments inside a former carriage factory and a graphic design studio, Tritonic, whose three young partners are the toast of Newark's corporate and political set. Although the neighborhood is decidedly edgy — balloons tied to a stretch of fencing mark the most recent homicide — three dozen "green" lofts and town houses are just coming on the market. The Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, as its promoters call it, will ultimately be anchored by a Smithsonian-affiliated Museum of African-American Music.

"The amazing thing is that we never have to advertise our apartments; they just rent by word of mouth," said Tony Gibbons, a real estate developer who, along with two partners, is turning the former McCarter mansion that faces the park into a lavishly appointed home for foundations and nonprofit groups.

For now, Mr. Saleh's house is the most happening spot in town.

A White House aide during the Clinton Administration who learned the art of hospitality working for Club Med, Mr. Saleh's gatherings are part salon, part bacchanal, with revelers, goblets in hand, vying for seats last Sunday on the oversized lifeguard chair that dominates his tiny backyard.

As guests nibbled Gouda and tossed around a giant rubber ball, the sinking sun cast a pinkish glow on the Colleoni, a stately apartment building facing Lincoln Park that is being turned into luxury rentals. In the foreground, a pack of stray cats roughhoused in the debris of a vacant lot, and a few paces away, recently paroled felons did pull-ups in the yard of their halfway house. At one point, Mayor Booker's father sauntered through as hip-hop music blared from living room.

Day turned to night, someone called out for another cocktail, and nobody seemed to notice as a hungry cat howled and the halfway house residents, perhaps stirred up by the party on the other side of the fence, shouted at one another, their voices filled with joy.