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Exploring Cafes and Culture in Downtown Newark

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Photo



Green Chicpea, a 10-month-old spot on Halsey Street. Credit Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

Heads Up

By CARLY BERWICK

The ceramic fire-breathing dragons in the window of Gifts East West, a curio shop owned by Ing and John Watts, have seen neighbors come and go during their 40-year tenure at 57 Halsey Street in Newark. Today the dragons look out to an empty lot and a mural painted on a wall of a shuttered department store, Hahne & Company, which last saw customers in the late 1980s. In two years the building will house a Whole Foods Market, with mixed-income rental apartments stacked above it. Another construction

site across the street is for the Prudential Tower, which will give the financial services giant a new home next year, with room for retail as well.

“I’ve been here so long that I know this is for real,” Mr. Watts said.

Over the past six years, a number of cafes and art collectives have opened along Halsey Street, a side street that runs parallel to the Broad Street thoroughfare, giving New Jersey’s largest city (population 277,000) a denser downtown culture district. Lined with three-story brick townhouses, Halsey Street links the century-old **Newark Museum** (49 Washington Street; 973-596-6550; newarkmuseum.org) and the Rutgers University campus to central downtown. It recalls the West Village circa 1990, pre-sweeping gentrification.

Photo



Creative writing students at Rutgers sit together at 27 Mix, a bistro. Credit Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

Cafes include a fusion bistro, **27 Mix** (27 Halsey Street; 973-648-0643; 27mix.com); **Coffee Cave**, a performance space and espresso bar (45 Halsey; 973-368-4654); **Art Kitchen** (61 Halsey; 973-732-1278); the 10-month-old **Green Chicpea** (59 Halsey Street; 862-240-1500); and **Elbow Room** (41 Halsey; 973-642-2300; elbowroombrooklyn.com), a Brooklyn import that serves only mac 'n' cheese varieties.

“We do a lousy job as a city of promoting these jewels to the community at large,” said Darrin Sharif, the Central Ward councilman.

Often overshadowed by the legacy of riots in 1967 and its colorful mayors, downtown Newark is quietly flourishing. Its proximity to New York, a 17-minute train ride away, has nurtured a vibrant if small art scene anchored by longstanding, nonprofit galleries like **City Without Walls** (6 Crawford Street; 973-622-1188; cwow.org), **Aljira** (591 Broad Street; 973-622-1600; aljira.org), the gallery at **WBGO** (54 Park Place; wbgo.org/gallery) and **Gallery Aferro** (73 Market Street; aferro.org), as well as the Newark Museum.

Triangular, six-acre **Military Park** juts out from Broad Street and reopens this month after a renovation by Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, responsible for revitalizing Bryant Park in Manhattan. Joining park statues are lunch-hour yoga groups, game tables and, eventually, a burger restaurant run by Jersey City’s well-received restaurant Maritime Parc.

After seven years as mayor, Cory A. Booker’s most lasting legacy for downtown Newark may be as rebrander in chief. Mr. Booker, now a United States senator, may not have been able to reduce homicides, which hit 111 last year, but he did woo developers. Newark’s mayor-elect, Ras Baraka, campaigned in part against the Booker legacy, particularly on education. But development will continue because “it has to,” said Brigid Harrison, a professor of political science at Montclair State University. “The city has nothing to gain by changing its plan in terms of fostering development.”

Photo



The century-old Newark Museum. Credit Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times
The idea that visitors would stay in Newark — rather than near its airport — is somewhat novel.

“Tourism was not looked at as an economic developer, as it is now,” said Michael Davidson, the head of the Greater Newark Convention and Visitors Bureau, which formed just two years ago. A Marriott opened here last year, the first new hotel in the city in 40 years.

Also opening are eight Richard Meier-designed mixed-use buildings at the southern end of Halsey Street, called Teachers Village. Their developer, Ron Beit of RBH Group, owns older buildings at Market and Washington Streets, a block from Halsey, where Gallery Aferro and **Index Art Center** (237 Market Street; 862-218-0278; indexartcenter.org) rent cavernous loft spaces for bargain prices.

“I like working here, because it’s so low-stakes,” said Dahlia Elsayed, an artist who has a \$400-a-month studio in Aferro. With affordability comes insecurity, however: Leases are month to month, and during Index’s late-night December opening, a man was shot and killed across the street.

Yet the Halsey Street “stroll district,” as city officials call it, is both placid and bustling in the daytime.

“One of the ways to bring back a city is to bring back people,” said Clement A. Price, the city historian. “What I’ve noticed more than anything else is more people in the

downtown corridor. It's been a long time for Newark to outlive its reputation as a city defined by the '67 riots."

Correction: May 22, 2014

An earlier version of this article misspelled the given name of an artist who has a studio in Gallery Aferro. She is Dahlia Elsayed, not Dalia.

A version of this article appears in print on May 25, 2014, on page TR2 of the New York edition with the headline: A Quietly Flourishing Art Scene Starts to Shine . Order Reprints|Today's Paper|Subscribe