

## Artist Displacement

by Mike Muller

Tuesday, November 21, 2006 12:00 AM -

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From Soho to the Lower East Side to Williamsburg, the story has been more or less the same — artists move in, eventually helping to cause the neighborhood to go through sweeping changes, which results in hardship for local families and businesses -- as well as for the artists themselves.

Several recent conferences have explored this scenario, which has played out time and again and continues to do so. [Art In The Contested City](#) at the Pratt Center was intended to "open a dialogue around the intersections between art, culture and urban development."

[Keep The Arts in Williamsburg](#)

, organized by Fractured Atlas, a national arts non-profit, discussed ways to "ensure that artists aren't left behind by the gentrification effects they inspire." And the

[Business Of Art Conference](#)

, held by the New York Foundation for the Arts, focused on homeownership as a strategy for artists to remain in the neighborhoods they like.

### Artists: A Threat Or An Opportunity?

When artists move into a neighborhood, some local businesses feel threatened because of a demand for different services. Community activists worry about the displacement of families who have lived in a neighborhood for generations, but cannot afford the higher rents. Manufacturers are concerned that artists' needs for space will trump their own. And the artists are anxious that they will be priced out due to their own success in transforming the neighborhood.

But the presence of artists in a neighborhood also offers new economic opportunities. The [highest rate of job growth throughout Brooklyn is in an "Arts, Entertainment & Recreation"](#) category, according to the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce.

Both reactions are at play in a debate over the future of the Fulton Mall. The [Fulton Mall Improvement Association](#)

, a business group, is reportedly planning

[to fill some long-vacant space above ground-floor retail stores with artist lofts](#)

. The idea is to replicate the success of SoHo. The Fulton Mall is not exactly economically depressed: It boasts some of the most expensive commercial rents in Brooklyn. Rather, the business group sees this as a way to compete with nearby developments like the Target department store.

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Some see the plan as [a threat to businesses important to black New Yorkers](#) . Many are worried that an influx of artists - 80 percent of whom in the metro region are white, according to one study - is bound to change the make up of the area .

The Pratt Center for Community Development, an urban planning research and advocacy group, maintains that the Fulton Mall can be diversified without destroying its "currently vibrant culture". In a [report on developing the area](#) , the Pratt Center posits that the mall's cultural character can be retained by creating "a planning task force with a diverse and broad set of stakeholders". Furthermore, they say, marketing for the mall should promote its existing cultural strengths, such as "urban wear, hip hop fashion and music."

Not all cultural shifts are unwanted, says [Jan Cohen-Cruz](#) , a professor at NYU Tisch School of the Arts. For example, "the migration of artists may bring less homophobic people to a neighborhood," she said at the Pratt conference, though she added that "those who would benefit from that may end up being priced out of their neighborhood."

But some don't see gentrification to be as much of a threat to local residents as is commonly perceived. A 2004 study by [Lance Freeman](#) , a professor of urban planning at Columbia university, and Frank Barconi, who is now the City Comptroller's Chief Economic Advisor, found that poor families in the city tend to remain in neighborhoods that gentrify around them. It found that disadvantaged households, defined as poor and lacking a college degree, were 19 percent less likely to move out of a neighborhood in the throes of gentrification than they were from other areas.

The authors are careful to note, however, that the households that remain pay 61 percent of their income towards housing, almost 10 percent higher than those outside of gentrifying neighborhoods. Also, they point out the hardships of disadvantaged households trying to move into, or relocate within, the gentrifying areas.

## Rezoning, Relocating, Illegal Conversions

Greenpoint and Williamsburg are famous internationally as artistic communities, but they weren't always so popular, and their zoning reflected that. To address the new attraction of the area, it was [rezoned](#) last year to allow for larger developments and more residential buildings. The rezoning was heralded by officials as a model of gentrification that would benefit everyone. Thirty-three percent of the housing units to be created were estimated to be affordably priced, there was money set aside to assist tenants in relocating and for legal aid, and anti harassment

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---

laws were strengthened.

Recently, criticism has begun to bubble up. An article [in the New York Times](#) last month noted that many of the developers are not taking advantage of incentives to include affordable housing in their projects, many tenants' homes are being threatened by nearby construction, and the money for a legal fund has yet to be distributed. City officials responded by saying things are going as planned, just not as quickly as some would like.

Many of the artists responsible for the change of attitude towards the neighborhood have already been forced to move on.

The artists who migrated to Williamsburg are generally thought to have come from the Lower East Side, seeking refuge from rising costs there. Now, as prices in Williamsburg skyrocket, they have begun migrating further East, into East Williamsburg and Bushwick, where warehouses with large spaces are plentiful. But their integration has not been free of conflict.

Warehouses designed for industrial businesses are highly coveted by artists, and many cities nationwide view artists as a way to revitalize downtrodden and underutilized industrial neighborhoods. But here in the city, industrial businesses are now being run out for lack of space.

Artists are not necessarily in direct competition with industrial businesses: Artist work/live space is allowed within many manufacturing zones, and expanding the number of these in Greenpoint was proposed as part of that community's [rezoning plan](#) (pdf format), though ultimately rejected in the city's 2005 rezoning plan. Adam Friedman, executive director of the [New York Industrial Retention Network](#), an advocacy group, likes to note that many of the industrial jobs still in the city are artisans.

But many landlords illegally convert their warehouses for much more lucrative residential use under the guise of creating work space for artists.

A [New York Industrial Retention Network report](#) (pdf format), published in 2004, found that

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27 buildings in East Williamsburg alone have carried out illegal conversions, which is estimated to equal 500,000 square feet. Another building in the area, 255 McKibbin St., was issued \$6,150 in fines for such violations, of which only \$1,150 was paid, yet was still approved in 2003 to begin legally offering work/live space for artists in the building, the report shows.

An Art in America article from 2001 noted that some insiders estimated the number of illegal artist residents citywide then as high as 25,000.

To stem this, Mayor Michael Bloomberg has stepped up [enforcement efforts against illegal conversions](#). His administration has advocated for more severe fines and has increased the resources available for a stepped-up enforcement effort. The administration has also created Industrial Business Zones, where he has committed to allowing no residential rezoning, providing stability for lease holding industrial businesses. Many of these new zones are located in, or adjacent to, hotspots for the arts like Red Hook and Williamsburg. The proposed zone in East Williamsburg was struck down by Vito Lopez, the Assembly member representing the area.

### Homeownership, Artist Buildings

To keep artists from being constantly shuffled around, many arts advocates stress the importance of artists owning their spaces. Indeed, 61 percent of metro area artists are renters, according to [Ann Markusen](#), a professor at the University of Minnesota.

"Financial literacy, home ownership and rent protection are the most powerful bulwarks against this cycle of displacement," says Esther Robinson, founder of the non-profit, [ArtHome](#). ArtHome holds financial literacy and homeownership classes for artists here in the city.

[A recent news article](#) had the New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development committed to developing a \$100 million fund to assist artists with buying the space they live and work in. But in an interview, Neill Coleman, the departments communications director, said that the report was a bit premature. He said that while they are looking into the development of a fund, they have not committed \$100 million to it. He did emphasize their commitment to providing affordable housing for artists, most likely in the form of rentals.

Rather than simply focusing on property ownership by the individual artist, some advocates

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are promoting the idea of non-profit organizations taking ownership of buildings for the purpose of renting space to artists or creative businesses.

One such example is the [Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center](#) , which acquired and renovated an industrial complex and then offered it for rent to industrial tenants, now employing over 500 area residents. Since the owner has the interests of the arts in mind, the argument goes, they keep rents low rather than seeking out the highest rents possible.

Arts non profits that specialize in development projects are making headway in the city. The Franklin Lofts in Crown Heights, Brooklyn is an attempt to start a long term cultural community by the non-profit [Artopolis Development](#) . The project, still in development, is an 85-unit artist live-work co-op. And [Artspace Projects](#) is raising funds to purchase PS 109, a long unused public school, to turn it into affordable housing for artists.

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