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Artists and Gentrification in Specific Urban Contexts. A Case Study from Williamsburg, New York

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Abstract: This article present a case study of artists' role in urban development processes. The focus is upon an evacuation process from a factory building where about 250 artists lived and worked, and how they managed to get back into the building some months later. We put this event into the context of social and urban development processes in Williamsburg, New York. We know well how artists often are looked upon as "pioneers" in gentrification processes, but we know less about how artists are "thrown" into different positions: as victims, as creative resources in cultural strategies, innovation, and so on. There is a need for an analysis on artists' possible role as "brakes" in gentrification processes, in the meaning of not having the means for physical upgrading the residential and industrial sites. Most often artists let buildings and facilities keep the state just necessary for living and working. This also means that non-affluent people can stay in the neighborhood, because living costs in the area are kept to an acceptable level. In this case, we find that artists and a local community in Williamsburg together may represent a brake for gentrification. As research methods we use personal interviewing of artists and representatives of community organizations, document analysis, and visual documentation of the urban landscapes in question (photo, video). This article, which is the first publication from this study, will be followed by a deeper analysis and dissemination later on.

Keywords: Gentrification, Artists, Loft Living, Urban Development

Introduction

AN INDUSTRIAL BUILDING in Williamsburg, New York, had been the living and working space for about ten years for approximately 250 artists. In January 2008 they were thrown out from the building by the Fire Department. "Technically we were 'evacuated', not 'evicted'," one of the artists commented. After three to four months, the artists managed to return to the building. In this article we will discuss some specific urban processes, and possible situational explanations we found in Williamsburg in 2008, enabling the artists of *KA Loft*¹ to get back into their loft building.

The aim of this article is to show how urban development processes have an impact on artists living and working in an urban neighbourhood in New York. We demonstrate some complexities of social demography, urban structures and power aspects connected to the main case of study, and as such emphasise the relevance of *context* when analysing the role of artists in contemporary urban processes. This focus is related to the topic "Social, Political

¹ '*KA Loft*' will be used on our main case in Williamsburg. This name indicates the special way of living in New York, *loft living*, the mixed use of work and living. These lofts are highly appreciated by developers, who most often are interested to buy these buildings and upgrade them for more exclusive dwelling forms.

and Community Agendas in the Art”, one of the “Arts in Society” conference themes in Berlin in 2011.

As a team of researchers with backgrounds in urban studies and art in practice and theory, we have employed varied methods in our study. To understand the study’s material our interdisciplinary approach is crucial, in terms of how we combine knowledge from the sociology of art, epistemology and relevant perspectives in/on contemporary art. These perspectives will be combined with and integrated into theories of gentrification (Ley, 1996; Lees et al., 2008; Smith, 1979; Zukin, 1989, 2010), on production of landscapes in cities in transformation (Lefebvre, 2000; Zukin, 1991) and visual culture studies (Pink, 2007; Schirato and Webb, 2004; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001).

We view our case study as a contextualised in-depth study. The methods used for the empirical investigation are interviews with artists who experienced the evacuation, representatives of community organisations, urbanists and gentrification researchers². Document analysis is used to study urban planning documents and other public documents, media texts, et cetera. Field visits and conversations with a group of activists in Chinatown and following a demonstration in north Williamsburg against landlords, are events that are used to illuminate our main case study. Photos and videos are used as *visual utterances*, as empirical material through which knowledge and meaning may be gained. This paper is part of an analysis that will later be developed further. Visual documentation will be an integrated part of the text in disseminating the research, unlike the traditional use as mode just for recording data, documentation or illustrating the text (Pink, 2007).

A broader aim of our research project, which is not touched upon here, is among other things to link studies of gentrification processes in Oslo, including artists’ role, to a wider urban context. We hold that even cities with very different political history, size and economic positions can be compared to some extent, with similarities and differences. This can make existing models of gentrification and the role artists play more complex.

“KA Loft” in a Theoretical Framework

We will first briefly sketch different perspectives on gentrification and production of urban landscapes, perspectives with relevance for our study on artists’ role in cities of change.

The Middle Class Perspective

What is gentrification? In its origin, defined by the sociologist Ruth Glass (1964), gentrification – of “gentry” – is a process where middle class groups move into working class areas in cities, and where the area is continuously being upgraded and prices are increasing. Low income groups cannot afford to live there any longer; they are excluded. This gradually leads to a shift from being a working class to a middle class area. The human geographer David Ley (1996) presents a theory of gentrification that takes place in sequences, and where the artists arrive first as the new residents in the area:

As a priestly caste in a secular society, the artistic aura has the capacity to transform the meaning and value of space – and thereby its inner value also. In deeply devaluated districts in inner Chicago property prices inflated six to tenfold in a decade with the

² The persons interviewed are anonymised, presented with constructed prenames in the text.

influx of artists and their followers. The socio-cultural identification with the artists' space depends on the degree of affiliation with the artists' *habitus*. The closer with the artists' world, the quicker is the response (Ley, 1996: 192).

Ley describes how the crucial process of gentrification is put in motion by others than artists. They are followed by more economically established professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and others. In its final stage, the market includes private-sector managers, sales workers and financial professionals

This "stage theory" was useful to see gentrification as a dynamic diffusion process, where settlement takes place as a chain reaction of players in the ideological proximity to those Ley called the clergy, the artists. Ley emphasises that artists cannot be given the responsibility for gentrification, but where the artists are, other groups follow. The artists will often let the area remain as it is, this is a cheaper living form and in line with the artists' finances and their need to work in "raw" space. But the area has gained a new symbolic value through the artists' interests, often expressed through experimental galleries and new types of exhibition spaces for art. This was also seen in the avant-garde art's emergence and central role in New York, which led to Manhattan's downtown becoming an "art financial centre".

Following Ley, it is possible to expand the view on the artists' role in urban processes through art theory. When Nicholas Bourriaud (2007) utilised the term "relational aesthetics" looking at contemporary art from the 1990s, he used the term "interstice" (ibid: 20) – a space between spaces as a precondition to understand this practice. Originating from Karl Marx, who used interstice to describe a community of exchange that escapes the capitalist logics of profit, Bourriaud sees this term as a way to describe a relational situation which artists can enter. This interstice is characterised by being open to a certain human exchange that is free of the commercialised public space where interaction is connected to commodities. For Bourriaud this is a way to explain the concerns and sensibilities of artworks that enter the realm of the social in a late modern situation. This view of the artist could be transported to the role of artists in the development of cities.

The spaces of *Ka Loft* were literally empty when the first artist tenants arrived there about ten years ago. According to one of our interviewees, the building that originally was a pasta factory was used for storage, but was becoming redundant. As the Williamsburg area lost industry, there were fewer goods to store. The spaces were uninhabited and unwanted since industrial production was no longer economically feasible. In this situation, artists took leases on whole floors that they would develop as studios with a working infrastructure that could be sublet to friends and friends of friends. In this way, they managed to create a situation where they could develop their own work in a suitable and affordable space and at the same time develop a community of fellow artists. It is true that this exchange involves money and profit, but it does not plug in to the ordinary real-estate circulation of money and profits, but sustains the artistic community established in the building. The prime tenants, while they supported their own practice economically, at the same time run the risk of losing their investments of work and money, since the developments were carried out without building departments' permissions.



Photo: Oddrun Sæter

Gentrification researchers often say that the process of gentrification in a district has started when one sees the emergence of coffee bars. Coffee bars are a symbol of a shift in style and consumption, with so-called brown cafes transformed into stylish restaurants. Chain stores, corporate offices and new shopping profiles replace the small shops with their special goods, and we get other types of owners and managers. On the economic side, we see a change from production to consumption: bike repair shops, dressmaking and shoemakers disappear, replaced by coffee shops, restaurants and galleries. “We see a change from kebab shops to coffee bars,” said a borough administration employee in Oslo. One of the artists interviewed in Williamsburg describes the process in this way:

So if you live there long enough, it gains a kind of “this is where it’s happening”. And when it does, speculators start moving in. And then they start buying and then renovating or replacing buildings. And then you reach a point where you have to have money to live there. And the neighbours who live in these areas, the poor people who are forced, just like the artist, to live in these areas that are unsafe, they get shoved out along with the artist. And there’s a tremendous resentment that sets in. And they call this gentrification. This happens over and over and over again. It’s almost like an inevitable repeating pattern (Christina).

We see that Christina makes a short and precise description of general gentrification, as presented by Ruth Glass from London in the sixties to David Ley in Vancouver in the nineties, and which is relevant for several processes in cities internationally today.

Capital First, People Follow

Neil Smith (1979) argues that gentrification is not rooted in middle class values, but developed from a need for housing in the cities, which emerged when there was a lack of buildings and areas in dense urban areas. He rejects the perspective that gentrification is related to increasing consumption, he is more interested in how urban areas are produced. Smith describes it as a return to the city movement of capital, not people – capital goes first, people come after. Housing and land are part of the production growth cycle. It occurs through a gap between existing and potential rent. According to Smith, it is in the process of difference between possible and actual rent that gentrification occurs. This perspective has caused many discussions among gentrification researchers, both because of Smith's particular use of concepts drawn from economics and his explanation of the differences in land values. Other researchers have also disagreed about the relationship between consumption-and production-driven gentrification. In spite of discussions and objections many gentrification researchers have returned to Smith's perspective, but the capital perspective has increasingly been linked to neo-liberal thinking in urban development. There seems to exist a certain consensus that production of space and increased consumer lifestyles support each other in these processes.

Gentrification as Initiated by Politics

The public sector has changed its role in urban development processes in the free market city. Policy, and thus the public system, has increasingly become a facilitator for gentrification. In a transition from government to governance, we see a shift from management to private-public partnerships, connected to neo-liberal regimes, both in cities and in societies in general. Private investors and developers lay the premises in large-scale development projects in cities today.

Many groups called “pioneers” in earlier decades, like artists and academics, were driven by idealism and an interest in old urban character and mixed neighbourhoods. These groups have now lost their role as “pioneers” of gentrification, because developers, in collaboration with the political level, are acting as initiators. They have the means at their disposal that can initiate gentrification quickly. The pioneer metaphor must therefore be given a new meaning: it can rather be linked to the “new settlers” than to the “restorers”, the old type of gentrifiers. And with the new “pioneers” is the somewhat negatively loaded term “gentrification” rarely used; one tends to see terms like “urban renaissance”, “revitalisation”, “regeneration” and “sustainability” (see Lees et al., 2008: 199).

Production of Urban Landscapes

In city politics of today comprehensive efforts are made to sell the city's image in the market for the new industries. Competition between cities is not local or regional, but global. It is essential to be visible, to be put on the map, and so on, and “creative people”, the wealthy tourists and the powerful investors are target groups. Urban visual and aesthetic qualities

are therefore central to economic policy. For these reasons, architecture and cityscapes become the most important cultural products of our time (Zukin, 1995). Many cities, including in Norway, have been inspired by Richard Florida's thesis about preparing cities for "the creative class" (Florida, 2002). The creative class has many similarities with the gentrifiers, as presented by David Ley, such as professionals, homosexuals, artists, etc (Lees et al 2008). Florida's theses have become akin to a planning ideology for both developers and politicians, and some urban researchers hold that social segregation has occurred as a consequence, which is even admitted by Florida himself (Lees et al., 2008: xx).



Photo: Oddrun Sæter

In light of the urban development processes described above, we see how aesthetic qualities dominate in urban transformations initiated by developers, facilitated by the political level, in a governance model. This leads to certain value preferences, where both architects and visual artists become more valuable for investors and urban developers, or at least what they represent, or what they produce of "objects" nourishing capital and ideas of growth. According to this, the low income class does not belong to the "creative class". In this complex social landscape we detect a possible conflict concerning production of urban landscapes. The image is, however, an intricate one, and we will try to untangle some elements we have found so far.

Hipsters³ in the North, Hasidim⁴ in the South

Across Williamsburg

Walking to the south end of the hipster street Bedford Avenue, by crossing Broadway you enter another world. Behind you are the skateboards, coffee shops, natural food stores, small boutiques and trendy bars and restaurants. The Brooklyn Industries shop on the corner is the last landmark of hipster culture. As you leave Broadway, the Hasidic community dominates the pavement very visible with their costumes, hats and hairstyles, wigs for the women and side curls even for the baby boys. On the Sabbath family groups fill the silent streets.



Photo: Oddrun Sæter

³ [“Hipster” has been used in sometimes contradictory ways, making it difficult to precisely define “hipster culture” because it is a “mutating, trans-Atlantic melting pot of styles, tastes and behavior[s]”. One commentator argues that “hipsterism fetishizes the authentic” elements of all of the “fringe movements of the postwar era—beat, hippie, punk, even grunge,” and draws on the “cultural stores of every unmelted ethnicity”, and “regurgitates it with a winking inauthenticity”. Others, like Arsel and Thompson, argue that hipster is a cultural mythology, crystallisation of a mass mediated stereotype generated to understand, categorize and marketize the indie consumer culture rather than an objectified group of people (*Wikipedia, May 2011*).

⁴ Hasidic Judaism or Hasidism is a branch of Orthodox Judaism. Since Hasidic Judaism is not one movement that represents one version of Hasidism, individual Hasidic groups often share underlying philosophy, worship practices, dress and songs (Wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasid. 31.05.2011, page 1). The Hasidim first came to the United States during the large waves of Jewish emigration in the 1880s. The Holocaust brought destruction to all Hasidic centres of Eastern Europe and most of the survivors moved to Israel or to the United States and established new centres of Hasidic Judaism modelled after their original communities (Wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasid. 31.05.2011, page 9).

Architecture is mainly residential, low brick buildings with the balconies distributed to give each household direct access to the open sky. The only shop to be seen is a small kosher food store down a side street. A few blocks straight ahead, passing a small park, you enter an area of industrial buildings. As it was described to us:

I don't know if you realise, but the whole street is filled with artists. There are three loft buildings, ours and two others right there. And everybody is getting protected by the Loft Law now. So that street – that little enclave in the middle of the Hasidic communities is going to be a street of artists till the end of time it seems (David).

David is optimistic, though we may doubt the future stability in this area, if we stick with theories of gentrification. You walk downhill, past an empty lot behind a fence before you reach the avenue along the shore and find the 11-storey building with a flat roof, *KA Loft*, to the left. Across the street is a timberyard on the shorefront, to the left is Brooklyn Navy Yard, to the right a new high-rise residential building is blocking your sight of the Williamsburg Bridge with its small brick buildings beneath it. You can walk down to the riverside and get a panoramic view of Lower Manhattan, standing beside the fence of the timberyard. Amy comments in general about the view from Williamsburg towards Manhattan: "... anyone who stands on the waterfront and looks at that view, you know there is a lot of potential".

When you turn around from the valuable view, you see the entrance of the loft building with its immense industrial type metal framed windows. The drama in 2008 took place here, and the tenants still have many questions about why they were evicted on that cold January day. When we started interviewing the artists from this loft in the south of Williamsburg, we also learnt about events that were happening in some neighbourhoods in the north.

Different Neighbourhood Processes and Groups in Question

In the following we will show how two characteristics of Williamsburg became important to our case study: the middle class gentrification of the north, with their landlords, developers and investors, and in contrast the large area in the south where the Hasidic property owners dominate.

We also see another issue for analysis in our material: how artists and low-income tenant groups belong in the same category of excluded and displaced inhabitants, and at the same time are being conceived as in conflict with one another. When questioned about these relationships in Williamsburg, a neighbourhood organiser describes the situation as follows:

The artists started coming here in the 80s, 90s. Here on the South, the Latinos started coming in from 1900 – there was a big wave in the 1950s – they feel very much like this is their neighbourhood. And then you have the artists that came in and took over abandoned buildings and they feel it's their neighbourhood, you know. (...) There's definitely a lot of tension. ..Yeah, you've seen a lot of the old buildings were either torn down or are now really fancy new condos. There was a huge displacement of the artists. Again, it's kind of very typical. Instead of the artists and Latinos working together and recognising that they have a same issue, it's like no one wants to work together (Amy).

The quotation tells us about rather dramatic changes in the borough, even group conflicts, where artists play a central role. We can read traditional gentrification processes out of this short description.

During our stay in Williamsburg we were informed about and chose to join a street demonstration, where inhabitants were protesting against greedy landlords, even criminal landlords, as their posters told the public. Their appeals at the rally after the march told the participants and observers that there had been a harsh expulsion from a building with 11 flats, where the landlord had thrown people out on the street, and they were suffering because of lack of housing. We knew how artists had been thrown on the street in the same borough. What were the similarities and the differences in the situation of the artists in the south and the low-income groups in the north? Before we go back to our main case in the south of Williamsburg, we will describe some characteristics in the north.

The Hipsters' Area

Williamsburg is internationally known as an urban scene of hipsters. The popularity of the neighbourhood is obvious. We see a lot of new bars and restaurants in Williamsburg north, and bookshops, vintage shops, wine shops, deli shops, and so on. One of the interviewees that lives here says that a lot of individuals do not invest their time and interest in the neighbourhood, as they are just surfing on a wave of a cool image and a popular neighbourhood, and may also neglect social rules and norms “like it’s the Wild West”:

I think in New York City sometimes there is this idea that if you’re busy, then you don’t have to maybe – like it’s [the] Wild West – you don’t have to necessarily follow the rules or there are no rules. There’s this idea that it’s a dirty city so you can do whatever you want. And there’s the people that fight back that wanna have a liveable neighbourhood. There’s always this – especially in this building where people flip through, they only come and live here for a year. They don’t have a long-term commitment; they could not care less. They throw their can down the street. For me that’s always a big battle, getting the people that are just here for nine months, a year, to understand that even if you live here for one month that you should have some sort of commitment to the place you live – even if you’re not gonna live there forever (Amy).



Photo: Oddrun Sæter

The hipster area is also home to Latin and Polish immigrant groups; often they are working in the service sector, or they belong to other branches of the working class. Their lives cannot be compared to the hipsters' life at all. These groups have often short and insecure housing contracts, and they are frequently dependent on landlords' goodwill or greediness, even by illegal means, as in the account given by another informant regarding the evacuation from a building because of a small fire:

What happened in F. (a street), there was a small fire and the building had to be evacuated temporarily – probably not that much damage was done. However, the landlords declined to do the work that was necessary to get it done. 'Cos they wanted the tenants out. Maybe that's why the fire happened; we don't know. And this went on for four years. Struggle, court – the courts are very ineffectual, very weak, are not strong in enforcing the law, unfortunately – and the building was sold a couple of times in the course of this. And then, the tenants were offered a 125 000 dollars each not to move back in by one of the landlords. But they wanted back, and they wanted to move back in. So they fought it out, and finally, after four years they got back in. The courts forced the landlords to make the repairs. And then the building was immediately sold to a new landlord. So . . . but that's one of the things that happened. And that's typical (John).

Through interviews with people living and working in Williamsburg, and through our own observations, we have learnt how gentrification affects the whole neighbourhood. One aspect

in this process is how Brooklyn has become a very fashionable place for food with a lot of new restaurants. One informant saw the opening of one of the first trendy restaurants, Diner, as a factor that “really pushed this whole Brooklyn movement”. She continues to describe how this development implies a zone of “consume segregation”, and also an exclusion of traditional and cheap restaurants:

And then you’ll talk to Latins and they’ll be like: “well, we don’t eat out”. So there’s even this tension about these new businesses rising up. You get a lot of – I don’t know if the word is “segregation”, but people feel very separated from the two different communities (the Latins and the Polish). There’s very few places where they overlap when it comes to something as simple as food, where you think that would be the one place where people could kind of come together. I think in the Polish neighbourhood there is a little bit . . . maybe more overlap. Because the Polish diners were able to kind of stick around and stay, whereas the Puerto Rican food places just tended to be displaced right away. They tended to be like chicken and rice, really cheap overhead. They instantly got pushed out, for the new restaurants (Amy).

The Hasidim’s Area

In the south part of Williamsburg there is also a mixture of traits, but together with the Latins and the Polish, the hipsters are “shifted out” by a Jewish sect. The Hasidim reign in the area, and they constitute a community of about 40,000 inhabitants. They have built their own Jewish society and hometown there, with brick buildings of a special style. This housing structure surrounds the factory where “our” artists live. The landlord of their loft building is also Hasidic. One of the artists interviewed says:

When I came here, this neighbourhood had no (...) whatsoever. And we assumed it never would. Because this is a Hasidic neighbourhood. And when you’re Hasidic, with a Hasidic community, they must walk to the temple. So they need a kind of extended but very closed in community, this is almost inevitably urban by definition. They can’t spread out, and they cannot move either. So they’re here to stay, and they’re here to stay in a density. And we really had this comforting notion that, you know, we were kind of an outpost, a lone building – there’s another one across the street. A couple of buildings in a Hasidic neighbourhood. We figured “No! Nobody’s gonna be interested in this neighbourhood!” This was – I will have been here – a little over eight years ago. Also, it was not a safe neighbourhood then. It was deserted here at night. You had to have a strategy to get to the front door. It’s almost amazing to see how quickly all this has changed. So those developers are on the case to make money, you know (Christina).

The insecurity for the future situation develops closer, even in this apparent protected area of density and monocultural surroundings. Even if the Hasidic Jews have created a close community, developers have extended plans for part of the surroundings, those close to the river, along the area of old industrial buildings, which are also just on the other side of the street of the artists’ loft building. A huge high-rise has already been put up nearby. Another informant thinks there is no danger of being displaced, as the Hasidic community functions as a barrier against this. He tells the story of how he discussed the possibility of a sale of the

building with his roommate, who had known the landlord well for seven years, and he answered: “They won’t sell. The landlord is Hasidic, and that community is very particular about property ownership in this neighbourhood”. He goes on to tell us that he met a real estate developer at a party held by people in the film industry, and he told him where he lived. “I live across the street from your studios, basically, or just down the street...I tried to buy that building a million times. That guy won’t sell,” said the developer, rather resigned about this fact, but this was information the artists in the loft appreciated very much.

Some of the artists interviewed find the situation in an enclave in the south of Williamsburg perfect. They want to work in peace, not spend their time in trendy cafés, like the newcomers in the building more often do:

Instead of very serious artists who just wanted to stay in their room and work all day, all night, there are a lot of young people who speak foreign languages, so their families are kind of treating them to a bohemian phase. I don’t want to be dismissive, I’m sure there are very serious people among them, but it is different. You know, a lot of times, like they come in here, and there are four people in a loft. And they’re not interested in being artists; they’re interested in just having a great time. Living their young adulthood in a hip, raw space. That kind of stuff is going on. And it was not like that at all when I moved here. So, we all knew this would change. There are a few of us who have stayed here who still live the way we live. But it’s just quite a different feeling (Christina).

The message here is that the atmosphere in the building has changed. This is similar to the problems related in connection to the young people in the north of Williamsburg, that they “do not commit themselves to the place”. We may say that the building itself, like parts of the neighbourhood, undergoes a gentrification process, or perhaps more like a dissolution of a seriously working culture of artists.

Some of our interviewees tell us about the economic power among the Hasidim. They are real estate holders, and they are industrial owners, such as the main owners of hospital technology in The United States. Among our interviewees, there are general, undocumented rumours about how well connected and powerful the Hasidic businessmen are economically as well as politically. To investigate this further is outside the scope of this study. We think there are reasons to believe that the presence of the Hasidim is a factor that limits gentrification in this part of the borough.

However, the northern part, constituted by a different “counter culture” to the Hasidic one, is not as powerful as a collective. Developers have freer access to the building stock and the public spaces in the north of Williamsburg, ready for transformation for another category of inhabitants, the paying class. But there may be some barriers for full gentrification also in Williamsburg north.

When asked how he thinks Williamsburg and Greenpoint will develop in the future, a main representative of one of the most influential neighbourhood organisations answers:

Well, to some extent – clearly, there’s gonna be more gentrification. More influx of rich people. But the economy has slowed it down a little bit – which is in some ways good for the rest of the community. Secondly, the community organisations I described – not just organising, but also, each of them has developed affordable housing. And

there's public housing by the City of New York in Williamsburg, a significant amount in Greenpoint. (...) So those remain a core. And I think will keep the core of people here. And in many places – I've lived in the same block for thirty-eight years in Williamsburg, and it's low-income Latinos, primarily. It's like a village. Generations stay there, kids stay there. It's contradictory elements. But here in particular, the community organisations resisted people being forced out. And that's been successful (John).

Here the subsidised housing, which is the result of struggles over many years, functions as a barrier towards full gentrification. The general economic recession is probably also slowing down these processes.

Some Conclusive Remarks

In the hipsters' Williamsburg inhabitants complain about the short periods some inhabitants spend in the neighbourhood. They just "do what they want", while others want to make it a liveable neighbourhood. According to an interviewed, hipsters lack interest in their surroundings, because they just stay in the neighbourhood for a while. The issue of "disorder" represented by the short term dwellers, is different from other narratives of gentrification, where "cleaning up" is the most dominate process, with different kinds of aestheticization of housing facades, street furniture and parks. In traditional gentrification processes, those dominated by middle class groups, we see that the process of successors, people following the artists, most often initiate cleaning and upgrading strategies in the working class surroundings.

All this together points to a preliminary conclusion: Williamsburg as a whole does not undergo all the traditional stages of gentrification processes that we have seen in many cities internationally. There is an element of a liminal stage in the processes, limited by groups of inhabitants who function as brakes on cleaning processes, like these mobile ones, the hipsters, who at the same time "put the neighbourhood on the map". This "liveable city" tempts more wealthy groups to join in, like developers and people interested in living in the luxury condos put up in the waterfront of East River. The transformation in a huge scale has started in Williamsburg, with zone planning indicating a future landscape of luxury housing along the river, with a spectacular view to Manhattan. This is designed for quite another group of inhabitants than immigrant workers and hipsters. Neil Smith's rent gap theory is a relevant one to understand the processes going on; there is a great possibility for developers to make money with the potential value of the real estate.

Compared with the north side, as far as we have learnt, the Hasidic community in the south seems to function very differently. There are strong norms of order and duty, and of religious worshipping by certain rituals during a day. This prevents "affluent activities", like shopping and restaurant dinings. We may therefore assume that the structure surrounding the artists' large loft building in the south of Williamsburg is a barrier against full gentrification.

And here lays some of the secret core of the study of the evacuation in 2008. We have heard different explanations about why the evacuation or eviction happened: From conspiracies between the landlord and central powers of New York to painting the landlord as the real victim, to theories of motivations on the part of the Fire Department. Every person who took part has his or her story, and this mirrors the complexity of the processes going on in

Williamsburg today: traditional gentrification processes combined with real estate investments, which cause radical changes in urban structures. Due to some local cultural conditions, however, which can be interpreted as stabilising or resistant forces, *inertia*, expectations from gentrification theories to some extent are by-passed. This may explain some special phenomena, such as the possibility of the artists at *KA Loft* to get back into their spaces after having been evacuated.

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Professor Oddrun Sæter is educated as a sociologist and a visual artist, and has for many years conducted research and published books, articles and documentaries on urban issues. Her topics are such as senses of place, gentrification processes, and studies of public art and visual culture. At present she is research leader of the Urban Research Program at Oslo University College.

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This knowledge community is brought together around a common shared interest in the role of the arts in society. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book series—exploring the affordances of the new digital media. Members of this knowledge community include artists, academics, educators, administrators, advocates and policy makers, curators, researchers and research students.

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Members of the Arts Community meet at the [International Conference on the Arts in Society](#), held annually in different locations around the world in conjunction with global and local arts events.

The inaugural Conference was held in conjunction with the Edinburgh Festivals, Edinburgh, Scotland in [2006](#), and in [2007](#), in collaboration with the Documenta12, Kassel, Germany. In 2007 an International Symposium on the Arts was also held during the Armory Show in New York and in co-sponsorship with the Center for Art and Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. In [2008](#), the Conference was held at the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK, with a special theme of Art and Communication. In [2009](#), the Conference was held at Venice, Italy in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. In [2010](#), the Conference was held at University of Sydney, Sydney College of the Arts, Australia. In [2011](#), the Conference was held at Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, Germany. In 2012, the Conference will be held in Art and Design Academy, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging artists and scholars. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on [YouTube](#).

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The Arts Community enables members to publish through three media. First by participating in the Arts Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums—a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series [The Arts in Society](#), publishing cutting edge books in print and electronic formats. Publication proposal and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our [news blog](#), constantly publishing short news updates from the Arts in Society Community, as well as major developments in the various disciplines of the arts. You can also join this conversation at [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) or subscribe to our email [Newsletter](#).

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