

Landlords Put the Squeeze on Brooklyn Artists

North Brooklyn Residents Band Together to Protect Their Homes

by Stephanie Cash

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The vibrant art scene that has developed in Brooklyn, drawing collectors, curators, and writers to the borough, is under threat by encroaching gentrification. It's a scenario familiar to artist communities in various cities, including San Francisco, where dot-com companies have sent rents skyward, making it nearly impossible for many residents, particularly artists and nonprofit groups, to compete. While such change can result from slow, unavoidable growth and progress, sometimes the process can get downright dirty.

In December, the city of New York once again saw fit to abruptly evict loft residents and their children from their homes. Sixty tenants of 247 Water Street, owned by Joshua Gutman in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn, remained in temporary exile as this issue went to press. The residents were ousted because they live in a commercially zoned loft building. Dwellings like this exist all over the city, and have for years. Artists move into otherwise undesirable buildings, usually making significant improvements to their spaces and surrounding areas. Everyone benefits from these tenuous and uneasy, not to mention illegal, arrangements. Then landlords, suddenly aware that they are sitting on gold mines, rush to cash in.

The recent eviction parallels earlier legal maneuvers. On Christmas Eve in 1999, a building on North 4th Street in Williamsburg was padlocked by the New York City Fire Department due to hazardous conditions; other lockouts followed. (Many residents of those buildings are now back in their home following needed building improvements and judicially forced mediation between tenants and landlords.)

The recent order to vacate came from the city's Department of Buildings, which has the authority to empty a commercially zoned building if tenants are found to be living there, whether or not dangerous conditions exist. By all accounts, 246 Water Street is one of the area's better-maintained buildings. Its evacuation came after the *Daily News*, which ran the story on December 19, requested a copy of a fire department report that lists 121 illegally converted loft buildings in Dumbo, Williamsburg, and Greenpoint. Though the report had been prepared a year earlier, no action had been taken. City officials estimate that 1,000 to 2,000 people are living in the listed buildings. But many more Brooklyn loft buildings have managed to escape notice, and some insiders estimate that the number of illegal residents may be as high as 25,000.

On January 2, the city attempted to clear 12 residents from a nearby building, 255 Water Street, also owned by Gutman, after he turned off the sprinkler system, presumably to provoke such an action by the fire department. But the move ultimately failed. Tenants and their neighbors mounted a noisy protest, drawing TV news crews to the scene and effectively blocking city agents from entering the building.

The resulting uproar led Mayor Rudolph Guiliani to call a truce. He also sharply criticized the buildings department and fire department for the confusion caused by conflicting roles: the agencies conduct separate inspections and have different criteria for removing people from

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

buildings. He promised that there would be no more surprise evacuations, that moderate violations would result only in fines, and that vacate orders would only be issued in instances of imminent peril.

Meanwhile, a 10-story building on Williamsburg's less-developed south side has been under siege since September 6, when building owner Lawrence Krasne severed power lines to the artist-occupied floors. Since then, the residents have endured disruptions in heat, water, and elevator service. Hazardous conditions have been a direct result of the landlord's actions, an increasingly popular tactic among building owners. The city has repeatedly ordered restoration of certain services, and each time Krasne has complied – for a day.

His commercial motives seem clear. A Web site for the property (www.brooklynhitechcenter.com) is targeted to dot-com companies and advertises features that, tenants say, are not yet installed. One leaseholder was told that his rent could increase from \$3,000 a month for one floor to an astronomical \$25,000. This particularly nasty, but not uncommon, situation is faced by many loft residents who aren't protected by rent-stabilization laws.

Many residents were hoping to find protection in the 1982 Loft Law, which covers some 900 loft buildings, primarily in Lower Manhattan, that were in existence that year; less than 50 are in Brooklyn. According to Brooklyn city councilman Kenneth Fisher, the law, which was supposed to pave the way for the conversion of loft buildings, is too complicated. Many buildings have failed to obtain residential certificates of occupancy, largely because of the prohibitive costs of building improvements and the difficulties of securing funding. As of May 2000, 633 buildings still hadn't completed the process. The loft law, which is often used as a political bargaining chip, is up for renewal at the end of this month.

New York attorney Arthur Rhine, who has successfully represented many ousted or threatened loft residents, said that trying to alter the original law would likely lead to its defeat and put Manhattan loft tenants at risk. State assemblyman Vito Lopez, who coincidentally represents some of the Brooklyn neighborhoods in question and is also chairperson of the state housing committee, is working to put through a separate piece of legislation for Brooklyn, but with the same provisions. He is optimistic that Brooklyn loft residents will have protection by the end of this legislative session. Lopez has long stressed the need for rezoning in these areas. He has urged artists to form a coalition like the Lower Manhattan Loft Tenants, a highly effective advocacy group, and to become actively involved with their communities.

In fact, a new group called the Brooklyn Live/Work Coalition (www.brooklynlivework.org) has formed to address the crisis. Artist Eve Sussman, one of the founders, calls residential rezoning a double-edged sword. She and others support a mixed-use rezoning that allows commercial and residential use within the same building, a policy which also preserves the diverse character of a neighborhood. This is one possible way to put the brakes on the rapid gentrification of areas like Williamsburg and still keep artists in the neighborhoods they helped revitalize.

Until this last barrage of evacuations, officials were pessimistic about a legal remedy anytime soon. The urgency of the current situation, however, may lead to a quicker solution. One judge reportedly expressed the need for a Brooklyn loft law because the courts are presently clogged with individual cases. In the meantime, many landlords and tenants are being encouraged to find reasonable solutions. In some cases, agreements have been worked out that allow artists to stay in a building, often with rent increases, but also with rent-

stabilization rights. Other landlords are offering some longtime tenants hundreds of thousands of dollars to give up their spaces, but such is the shortage of affordable live/work space in the city that many refuse the offer.

The Brooklyn waterfront, where these communities are located, is indeed a battleground. Last year, Dumbo residents successfully fought a Jean Nouvel-designed marina-hotel development in favor of a proposed park, which ironically is likely to make the area more residentially appealing and attract other forms of commercial development and increased pedestrian and vehicular traffic. In south Williamsburg, ongoing plans to convert the Brooklyn Navy Yard into a movie studio have the neighboring Hasidic community up in arms. (Original developers Robert De Niro and Harvey Weinstein are no longer involved.) And further north, the city seems torn between building a hotly contested waste-transfer station or a 25-acre waterfront park as part of its bid to host the 2012 Olympic games.

It took about 25 years for SoHo to be transformed from a desolate manufacturing area to an artists' enclave to what is now a virtual outdoor mall, uprooting all but the most stalwart and financially successful artists. Fueled by a still reasonably robust economy, the trend in Williamsburg seems to have accelerated. In the past five years, numerous cafés, restaurants, bars, and shops have opened, keeping pace with the increasing number of residents. Many of the newcomers are not artists and are willing to pay Manhattan prices for spaces that not long ago couldn't be given away.

It's not just artists who are being priced out of the area. Long-established manufacturing businesses, along with Polish and Puerto Rican communities, are feeling the pinch, too. The recurring irony is that Williamsburg, like SoHo, would not be enjoying such prosperity were it not for the artists who first moved in and put them on the map as hip neighborhoods.

As more and more artists head to Harlem or push deeper into derelict areas of Brooklyn, many are wondering: where to next? Newark?

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