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Bow tie

From Canal to Houston, the lower Bowery heats up

Not too long ago, Luke Armstrong noticed something new on the corner of the Bowery and Prince Street.

“I saw a Freitag shop,” says Armstrong, who has been living at Avalon Bowery, the massive rental complex on the Bowery just off Houston Street, for the past year. Freitag sells “these very interesting bags — but it surprised me, because they’re quite high-end, \$300 bags.”

Though the Bowery has been no stranger to luxe development over the past several years — restaurateurs such as Daniel Boulud set up shop, CBGB gave way to John Varvatos and some apartments on the Bowery (at the old Bouwerie Lane Theatre) were priced at more than \$2,500 per square foot — it’s mostly been confined to north of Houston Street.



South of Houston tended toward the Bowery of yore. Not that there were criminals and vagabonds lurking, exactly, but real estate got decidedly frumpier in the land of kitchen-supply and lighting-fixture stores.

Now, though, the high-end market is heading south.

Aside from pricey stores like Freitag, which opened last spring, as well as amenities like the New Museum and a Whole Foods, condos, hotels and restaurants have started making their appearance much more forcefully. And more are on their way — tying the north part of the Bowery to the south.

Take, for instance, 250 Bowery, between Houston and Prince. Twenty-four hours after the teaser Web site for the new condo building went live, it crashed — there was too much traffic.

The phones for the building’s brokers, John Gomes and Fredrik Eklund of Prudential Douglas Elliman, began ringing with eager buyers.

“I cannot tell you how many people have been soliciting the security guard” for details about the building, Gomes says.

“There’s been a huge waiting list,” says developer Zach Vella, whose VE Equities is responsible for 250 Bowery.



The building won't be topped off for another month and a half. And even though prices haven't been fixed yet (the Web site says prices should be between \$700,000 and \$2.7 million, but both Vella and Gomes insist that nothing is set until their offering plan is approved by the attorney general's office), some have already declared their intention to buy.

"I'm very interested in purchasing in 250 Bowery," says Oren Alexander, himself a broker with Prudential Douglas Elliman. "It matches my lifestyle very well."

According to Vella, the building will consist of 20 one- and two-bedroom apartments, as well as four penthouse duplexes consisting of three or four bedrooms each.

The appeal is not necessarily the Bowery itself, but "it's more about the popularity of the bordering neighborhoods — Nolita, the East Village, the Lower East Side and Chinatown," Alexander says. "Chinatown has been very hot lately," he adds.

In the next couple months, the glassy Wyndham Garden Chinatown, a new 16-story, 106-room hotel, which will include a lobby bar and restaurant, at 93 Bowery, is slated to open.

And above Chinatown, one sees a budding restaurant scene on the lower Bowery. Keith McNally planted the first flag with Pulino's, but Mathieu Palombino (the famed chef of Motorino) recently opened the Bowery Diner with his haute take on comfort food. (The bill of fare includes staples like doughnuts and burgers — but with an eye toward fine ingredients and a classical style.)

EMM Group — the restaurant/nightlife trio of Eugene Remm, Mark Birnbaum and Michael Hirtenstein, the men behind such city hotspots as Catch — signed a lease for a 20,000-square-foot space at 199 Bowery in December, which they are planning on turning into an eatery and club.

"We've been looking for something special — with a lot of space," says Remm about EMM Group's decision to open on the lower Bowery. "It's an exciting area — up-and-coming with an amazing energy. It's like the Meatpacking District was eight years ago."

This has made real estate here — which is scarce — a hot commodity, both with prospective residents and developers.

Tony Sargent, a broker at Core, got two offers last week on an 1,815-square-foot two-bedroom at 195 Bowery listed for \$2.75 million — a cool \$1,515 per foot — and just sent out a contract for the property.

"From an inventory standpoint, there's not that much out there which is this large," Sargent says.

Shaky Cohen, head of Nexus Building Development, did so well with his new boutique condo building at 263 Bowery — selling all four units earlier this year at a respectable \$1,300 per square foot for the bottom three units and \$1,425 per square foot for the penthouse — that he has plans in

place to do another building down the block at 255 Bowery (Karl Fischer designed both buildings). It should be ready in the second half of 2013, using more or less the same floor plan, except five units instead of four.

“We built the first condo below Houston,” says Hagay Azoulay of Prudential Douglas Elliman, referring to 263 Bowery. “This set the price.”

Cohen and Azoulay are anticipating increasing prices at their next project by 5 to 10 percent, depending on how 250 Bowery fares. So far, the appeal of the location seems to justify all these developers’ expectations.

“I always assumed these apartments would be for the single guy in his mid-30s,” says Cohen, “but that hasn’t been the case. We got an older couple; a younger couple that was just married; we got a couple from Italy.”

Given how many nightlife-heavy areas the Bowery hugs up to — coupled with its seedy history — one wonders just how livable the area is.

“It’s been fantastic,” says Armstrong, who recently got married. “I feel like I have everything on my doorstep, weekends are a dream.”

But the area also appeals to the younger set.

“I ended up [on the Bowery] one summer in an NYU dorm,” says Jay Solomon, who also lives at Avalon Bowery. “I asked to live in a different dorm. I didn’t want to live around there.”

But just since 2007, “the area really changed,” he says. “There were younger people, more artists, more models, more fashion, more design people.”

And as long as the hunger for being in the center of things is there, developers will continue to build. Both Vella and Cohen are on the lookout for more Bowery properties. (Cohen was recently outbid on one site.) The Bowery isn’t zoned for extremely dense housing (and there are height restrictions), but as sites become available, Cohen thinks boutique buildings “will keep popping up.”

“You see those buildings all down there?” asks Azoulay, pointing to the row of kitchen-supply stores. “All these places are moving to Brooklyn or Queens.”

If a massive exodus does ensue, the south end of the Bowery might really give the north a run for its money.