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# Apartment Complexes Blossom in Astoria

By LAURA KUSISTO



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal  
Basil Brick Oven has been attracted to Astoria.



"Astoria has been overlooked for quite a few years," said Ted Kouris, a local broker, whose projects include the Arista, a 35-unit condominium, which sold out in the fall. Compared with Long Island City, "It's got more of a charisma," he said.

Astoria has seen at least 10 new condo and rental projects in recent years. Average prices in Astoria also increased 5% to \$414,000 in the fourth quarter from a year earlier, according to StreetEasy.com. In Long Island City, the average price declined 7% in the same period.

Astoria also outperformed New York City as a whole, where prices fell 10% between the end of 2010 and 2011, according to StreetEasy.

In a new twist, the developers of a new condo project called the Santorini, which sits on the border of Long Island City and Astoria, actually decided to bill itself as being in the latter.

"Astoria is a great neighborhood. Long Island City gets the sexier name, but from an overall neighborhood perspective, I think Astoria is more robust," said Harold Valestin, a vice president at MNS, a real-estate company marketing the project.

Prices at the Santorini, which is roughly 60% sold, range from \$289,000 for a studio to just under \$1 million for a two-bedroom penthouse.



Sara Gergovich, a 33-year-old who works in e-commerce, had rented in Astoria for 14 years before purchasing a one-bedroom at the Santorini.

She said she's considered purchasing for years, but the influx of new developments helped make it affordable for her to do so, since they were priced well below popular neighborhoods of Brooklyn and Queens.

"For me it really came down to economics," Ms. Gergovich said, adding, "I love how close it is" to Manhattan, "but how much more residential it is. It's like living in the suburbs."

But although Ms. Gergovich looked at 11 buildings in Astoria, it was hard finding one that appealed to her more-modern design sensibilities. "A lot of them were a little more ornate, old European style, even though they were new," she said.

Starting a few years ago, a number of new projects, such as Plaza 21, the Livelle and the Norwood began springing up. But the modern towers amid a neighborhood that still feels like a cozy,

middle-class suburb didn't always win praise. A Tumblr blog even sprung up called "Astoria Ugly" that included discussion of the new residential architecture.



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal  
Sanfords is a neighborhood mainstay.

But Astoria's future development may be more limited than in its go-go days. In 2010, the City Planning Commission approved a rezoning for nearly 240 blocks of the neighborhood, limiting the heights of new development on side streets to three to five stories, while allowing development of up to eight stories along major avenues. The commission said in a news release at the time that the area "will no longer be threatened by out-of-scale new developments."

Eric Benaim of Modern Spaces, a residential brokerage in Long Island City, notes that many of the new projects in the neighborhood have only 10 to 20 units. The brokerage recently opened an office in Astoria because he kept taking his clients there.

"People who are priced out of L.I.C....we end up taking them to Astoria," Mr. Benaim said.

Some longtime residents say the influx has brought welcome changes. More stores and restaurants have opened, including Basil Brick Oven Pizza, Mosaic Cafe and Sweet Afton, catering to families and young professionals.

Mackenzi Farquer, who owns SITE, a small shop on 34th Avenue that sells jewelry, house wares



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal

Tommy Cusanelli

and other eclectic objects, said a third of what she sells is now children's items—compared with none just a few years ago.

"It's not pretentious. It's not Williamsburg hipster. Cool people don't want to be here, really. It's humble and interesting," Ms. Farquer said.

A neighborhood mainstay, Sanfords, which has been on the same corner for more than 75 years, also recently underwent an upgrade to appeal to the affluent newcomers.

The restaurant aims for upscale comfort food, and popular dishes include almond-encrusted butternut squash ravioli. Even late on a weekday evening, it was filled with 20-somethings speaking Russian, English and Greek.

"We've seen a big influx of people from the city," said Gus Karale, a co-owner. "We're packed

every night."

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