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#### ON THE COVER

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## Web Exclusive

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## COMMUNITY

# Fort Greene, Brooklyn, USA

In the rapidly changing New York City **BOROUGH OF BROOKLYN**, a gem of a neighborhood shines.

**E**VERY DAY I WALK DOWN SOUTH PORTLAND Avenue in the New York City borough of Brooklyn, I feel lucky to live in the dynamic neighborhood known as Fort Greene. The block that begins at DeKalb Avenue has become my favorite. Stately London plane trees tower above classic brownstones, which are lined up like neatly dressed soldiers. It is the best Brooklyn has to offer — so perfect that it should be in television commercials, complete with chirping birds and giggling children.

Movie studios and production companies often set up shoots on the sidewalks of Fort Greene because it is home to some of the most picturesque homes and historic mansions in the city. This dreamy Brooklyn style, however, is not the neighborhood's only claim to fame. The diverse crowd and the artistic soul of the community set Fort Greene apart and are why it ultimately became my home. I'd been looking for years for a New York City neighborhood that could charm me with its atmosphere and awaken me to the history and diversity of my city.

During the past few decades, Brooklyn has been a borough in transition.

More and more Manhattanites are crossing the East River with the hope of finding an alternative to skyrocketing rent and maddening congestion. Areas like Park Slope have a magnetic pull for young professionals and stroller-pushing families, while Williamsburg is a hub for a hipster crowd because of its Bohemian character.

Fort Greene is now one of the most culturally integrated neighborhoods in the city, though the road to success was arduous. Before the designation of the Fort Greene and Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) historic districts in 1978, economic depression hit the area



hard. In 1966, the Brooklyn Navy Yard (just north of Fort Greene) was decommissioned, causing widespread job loss. One of the area's lifelines, the Myrtle Avenue El train, was demolished only three years later. These closures made the area less appealing for commuters and visitors, leading to the shuttering of businesses and bringing an increase in crime and drug use. At night, the streets were empty and dangerous.

Once the historic districts were established, artists, writers and preservationists moved in and helped revive the area. Most notable was the opening of Spike Lee's production company, 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks. Several of his films highlighted the Fort Greene/Bedford-Stuyvesant area, including *She's Gotta Have*

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Madiba restaurant is a popular part of Fort Greene. Wooden row houses line the Fort Greene Historic District. Mark Morris Dance Center is part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Members of the Trisha Brown Dance Company perform at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Opera House.

Find contact information for all of the places mentioned in this story on [aa.com/americanway](http://aa.com/americanway); keyword search **Fort Greene**.

*It and Mo' Better Blues.* Soon, the neighborhood was welcoming famous residents like Chris Rock and Rosie Perez, who helped define Fort Greene as a new cultural center. Crime numbers began to drop, and new businesses popped up. By the early 2000s, people of all backgrounds were flocking to a flourishing neighborhood. Fort Greene was

back on the map of desirable Brooklyn, and the burgeoning ethnic and economic diversity that resulted from decades of struggle is now one of the neighborhood's biggest draws.

Nothing embodies the diversity more than the Brooklyn Academy of Music. For more than 150 years, artists of all heritages have been performing on the eclectic BAM

stages. Though the seasonal repertoire comprises international plays, dance and theater, popular musicians such as Paul Simon, Dr. John and members of Arcade Fire have also appeared here.

With the cinema program and the industrial-chic event space in the BAMcafé—a performance area that has metal archways, starburst lights in the windows and blue and red light accents inside the space—BAM has become a popular gathering place in Fort Greene. That is something Karen Brooks Hopkins has worked hard to achieve. Her goal as president is to make BAM the largest host of contemporary international performing arts in the U.S., and she is dedicated to fostering the neighborhood around her.

“There is room for everyone in Fort Greene,” she says. “It’s one of the great American urban communities.”

BAM is only one of many local art centers. Renowned art college Pratt Institute attracts students from all over the world to study art and creative disciplines. Across Fort Greene Park, the Mark Morris Dance Center presents live music and modern dance while providing rehearsal space and community-outreach programs.

The opening of Barclays Center has resulted in world-class music and entertainment acts and also major sports events being held in the area. But just down the street at the Brooklyn Masonic Temple, small bands perform to sold-out crowds of only a few hundred people. That these venues exist in the center of the neighborhood makes it clear that art is at the core of cultural diversity in Fort Greene.

The food scene is another key part of social balance here. Not only do we drink local beer out of mason jars, but we also have access to fine international cuisine. Neighborhood favorites include Habana Outpost, a Cuban/Mexican, solar-powered outdoor eatery on Fulton Street; and Chez Oskar, an eclectic space on DeKalb Avenue that offers a unique brand of “funky French” food.

But it is Madiba, a South African restaurant on DeKalb Avenue between Adelphi Street and Carlton Avenue, that demonstrates that it’s the people who make the neighborhood unique. Owner Mark Hegen, a South Africa native, has been serving traditional cuisine here since 1999. It was his dream to come to New York, and he says Fort Greene “is the best place to live in the U.S. It’s one of the last few gems in New York City.”

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When I meet Mark for a drink in Madiba's bar, it is instantly clear how much he values neighborhood unity. As we sit on leather stools tasting South African wines and traditional dishes of lamb and sausage, he talks about the importance of community. "You only get back what you put out into the world," he says. This motto has not only helped him make Madiba a social and cultural hub of Fort Greene, but has also inspired his emphatic support of area schools, churches and public programs.

Local restaurateurs and bar owners also seem to support all businesses instead of creating cutthroat neighborhood competition. Matt Hamilton, chef and owner of the new

*"There is room for everyone in **FORT GREENE**. It's one of the great American urban communities."*

local eatery Lulu & Po, says the tight-knit network of chefs is one reason he chose Fort Greene for his venture. His small, 29-seat restaurant sits on a hidden corner of tree-lined Carlton Avenue with a stunning view of the Empire State Building, and support from the businesses around him as well as the community's patronage have been crucial to his success. Lulu & Po's menu offers a creative array of comforting dishes ("iron" pressed firehouse chicken) and daring plates (bone-marrow tacos or Spanish octopus).


Beyond the art and food hot spots, one place in the neighborhood always brings people together regardless of race, economics or age: Fort Greene Park. Early in the Revolutionary War, Gen. Nathanael Greene built Fort Putnam on the high ground of the park. It was a key part of the Battle of Brooklyn, and it's the origin of the neighborhood's name.

This historic site is now a public space, serving as an anchor for community events and outdoor activities. That includes the Fort Greene Park Summer Literary Festival, which is hosted by the New York Writers Coalition and consists of workshops and public readings that help promote creativity and literature among young writers.

On Saturdays, it seems as if the whole neighborhood stops by the farmers market at the southeast corner of Fort Greene Park, which supports growers from throughout the

Northeast. Even Fort Greene's canine contingent comes together for early morning, off-leash playtime — something I look forward to on my daily morning walk through the park.

With so many people and businesses striving to make Fort Greene a harmoniously integrated neighborhood, it's encouraging to feel the balance. This is a true example of how

New York City brings people from all walks of life together to create a stronger community. My personal haven of South Portland Avenue is beautiful, but it's the people who keep me loyal to Fort Greene. 

**ANNIE SHUSTRIN** is a Brooklyn-based travel writer and blogger. She has visited more than 30 countries and has tasted the local wine in almost every one of them.

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