

Snake in the Garden: The Wisdom of Developing Space in Brooklyn, NY

by Jenny Walty

As a student of New York City, I know things now that I was naïve about ten or even five years ago. I admit to my mistakes, and the one I regret the most is underestimating my impact as an artist on my Brooklyn neighborhood's development. I'm not claiming to have single-handedly developed Williamsburg, but I'm still looking for a way to make it up to my community.

A neighborhood is constructed of concrete, is named on a map, has boundaries drawn around it and a zip code assigned to it. It is altogether knowable and tangible compared to a community. A community is organic, growing in and between people who care about something held in common. It is the foundation of civic life, where people display their values. People in a neighborhood share the streets, parks and public spaces as well as the hidden infrastructure, the electricity grid and the sewer system, but it takes a community to defend these public resources when they are in danger. A neighborhood has a name that you can claim, but if you're lucky you belong to a community.

Social capital¹ is the trust and collaboration generated by a community that enables people to live and work together, but it is complicated by the fluidity of postmodern life. Every year almost one-fifth of Americans move to a new address, and the most common reasons are work opportunities and changing family/space requirements. Employment opportunities will continue to influence where people choose to live, particularly as we enter the 21st Century and the energy challenges that are sure to come, and the distance between work and home is likely to shrink. Workers in many sectors have already begun to bridge the separation between living and working with telecommuting, mobile communications, and home studios. Richard Florida coined the phrase "the creative class"² to describe these creative, technological and managerial workers in the new knowledge economy.

¹ Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

² Florida, Richard (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class...and how it's transforming work, leisure, community & everyday life*. New York, New York: Basic Books.

Creative Employment Patterns and Work Space

At the core of the creative class are “cultural producers”—a catch-all term for visual artists, musicians, dancers, actors, filmmakers and writers—who generally don’t work for a firm in an office, but do have buyers, collaborators and patrons who they need to interact with regularly. If a creative product is not worth enough on the market to cover the cost of making it, then other sources of income must be found. Some artists rely on personal or family support, but most have other jobs and many receive income from work in commercial creative fields like design, marketing, advertising, broadcasting and publishing. Creative producers also do community work including education and nonprofit community development.

Community work can be pursued anywhere, but most cultural markets and well-compensated commercial industries are concentrated in urban centers, specifically global cities. New York City and Los Angeles have concentrations of media and broadcasting jobs with percentage shares of the local economy that are approximately 300 times the share of media and broadcasting jobs in the nation’s total employment³. Creative producers must be physically close to these conglomerated industries, and the media is more concentrated than ever. An artist in Topeka, Kansas, has an economic incentive to move to Los Angeles or New York, because that’s where the commercial work is located. As a result, the share of New York’s economy that is made up of arts and cultural jobs is more than 400 times the share of arts and cultural jobs in the nation’s total employment. The down side is that the cost of living in New York City today is much more expensive than it was 40 years ago and certainly more expensive than living in Topeka. As a result, creative producers must do more commercial work than ever before to pay the rent.

³ Currid, Elizabeth (2007). *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion Art & Music Drive New York City*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Many creative jobs are paid on a temporary, project or freelance basis, so creative producers must be very efficient about finding work. Like most professions, cultural producers rely on networks of acquaintances and friends to find jobs in their field, and creative professions are even more reliant on their social networks since jobs are shorter term, often team-based, and must produce on a contract. Elizabeth Currid observed that creative producers cultivate extensive networks and find professional opportunities to collaborate in the same places where they gather to relax and celebrate. Coffee shops, galleries, bars and clubs are the third places⁴—the public gathering places that provide a respite from the obligations of home and the responsibilities of work—that function as creative community space though most are technically private.

Writers can sit down in a café to pen a novel, but performers and visual artists need space to practice their craft and create something that can be shared. Performers create a fleeting experience for their audience using temporary space. Visual artists create objects that take time and space to realize, but space is expensive in New York. Some artists make work that does not require a studio—street art and digital media are vibrant examples—but most visual artists search the city for creative space they can afford, and are often willing to improve nonresidential spaces to meet their needs. At the same time, creative producers must remain close to their network and job opportunities.

Because of the structure and characteristics described above cultural producers, and particularly visual artists, are attracted to neighborhoods that have under-utilized industrial space, inexpensive rent and access to other creative centers. Cultural producers can and will develop the infrastructure needed by the cultural community, including the third spaces key to social networks and opportunities. Established social infrastructure will attract other creative producers, some of whom will also look for space in the neighborhood. Artists can be thought of as proto-developers—able to see the potential in raw space and convince others of its potential

⁴ Oldenburg, Ray (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York, New York: Paragon House.

value. The Brooklyn Economic Development Corporation studied the incredible growth of creative professionals in Brooklyn and christened the spatial settlement pattern the “creative crescent.”⁵ Over the past 10 years, creative professionals have migrated along the L and G trains from the Village and SoHo to establish communities in Park Slope, Red Hook, DUMBO and Williamsburg.

Developing Space for Creative Production in Williamsburg

I first visited Williamsburg, Brooklyn for brunch in 1999, when a friend of mine who writes comedy was dating a graphic designer who lived in the neighborhood. By that time, creative producers had been living and working in Williamsburg for 15 years and cafes and restaurants were burgeoning along Bedford Avenue near the L train. My partner, Patrick May, and I were both a year out of art school, and he was working at a web development start-up in Williamsburg. The company had been operating in the founder’s living room, which also happened to be a converted storefront on Grand Street between Driggs and Roebling. By 2000, dot com was bubbling, the firm was expanding to a real office on Meeker Avenue and the founder had purchased a house in the neighborhood. Shortly before their office moved I saw the storefront office/living space, and like the artists I described above I saw so much potential—I was instantly drunk with the possibilities of 3,000 sq. ft. on the street with a yard in back. I turned to Patrick with desire in my eyes, “Who’s moving in? No one? Then we are!”

I wanted space to make sculpture and continue a critical dialog with our peers, so we signed a five-year lease with built in rent escalations. We could have just used the 3,000 sq. ft. for workspace, but we wanted to open it up so more artists could benefit and

⁵ *Transcript of Harnessing Brooklyn’s Creative Capital: The Impact of Self-Employed Creative Professionals on the Borough’s Economy, March 5th, 2008.* (http://www.nycfuture.org/content/articles/article_view.cfm?article_id=1208)

ended up with a gallery. We kept our day jobs and acquired a second shift. We were developers without a pro forma, and our budget was figured in beer and love. We started a wiki website, we left the front door open, we made friends with our neighbors and our cohort of galleries in the visibly developing edge of the Southside of Williamsburg. Artists walked in off the street and became part of our inner circle. We hosted political meetings and community forums and bands played benefits to fight the power (plant). We called it Open Ground, and if it sounds idyllic, it half was. We tried to open source art: we curated shows collaboratively; we hosted exchange shows from other collectives and solo shows of mid-career artists looking for a break. We tried to get press, we didn't sell much and we kept our day jobs.

Who's Williamsburg?

After a few years of drawing big crowds and getting great responses from our visitors, we started taking ourselves, our audience and our investment more seriously. The gallery association at the time was creating an exclusive brand identity for the galleries that could pay large membership dues. The association required certain hours of operation during the week, creating a barrier to entry, and then used the deep pockets of their members to start promoting Williamsburg's art scene with their name on it. They bought full-page ads in Artforum and hired buses during the Armory Show to bring the well-heeled uptown and international art patrons to North Brooklyn, and they got press for doing it.

Many of the galleries we knew were like us: run by working artists, only open on the weekends, but were often open for events in the evening and afterhours. We felt like our neighborhood and all the work we had done to make space for our community was being co-opted, so there was a movement to form a new arts association. The goal of the new association was to attract arts audiences to the Lorimer Street stop of the L train (2nd in Brooklyn), re-centering the map to include more of the Williamsburg art community and the literal space of the neighborhood. A two-day festival to attract people eastward, called "See Williamsburg," included galleries,

businesses and individual artists studios. We made a website, posters, maps and listings for the 10,000 visitors to explore the neighborhood. We set up a welcome center at a studio building near the Lorimer stop (formerly the home of NURTUREart).

The usual measures of success for artists are press attention, attendance and sales, and by that measure we succeeded: there was a full-page announcement in one of the big three daily papers, thousands of people came to the Lorimer St. stop and artists sold artwork right out of their studios. However, by the time of the event, I had come to realize that we were speaking the same language as the developers. We were exhausting ourselves pushing the bandwagon to advertise how great our neighborhood was, but we weren't the ones who would benefit from making the Lorimer stop a destination for arts audiences. We would be equally affected by the rising rents, in our case making our community practice unsustainable. When our lease was up in 2005, we choose to take Open Ground on the road. Open Grounder Radek Szczesny took over the lease for two years and invested in Maiden Brooklyn, a combination store and workplace reincarnation, but eventually decided Bushwick had better opportunities

This was the moment the big New York developers had been waiting for since buying waterfront properties in the 1980's (when the manufacturing interests were moving out and the first artists were riding the L Train). They saw the potential and had the resources to wait patiently until cultural producers made the neighborhood valuable again. Twenty years later, after the seismic shift in land use that had taken place in Williamsburg, the City rezoned the neighborhood and the waterfront in 2005, giving a green light to build tower upon tower of luxury condos. While there were some concessions to affordable housing advocates, the size and cost of the new developments insured that there would be a massive influx of affluent residents—and most of them have turned out to be white.

The kind of wholesale change in Williamsburg that I witnessed was just the next iteration of a recurring cycle, but perhaps the most dramatic. Scale matters to a communities' ability to integrate new populations or else be replaced by a new culture. Something is lost when communities wither away in the face of massive redevelopment and new populations.

Fall from Grace

What has been lost in Williamsburg and DUMBO and SoHo? The desegregated diversity and the rich cultural expressions that were once part of a set of integrated communities are practically invisible now, and many of the third places that served these earlier settlers have closed. The social capital that enabled the community to organize itself against firehouse closures and school overcrowding has been diluted by the rapid influx of new residents (many temporary). Core cultural production space or any kind of unclaimed, undeveloped space is no longer widely available in Williamsburg, and artists now look elsewhere.

This may seem out of place in the context of a catalog essay for the Bushwick Biennial, but I write this as a cautionary tale before another community follows in the footsteps of Williamsburg. Williamsburg was at the tipping point⁶ in 2000, and Bushwick may be close today. Bushwick galleries and artists should be wary of advertising their neighborhood. Bankers and lawyers are looking for cheap rent these days, and if you build a comfortable neighborhood and then invite them over, they will come! The more commercial galleries might eventually move to Chelsea to be closer to their markets, but the community efforts will not. They will find themselves stuck, as we did, between the heightened expectations of professionalism and the rising rents that come with a new constituency.

Based on the employment patterns and characteristics of cultural producers, it may be inevitable that artists cluster in neighborhoods where appropriate space is available, and potentially displace other uses, but we should be critical of any attempts to commercialize our communities. Art galleries are a problematic kind of third space that we should be wary of in our neighborhoods.

⁶ Gladwell, Malcolm. (2000). *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.

These spaces can be successful public gathering places that build community, as well as gate-keeping spaces for private commerce. Professional galleries are looking for press, attendance and sales; each exhibition is advertised and invitations are extended to visit a neighborhood that the gallery has, perhaps, just claimed.

One solution is to embrace the art fair as the commercial sales venue and dedicate the space of the gallery to community development. The spatial separation of creative production space and professional/commercial exhibition spaces is an inherent part of international art fairs and their satellite fairs, since fairs attract art audiences to places far from the places artists live and work. As the current Director, Patrick took Open Ground to Miami last year and Pool in New York this spring and found these fairs to be better exposure for the exhibiting artists and our communities.

I've learned the hard way that we, in the art world, can be guilty of claiming space and distancing ourselves from our sources, of creating a tabula rasa to write our names on (Central Williamsburg). We may be stuck in the immediacy of the present—putting up the next show, or paying our rent—but our failure to plan for creative production in the long term will stymie the success of our community, and our ability to contribute to the real human development needed in our neighborhoods. The lower we keep our rent the more time we can afford to spend doing community work. We need to take responsibility for the places where we live and work, and learn how to sustain them in the long term.

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