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Astoria, Zohran Mamdani's working-class New York

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FEATURE | The victory of New York City's new mayor on November 4 was also a victory for his Queens neighborhood, Astoria, which he made the focus of his campaign. This cosmopolitan district, plagued by economic difficulties, wants to be a beacon of hope in Trump's America.

An October morning spent mopping up the mess from a water leak finally convinced Zohran Mamdani and his wife, Rama Duwaji, that it might be time to move. Their small brick building in Astoria, Queens, with its single bedroom, clearly aging plumbing and shared washing machine in the basement could hardly be more quintessentially New York. Speaking on *The New Yorker* magazine's podcast, the city's future mayor (elected on November 4 and set to take office January 1), usually reticent about his private life, laughed as he confided his "dream of being able to live in a larger apartment."

Mamdani's new status will make that dream come true as soon as January, when the couple moves into Gracie Mansion, the prestigious residence reserved for New York City's mayor since 1942. His statement on December 8 announcing the decision, which cited "safety" reasons for leaving Astoria to settle in the 18th-century mansion on the Upper East Side with a ballroom, vast lawn and vegetable garden, was more political than it appeared.

Indeed, his modest apartment became a focal point of the mayoral campaign, during which he advocated for a rent freeze in the city's regulated areas. On one hand, his opponents pointed out that it was a rent-stabilized apartment – \$2,300 a month – normally intended for lower-income residents. For a New York State Assembly member earning \$142,000 a year (above the average salary but not excessive by New York standards) and campaigning on purchasing power, this raised questions, even if nothing was illegal. On the other hand, Mamdani emphasized that he lived in Astoria, a working-class neighborhood far from the luxury of Manhattan, where his rivals resided.

Community and artistic energy

It is impossible to fully understand the phenomenon of Mamdani, this unknown who won over the world's richest city in a single year with a distinctly left-wing program, without walking the streets of this pocket of Queens along the East River. With residents from around the world, young people searching for affordable rent and a vibrant community and arts scene, Astoria reflects the working-class and progressive coalition that carried Mamdani all the way to City Hall.

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This district is the only one in New York represented at all levels (municipal, state, federal) by three elected officials who are members of the Democratic Socialists of America, a small organization to the left of the Democratic Party, of which Mamdani is also a member. The future mayor won 66% of the vote here, with a 40-point lead over his main opponent, former Democratic governor Andrew Cuomo: a margin well above the nine-point difference citywide.

During the campaign, which often centered on the future mayor's pro-Palestinian positions in a city with a significant Jewish community, Astoria was frequently reduced to one of its facets: a few streets lined with Arab businesses and Muslim prayer spaces, known as "Little Egypt." Many homes in the neighborhood display messages supporting Gaza. Since the city's future mayor is himself Muslim, the association is easily made, although he was born in Uganda to Indian parents.

'Village in the middle of the city'

Above all, the neighborhood reflects New York itself, composed of layers that mirror the world's upheavals. In the 1960s and 1970s, many Greeks fleeing the colonels' dictatorship settled in these quiet streets, where Greek restaurants and Orthodox churches still attest to that history.

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Then came Moroccans and Egyptians in the 1980s, followed by people from the Balkans fleeing war in the 1990s, as well as Latinos, and more recently, South Asian immigrants. "We are proud that Zohran Mamdani has become the mayor. It's strange to think that we've seen him on these streets and that

he will soon be leading the city," said Ahmed (who preferred not to give his last name), a 32-year-old with Moroccan roots who works in construction.

"A significant part of the migration now is young white Americans looking for cheaper rents," joked native New Yorker Richard Khuzami, 72, who is of Lebanese heritage and president of the Old Astoria Neighborhood Association. "New York's young progressives were originally clustered in the West Village and then prices pushed them to the East Village. They eventually moved across the river to Williamsburg in Brooklyn, then to Greenpoint, Bushwick and now to Astoria. This is natural evolution." It's a map of New York's accelerated gentrification. A retired international trade professional and musician in his spare time, this resident – who has lived in the area for 40 years – defends the neighborhood's interests on various local committees. "Astoria has always been a village in the middle of the city," he said, while praising its location, which offers easy access to the rest of New York.

'A calm, peaceful, harmonious place'

These are the advantages that convinced Ellen Carey, a 24-year-old Australian intern at the United Nations, to live here during her stay in New York. "I had heard about the neighborhood, which is quite iconic, and I discovered a calm, peaceful and harmonious place," she said. The UN headquarters is 30 minutes away by subway, and LaGuardia Airport is nearby. "Astoria has the best of both worlds. It has a marvelous track record of creative ideas and a close seat to Manhattan, which is regarded by many as a center of world culture and ideas," summarized Bob Singleton, 72, executive director of the Greater Astoria Historical Society and an inexhaustible source on local history.

The neighborhood has not always been the progressive enclave it is today. Originally inhabited by the Lenape, the region's Indigenous people, it got its current name from John Jacob Astor I, a German immigrant from the late 18th century and America's first multimillionaire, who made his fortune in the fur trade, New York real estate and opium trafficking. Local property owners reportedly created the place name in hopes of attracting his attention and benefiting from his wealth. The tycoon, who lived in Manhattan, supposedly

declared that he had never set foot on the other side of the East River and had no intention of doing so. But the name stuck.

For much of the 20th century, Astoria's position along the Hudson River made it a major port area with numerous manufacturing industries. The Hell Gate Bridge, the railroad bridge spanning the river, whose architecture inspired the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia, stands as a reminder of that industrial era. Today, the waterfront is a series of brownfields and municipal parks with stunning views of Manhattan. Some of this land has been purchased to build large modern apartment buildings that, if completed, could profoundly change the neighborhood's landscape.

'Actoria'

Will Astoria see the same fate as Brooklyn's waterfront, which has been completely 'Manhattanized'? It's hard to predict what the neighborhood will look like in 10 years. In 2018, Amazon chose Long Island City – the neighborhood just south of Astoria – to build one of its headquarters. But, facing local opposition – led in part by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic Congresswoman representing another New York district (the Bronx), and a Mamdani ally – the retail giant pulled out. The project would have brought 25,000 to 40,000 jobs, with salaries far higher than those of local residents.

On the other hand, a massive film studio, Wildflower Studios, opened in the north in 2024. Residents see two advantages: It fits the history of the neighborhood, sometimes nicknamed "Actoria" for its long-standing ties to the film industry, such as the Kaufman Astoria Studios on 36th Street in Long Island City, where scenes from Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* and, more recently, Adam McKay's series *Succession* were filmed. It is partially owned by Robert De Niro, a city icon and fierce opponent of Donald Trump.

"While I may no longer live in Astoria, Astoria will always live inside me and the work I do," Mamdani promised. Once he is settled in Gracie Mansion, it is likely he will keep a close eye in coming years on the gentrification of his old

neighborhood. On warm evenings, he can always sit in the summer veranda. From there, across the East River, the banks of Astoria are still in sight.

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