The Arts in a Gentrifying Bushwick

By: Laura Malone
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Brooklyn is the most populated borough in New York City with over 2 million residents as of 2014. Over the past several decades, the process of gentrification has been occurring significantly within the borough. With this process comes many economic and demographic changes for residents, and arguably at the forefront of these changes are an influx of artists and other creative types into the area. Historically, it is often artists who are the first to move into an area otherwise deemed undesirable which gives rise to the gentrification process. In Bushwick, Brooklyn, the presence of artists in the neighborhood has made a significant impact, attracting attention from people far and wide. Specifically, new art galleries, performance spaces and street art have contributed to a growing community of the arts in a neighborhood that was previously without it on such a scale. Regardless of the positive and negative attributes of gentrification on a neighborhood, the community of artists is growing rapidly in Bushwick.

The term “gentrification” was first coined in 1964 by Ruth Glass, an early pioneer of urban sociology, describing it as a new, distinct process of urban change, specifically in London at the time (Lees, 4). “The term was defined to point out the emergence of a new ‘urban gentry’ (people of good social position, specifically in England) – literally, gentrification or ‘gentry-ification’ means the replacement of an existing population by the gentry” (Lees, 5). Over time, the definition has been used more specifically depending on where it is said to be occurring. Brooklyn, New York has been undergoing gentrification at an accelerated rate since
the 1990’s, especially within specific neighborhoods in the borough which were once deemed undesirable. Rather than young upper middle class families moving in, which has historically been cited as a sign of the gentrification process occurring, there has been a change to an inflow of young, single, middle class people moving to neighborhoods where rents are still affordable and in close proximity to Manhattan. Williamsburg, Brooklyn has had the largest rent increases over the past several decades, and Bushwick, Brooklyn is currently following suit.

Certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn have appealed to artists in recent decades. Williamsburg, and most recently Bushwick, have arguably become the epicenter of artist residency within Brooklyn since the 1990’s, changing the face of these neighborhoods by opening art galleries, starting artist collectives, establishing performance spaces and music venues, and assisting in pioneering the notion of street art as an acceptable form of expression, in stark contrast to how it has been perceived in the past, as mainly illegal graffiti. Many claim the influx of this new artist collective is the cause and/or effect of gentrification, bringing forth opposing views on the positive and negative effects of artists migrating and settling within these communities. Nonetheless, the impact of the artists’ role on such neighborhoods cannot be ignored.
Bushwick, a neighborhood spanning 1.3 square miles with a population of over 85,000 residents has followed in Williamsburg’s footsteps in being the next new hot spot for young artistic types. The spike in new residents being predominantly young people (between 20 and 30 years old) began in the late 1990’s and has accelerated into the 2010’s. The neighborhood has historically been mainly Hispanic, but has seen a rise in white residents moving in as interest in the area has increased (www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Bushwick-Brooklyn-NY). Tom Le, a New York City real estate agent, discussed gentrification in Bushwick in 2006, citing it as the next up and coming neighborhood. Le states the reasoning behind this as its proximity to Williamsburg, which we know has already been heavily gentrified by this point, and its low property value make it a prime location for young artists wishing to live in Brooklyn. He also points out that artists have populated the area since the 1990’s making it just a matter of time
before others with similar lifestyles catch on and move in. New businesses moving to Bushwick beginning in the early 2000’s aim to entice a young, single and creative generation, such as the “The Life Café”, originally located in iconic Greenwich Village (Sullivan, 2006).

During this time, artists begin migrating to Bushwick in larger numbers, carving out their own networks in the neighborhood before rents become unaffordable. 56 Bogart Street, a warehouse space converted in 2005, is notable for housing many bustling art galleries. Each loft has at least 108” windows, “offering great light for artists who range from painters, sculptors, photographers, jewelry designers and craftsmen” (www.56bogartstreet.com).

Currently, 56 Bogart is housing eighteen galleries. Unlike high-end galleries in SoHo, for example, the founders of this gallery are more focused on art for art’s take rather than monetary gain, citing not having heat on weekends as an example of their thriftiness. However, this gallery is growing constantly along with many others like it in Bushwick (Lipinski, 2012). In an effort to continue community building between artists in the area, some have encouraged their peers to pool resources to purchase real estate before everything becomes too expensive to remain. Jules
de Balincourt, a painter, purchased a building in Bushwick where he both lives and works and encourages others to do the same, claiming it would be unfair to have to leave after moving to the area many years prior to the housing boom (Haller, 2013).

Performance art, an art form that combines visual and dramatic works, has become popularized throughout the area as well. The Bushwick Starr Theater is a DIY performance space on Starr Street that emerged out of a run-down loft apartment rented by two artists who moved to the area in the 1990’s. The artists accidentally became curators of performances in their space in 2007 after years of trying to make a living in the area through their art.

Though the original creators of the theater have since moved to Queens, The Bushwick Starr has left a lasting impression as a benchmark for creativity in an emerging artistic landscape in Bushwick (Soloski, 2015). Today, the Starr describes their mission as helping ambitious artists...
and audiences find each other by providing a springboard for emerging professional artists to make career-defining leaps, and provide a sanctuary where established performance companies come to experiment and innovate (www.thebushwickstarr.org).

While many of the artists in Bushwick today are originally from elsewhere, some were born in the neighborhood and have enjoyed participating in the growing art community that didn’t exist in mass many years earlier. Bushwick native, Joseph Ficalora, turned his family’s old steel fabrication business from the 1980’s into a modern day street art outdoor gallery. Ficalora recalls growing up in what he remembers to be an extremely dangerous neighborhood with more bad memories than good, even losing his father to violent crime. Though many natives decry gentrification, he takes comfort in the revitalization of his hometown through a new artistic collective in the area that he enjoys being a part of (O’Leary, 2013).
Ficalora’s street art gallery, titled “Bushwick Collective”, begins on Jefferson Street and continues on Troutman Street towards Saint Nicholas Avenue. Several free walking tours are offered to view the artwork, which uses the walls of the buildings as canvasses with works from artists of all backgrounds on what used to be blank industrial buildings. Local artists named Cost, Revs, Enx, Mast, Never, Nekst, 4 Burners are included, as well as many international artists. Since the art is displayed outdoors and doesn’t rely on indoor real estate to exist, the artwork is constantly expanding and changing, making each visit unique. “While some naysayers may turn down their thumbs and cry out that graffiti is mere vandalism, others feel differently about the artwork grazing the walls in Bushwick.”


Gentrification in Bushwick, Brooklyn may have its critics, but has without a doubt led to a new, immersive community of artists of all kinds that had not previously existed. Whether it be
the conversion of aged industrial space into art galleries and performance spaces, or street art that used to only be known as graffiti under negative connotations, the influence of the arts in Bushwick is ever present. As we see these new artist developments accelerate in a matter of decades and more people show interest in the neighborhood, one can assume that even more artists will want to call Bushwick their home.
**Works Cited**

- “In Bushwick, Artists Try to Rewrite Gentrification’s Usual Story”
  


- “Next Stop, Bushwick”
  

- “Bushwick Gets a Fresh Coat: [Metropolitan Desk]”
  

- “A Brooklyn Home for Artists, With Love: [Arts and Leisure Desk]”
  

- “Psst… Have You Heard About Bushwick?: How an Undesirable Neighborhood Becomes the Next Hot Spot”
  
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