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Harlem resurrecting

If Bill Clinton moves in, he'll find a thriving community of new businesses, lower crime, welcoming residents, and affordable cachet. He'll also find old challenges still unmet.



Interior designer Sheila Bridges, a transplanted Philadelphian, in her office/apartment. She has lived in Harlem for seven years. JONATHAN WILSON/Inquirer Staff Photographer

By Annette John-Hall
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NEW YORK — The signs, accented with the red, black and green colors of African liberation, are posted in the windows of businesses all around town — in the braiding shops and nail salons, in the seafood joints and soul food restaurants, even in the calling-card stores.

Welcome President Clinton To The Community.

The community is Harlem, and Bill Clinton wants to work here. He is negotiating office space on the top floor of 35 W. 125th St., a 14-story glass-front building that is readily identifiable by a larger-than-life FUBU mural adorning its east wall.

"When you say Harlem is changing," businessman Oumar Signi notes, "Clinton coming here is proof."

But the fact is, Harlem had been changing long before the former president's decision to move uptown. Clinton's willingness to come simply reaffirms that the neighborhood, home of the art-driven Harlem Renaissance early in the last century, is enjoying an economic rebirth today.

A healthy economy, a low crime rate, a thriving empowerment zone, and an attractive real estate market all contribute to this latest revitalization, which is being dubbed the second Harlem Renaissance.

"People are starting to catch on and make the move to Harlem," says interior designer Sheila Bridges, a Philadelphia native who has lived in Harlem for seven years. "Obviously there are a lot of incentives to want to be part of its culture and history. But on a practical level, it's a much more viable alternative to people who want to live and work reasonably."

Bridges, 35, runs Sheila Bridges
See HARLEM on D3

If Clinton comes to Harlem, he'll find a community resurrecting

HARLEM from D1

Design Inc. from her eighth-floor apartment in the historic Graham Court building on Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard.

Her spacious four-bedroom apartment, with crown moldings, mosaic-tiled foyer, and built-in bookcases, is a designer's dream. A director's, too, as it turns out. Her building, built in 1901, was used as a site for films such as *New Jack City* and *Malcolm X*. Spike Lee also used her actual apartment in *Jungle Fever* as Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis' home.

"The bloodstain where Samuel L. Jackson was shot is still on the floor," says Bridges, pointing to a spot on the living-room hardwood that is covered by a sisal area rug.

Looking out her floor-to-ceiling windows, Bridges has seen Harlem change for the better.

She can pick up her dry cleaning and prescriptions in her own neighborhood now. She can work out in her neighborhood, rather than taking the subway to a gym downtown. And when she orders a pizza from Domino's, she doesn't have to meet the deliveryman outside as she used to, thanks to a change in company policy, which Bridges believes was fueled by competing businesses that had no qualms about delivering directly to residents' doors.

"I used to be reticent about parking my car on 117th Street because it was all [vacant] lots. Now it's all townhouses and lighting," she says. "You can't walk down a block in Harlem without seeing some scaffolding."

Up and down 125th Street's commercial artery, new businesses have popped up, a testament to the \$300 million the city says has been invested in Harlem since 1994. There's a Pathmark on the corner of Lexington, the first full-service supermarket the community has had in 30 years. The famed Apollo theater is within shouting distance of a Blockbuster video — the largest-grossing Blockbuster in the country — along with an Old Navy, a Magic Johnson theater, and a Disney store, all part of the \$68 million Harlem USA project.

A Starbucks anchors the block Clinton is eyeing. Two doors down from his proposed office building stands a McDonald's Express. And, in a service that is sure to delight the former president, this McDonald's delivers.

There is an anticipatory buzz in

the air here, a newly infused hope for a neighborhood long neglected after drugs and crime took their toll in the 1960s. It's not so hard to imagine when Harlem was the mecca of black culture during its first renaissance, when Ella scatted and Ellington swung, when Langston wrote of a people's dreams and Malcolm preached words of revolution.

But New York City councilman Bill Perkins warns that the Harlem of the 21st century cannot afford to be romanticized yet. The neighborhood may be benefiting from a commercial boom and an unprecedented rise in real estate sales and renovations, "but if this so-called economic renaissance does not translate into addressing the problems that have stubbornly impacted this community, then it does no good."

Perkins, whose Ninth District includes central Harlem, parts of Spanish Harlem (below 110th Street), the Upper West Side, and Morningside Heights near Columbia University, agrees that revitalization has been good for Harlem.

"People appreciate having a major supermarket and better quality of services, and people appreciate there is a better look and in some respects a positive atmosphere," he said. "But this rosy veneer is detracting from the hidden problems that are not being addressed."

He rattles them off: an infant mortality rate that is three times higher than the rest of the city's; a pandemic of AIDS and HIV; a floundering unemployment rate, and sub-par public schools, all of which negatively affect Harlem's 500,000 residents.

Even the economic development isn't all positive.

"There are those who were here in the bad times and sometimes they wind up getting displaced because they can't afford the competition," he explains.

That's what happened to Signi. The owner of Signi Imports on Lenox Avenue, Signi arrived from Mali in 1988 and is representative of the thousands of West African immigrants who have opened businesses in Harlem.

Signi, 40, does most of his business selling the textiles of his native land — richly woven mud and kuba cloth, colorfully dyed adire and Adinkra cloth. He employs a trio of tailors, who sew stoles and choir robes for thousands of Harlem churchgoers.

He was forced to move to Lenox

Avenue after getting priced out of his non-rent-controlled space on 125th Street a few years ago.

"I was paying \$4,000; someone else pay \$7,000," he says. "The big man come and push the little man out. That's no fair. But if I sit here and cry about it that's not helping myself."

Perkins echoes Signi in believing Clinton's arrival, and gentrification as a whole, have the potential to spotlight the challenges of a changing community.

"There goes the neighborhood," Perkins jokes of the gradual presence of whites. "[Gentrification] is an inevitable consequence of folks' looking for real estate possibilities. There are whites moving in but they aren't dominating the flow. The soul of Harlem will still be the mecca for the African diaspora."

Clinton, Perkins says, wants to be in Harlem "for the same reason black people come. It's a rich heritage. He likes the idea that people like him up here. And they do. More than I realized, frankly."

"I think he is good for the community. I loved him as president. Clinton was better than him," says Tan-yetta Scott, nodding toward the televised image of President Bush on CNN. "He can't even talk."

Scott takes a rat-tailed comb and sections a razor-fine part in Blaine Hardon's hair. Hardon hands Scott a long section of human hair strands out of a package, which Scott cornrows into Hardon's hair to form a long braid down her back.

It's just another business day at Hair Do Beauty Salon on 125th Street, right across the street from Clinton's proposed office building, and the ladies are talking.

"They've really built up Harlem, with all the co-ops and condos," remarks Hardon, 40, a lifelong Harlem resident.

"I'm mad it took this long," Scott, 30, retorts. "It's good that they're doing it, but they should have done it a long time ago."

"I'm inviting Bill and Hillary to my picnic. I have one every August at Marcus Garvey Park," chimes in Carolyn Stephens, who is getting her hair done in a style heavy on Shirley Temple curls. "They'll definitely be welcome."

A banner stretching the length of the new condominium complex on 116th and Lenox speaks, it seems, for scores of Harlemites who want Clinton to reside here permanently.

Bill, it reads, *Live Here, Walk To Work*.

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