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*A jazz band plays outside Alexander's Cafe in Mott Haven.
Photo slideshow: [Mott Haven Treasure Hunt](#)*

[A Mott Haven treasure hunt](#)

Finding a new art world can be a challenge

Posted on 18. Mar, 2009 by [Maria Clark](#) in [Art](#)

By Maria Clark
maria.clark@motthavenherald.com

The Mott Haven art world can be difficult to find.

It is tucked away in a dark jazz café on the corner of Alexander Avenue, up a 5-floor walk-up through a narrow apartment or in a corner restaurant hidden under the cement overpass of a major expressway.

“The arts in the South Bronx are hidden. If you don’t hear about it by word of mouth you miss out on an experience,” said Lourdes Hernandez-Cordero, 36, as she stood by her husband’s photo exhibit in the [Pregones Theater](#) lobby on Walton Avenue.

The South Bronx has blossomed into a unique artistic destination in recent years, with small theaters, galleries and alternative art spaces appearing in remote streets and apartments. The once barren warehouses in Mott Haven are drawing a generation of young artists seeking low rent and generous space.

Pejro Martin, a metal welder and Ira Merritt, a photographer and print maker, stopped by [The Blue Bedroom Project](#) on a recent Saturday, interested in finding exhibition space in Mott Haven. The alternative art space caused a stir last year in the local art community when artist Blanka Amezcua converted her bedroom into a mixed media art space.

The small bedroom is enclosed by curtain in the doorway. Visitors crowd along the walls to watch videos projected on Amezcua’s window. They wander in and out of the stuffy room towards a table laden with crackers, hummus, wine and juice. Amezcua stands near the door greeting and bidding farewell to the constant stream of guests entering the intimate space.

Martin was visiting his friend, videographer Damali Abrams, the featured artist at The Blue Bedroom Project in March. Although Martin has exhibited his metal sculptures in SoHo, he has come to the South Bronx seeking new and undiscovered territory.

“The Bronx is a forgotten borough. People visit it for Yankee Stadium and leave,” Martin said. “You take a look at this area and there really is much to see.”

Martin thinks the growing art world in the neighborhood is a positive change.

“Everyone knows SoHo. Hopefully people will see this and the word will spread like wild fire,” he said.

Italian artist Vittorio Ottavioni turned his back on SoHo. A 5-floor walkup apartment is his new artistic stomping ground.

Visitors who dropped by to view the Anti-SoBro art show he curated, surrounded him as he said. “I do not advertise my art in SoHo, Williamsburg, or Chelsea. I want the focus to be on my art and not of me.”

Ottavioni commanded the room as he spouted his disdain for New York’s mainstream artistic destinations. He avoided the glare of photo lenses and intrusive questions from the visitors.

“Who does he think we are: CIA?” said Vincent Beltron, a one-time Mott Haven resident.

The neighborhood has changed a lot since he lived there, Beltron, 51, acknowledged.

Some things, however, never change. The former bus driver looks forward to dusty summer parties held on construction lots by the Harlem River, a pastime only true locals know about, where illegal pina colodas and tortillas are sold from car trunks.

“This is all new to me though,” Beltron said as he walked away from Ottavioni and his elaborate speech. “I seen the little art stores, but I never know this exists.”

Since the varying art spaces can be hard to locate for the unknowing tourist or longtime resident, [the Bronx Council](#)

[of the Arts](#) runs two monthly tours on the [Bronx Culture Trolley](#). A school bus converted to look like a turn of the century trolley, it loops around Mott Haven and parts of Highbridge and Hunts Point, dropping off dozens of tourists at each location.

Dom Darby, 23, rode the trolley for the first time with her sister Briana, 9, on its inaugural Saturday run.

The Darbys live in the Paterson Housing Project near the Blue Bedroom. Dom recalls looking out her window and seeing the bright red vehicle roaming the streets.

“It was so random. I wondered why do they have that old timey trolley wandering around?” she said.

Darby stumbled across the Blue Bedroom on her way to library. A sandwich board advertising the project drew her attention.

“It’s so interesting and unique. A gallery in someone’s bedroom,” Darby said.

The galleries are a great way to bring positive attention to the neighborhood, she said, “I really wasn’t aware of all this.”

A band played live music on the sidewalk outside of the [Alexander Café](#) near Bruckner Boulevard. Couples stopped by for a glass of wine or a beer from the Café’s varied selection. Aida Vega, 81, Julia Torres, 82 and Maria Teresa Emeric danced on the street corner while they waited for the trolley to make its final loop of the day.

All three grew up and spent most of their adult lives in Mott Haven. They were there when Tito Puente and Celia Cruz performed in the neighborhood. And they saw the theaters burning in the devastation of the South Bronx.

“Things have changed here, but they are getting better,” Torres said.

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