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In Queens, a Casino Bet Gone Bad

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On a recent Saturday afternoon I set out to explore South Ozone Park in Queens, in particular a stretch whose racial composition — according to recent census data, about a quarter white, a quarter Asian, 10 percent black and 11 percent biracial, with 30 percent of residents belonging to the statistical category of "other" — makes it one of the three most diverse patches of the city. Ethnically, too, it contains multitudes: Dominicans and Puerto Ricans live alongside Ecuadoreans, Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese and people who look as though they might be cast in the production of anything succumbing to Italian-American caricature.

What had prompted my visit was, in a sense, a tourist's curiosity about how integration of this kind might actually be lived and how, in the midst of a mayoral race, political conceptions in such a place might be evolving.

There were instances of inspiration to be found, encounters with a New York of one's gorgeous mosaic fantasies. A barbershop called E Place, owned by an Uzbek immigrant named Eric Dzhuray, caters to Trinidadians and Guyanese — who make up a considerable share of the community in South Ozone Park — and at least one young white suburbanite who had grown so devoted to the shop when he lived in neighboring Howard Beach that he continued his patronage even though he had married and moved to Long Island.

The fact that a catering hall called La Bella Vita, owned by a man named Tony Modica and steeped in Pompeii aesthetics, was full of black patrons on the day I wandered in suggested that a certain kind of social progress had been made since the divisive days of Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing," two decades ago.

Both the barbershop and catering hall were to be found on Rockaway Boulevard, the primary commercial thoroughfare in South Ozone Park. Though it seemed as if it should be a busy place, full of pedestrian traffic and businesses servicing varied cultural interests, it has the bloodless feel of a Sun Belt village lost to misbegotten visions. The area itself is not poor; in the particular census tract I was visiting, median family income stands at $63,000 a year, above the figure for the city on the whole. But whatever vitality the demographics might suggest is so obviously lacking that one longtime resident mentioned that he hoped simply for a McDonald's to energize the slackened mood.

How could this have happened? When the subject of politics came up, it elicited little interest (except from a man named Danny Napoli, who wore dark glasses and a flag bandanna around his

head and said that he was supporting Christine Quinn, offering that it didn't matter to him that she was gay). Few others seemed to have much sense of who was running for mayor at all or much faith that government could effect significant change — or at least significant good — locally.

Something unfortunate had happened in the neighborhood, and now there seemed to be no turning back, people said: the opening nearly two years ago of Resorts World Casino on Rockaway Boulevard, adjacent to the Aqueduct Racetrack. As Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo pushes for the authorization of three Las Vegas-style casinos in upstate New York, and as the possibility of additional casinos in the city looms in the years ahead, there are certainly lessons to be absorbed from what Resorts World has wrought.

As Alberto Livecchi, a longtime resident of South Ozone Park and the owner of a store selling musical equipment, explained, the construction of the casino — a racino, in gambling parlance — came with promises that have not materialized. Having been sold as a boon to local commerce, it has instead affected businesses negatively, Mr. Livecchi argued. "People are just funneled into the casino and don't leave," he remarked. Whatever street life there was has been destroyed, residents said; pawnshops are ubiquitous. "Casinos are only interested in enriching themselves," Mr. Modica said.

Ample data on how gambling affects local businesses suggests that these men are not hallucinating. In the 1990s, researchers at Iowa State University examined the consequences of riverboat gambling for business owners in Clinton, Iowa, and found that while 12 percent reported an increase in business, 29 percent reported a decrease, and 60 percent reported no change at all. And racetrack casinos, as Clyde Barrow, a political economist who studies gambling, explained, draw most customers not from the far and wide but from a 30-minute radius. Rather than drawing new money to the area, it seems, they divert local dollars to gambling.

What we hardly need research to tell us is that the world that emerges around casinos is often an intensely depressing place. Across the street from Resorts World is Sell and Pawn Inc., which takes gold, silver, jewelry, electronics and so on from those compelled to find their way to their next slot machine dollar. The shop's owner, a Russian immigrant, opened up a year after the casino did, having worked in construction and seeing that work dry up after the financial crisis. A friend urged him to open a pawnshop because it was lucrative, but he was not, it seemed, prepared for the psychological toll this new occupation would take, for the fact that moral bankruptcy was now a job requirement.

"You have to take advantage of desperate people," he told me, looking fairly miserable. "I don't like this business at all."

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