



# BROOKLYN, DISCLOSED

REINVENTING THE BROWNSTONE TYPOLOGY AS A SOLUTION  
TO ARTISTS DISPLACEMENT IN NEW YORK CITY

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## *Brooklyn, disclosed*

## KEYWORDS

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate and analyze the different degrees of the gentrified urban environment in the borough of Brooklyn, New York City. The ultimate aim of the work is to use on-site tools and academic resources to propose a spatial solution to a socio-political problem. The critical issues addressed are central, as they have a direct impact on the residents and the city economy. The case of Brooklyn is one of a kind: although numerous neighborhoods are affected by intensified gentrification and regentrification, this condition hasn't been fully explored as a multi-faceted process affecting multiple neighborhoods in different ways yet, neither have its actors, its consequences.

After defining the intricate nature of this phenomenon and what it entails, the research focuses on the neighborhoods of the so-called Brooklyn Gold Coast. This area, scattered around Prospect Park, has witnessed one of the most striking suburban developments of the 19th century, using the Brownstone townhouse as the leading

typology for this expansion and, later, as a tool for gentrification. A rigorous analysis of this typology defines its distinctive features and finds its signature traits. In the late 20th century, a new generation of white-collar professionals has relocated to the area and, by restoring old, decaying Brownstones and moving permanently there, has caused real-estate values to increase and working-class residents to move out. Today, Brownstone Brooklyn presents itself as a compact enclave of the upper class where little diversity is preserved.

The second part of the thesis work focuses on the neighborhood of Williamsburg, North of the Gold Coast, that has been interested in the recent year by another type of gentrification. Being a former industrial district, artists communities escaped Manhattan to inhabit former commercial spaces. Despite the blossoming of the neighborhood, thanks to art and the hip culture, artists attracted, in turn, the interest of the city government that transformed Williamsburg into a tourist attraction,

through a rezoning of the area. A thorough research on the city economic interests and outside investments toward neighborhood "revitalization" explains the dissipation of the original authenticity, due to the exodus of artists to other areas of New York City.

The third and last part of the thesis tries to merge the two mentioned issues, by means of a proposal that addresses both. As a result of on-site research, the low-

rise, residential neighborhood of Ridgewood appears to be potential fertile soil for gentrification, due to an aging population and possible future changes in the zoning regulations. The proposal offers a live-and-work dwelling for up to two artists' households. This architectural solution explores and suggests the typology of the Brownstone, interpreted in a contemporary language, as a possible key to artists displacement and a cultural catalyst for

a dying residential neighborhood. Taking advantage of the current zoning regulations, the proposed project occupies a vacant lot, coded for a two-family building, with the intention of preventing artists to move in flock and triggering further gentrification. Furthermore, the intervention proposed can be potentially implemented elsewhere, with a tangible impact for artists and local residents, benefitting both.

*Today's Park Slope cityscape. Downtown Brooklyn in the background. Courtesy of G. Steinmetz*





**WILLIAMSBURG**

**RIDGEWOOD**

**BROWNSTONE  
BROOKLYN**



***WELCOME TO*** 01  
***BROWNSTONE BROOKLYN***



# History of Breukelen

**t**he story of Brooklyn began as an American Indian settlement at the southernmost tip of Long Island. This land was abundantly forested, but they were able to harvest corn and tobacco and used the rivers for fishing.

When the Dutch came in the early 1600s and began to buy land, they took over the indigenous populations to an extent that, by the end of the 1680s, American Indians had no more claims to their landscape whatsoever.

At this time, five villages were founded: Bushwick, Breuckelen, Flatbush, Flatlands, and New Utrecht. All of them, plus a sixth village, Gravesend, were conquered by the British and gathered under one single county, part of the Crown Colony of New York, Kings County.

By the end of the century, its population was around 2,000 people (the half being Dutch). Slavery was prominent in farmlands and stayed that way all throughout the 18th century, until 1827 when it became illegal. Slaves brought from Africa covered nearly one third of the population. During the

Revolutionary War, former Breuckelen (now Brooklyn) was the battlefield of the 1776 clash between the Colonial and British army. The latter won and occupied Manhattan and Brooklyn until the end of the war<sup>1</sup>.

Brooklyn's village was directly facing Manhattan across the East River and represented a forced point of entry for all the food produced in Long Island that had to reach New York City. For this reason, as Manhattan grew economically, so did Brooklyn. Still a village, it was made of a small, unpaved group of a hundred or so modest houses that only became a medium-size town during the 19th century. With the opening of numerous factories along the waterfront and the U.S. Navy Shipyard, Brooklyn gained momentum and was the target of speculators that started to buy land to build housing and commercial space. In 1814 the first steam-ferry service across the East River opened and allowed

1. STILES H. R., *A history of the city of Brooklyn: including the old town and village of Brooklyn, the town of Bushwick, and the village and city of Williamsburgh*, Brooklyn Pub., 1867

<< *Brownstones facades in Carroll Gardens. Courtesy of M. Rojo Barriot*

a fair amount of white-collar workers and businessmen to invest their wealth in buying properties, move to Brooklyn Heights and commute to Manhattan.

It's in the new century that a conspicuous flux of Irish immigrants aimed at areas such as Fort Greene and Vinegar Hill. The opening of the Erie Canal (in upstate New York) in 1825 boosted the economy in all New York State and together with the many small factories on the river and the Navy Yard, provided easy employment conditions<sup>2</sup>. As the town grew into a city, the population rose to 80,000 in the span of 25 years and the industrial sector bloomed: there were more and more factories on the waterfront, the streets were paved and well illuminated and an administration and public school systems were established. By 1860 Brooklyn reached the dramatic number of 205,000 residents, thanks to the large wave of immigrants from Germany, Eastern Europe, Russia, Italy, Poland and Scandinavia mainly that filled the city. Moreover, 30% percent of the total population was foreign-

born an 40% of workers used the ferry to New York City every day. The demand for transportation was high and this triggered the construction of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883. Following this event, new immigrants would seek here relief from Manhattan's steep rents, causing an urban expansion that filled all of Kings County and the later annexation to New York City in 1898; Brooklyn was no longer an independent city, it was now one of five boroughs<sup>3</sup>.

The urbanization of Brooklyn made its rural character quickly vanish with the implementation of trolley lines, elevated railroads and subway lines reaching the heart of the borough. The population reached 1 million inhabitants. The Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridge opened in the first decade of the 20th century and the first subway line passing under the East River was operational by 1908. Each area reached by

2. PUELO S., *A City So Grand: The Rise of an American Metropolis, Boston 1850-1900*, Beacon Press, 2011

3. MCCULLOUGH D. W., *Brooklyn...and how it got that way*, Doubleday, 1983

new infrastructures started to develop and expand. The grow of the industrial sector quickly made Brooklyn one of the leading manufacturing centers of the United States: sugar refining, ironworks, slaughterhouses, gas refineries and breweries were among the most successful industries. Work was largely available, although the health and safety conditions weren't always appropriate. During the Great Depression, sparked by the stock market crash in 1929, many Brooklynites lost their jobs and poverty was everywhere in the city.

It's in the 1930s, with the Great Migration, that thousands of southern African Americans poured into Brooklyn's neighborhoods (mostly Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick, Crown Heights, Flatbush and East New York). When the A subway line provided a direct link between northern Manhattan and Brooklyn, more and more African Americans moved to the borough, looking for better housing and living conditions. Additionally, thousands of Puerto Rican immigrants settled in Brooklyn as well,

occupying neighborhoods South of Prospect Park and creating their own enclaves, with hopes for a more prosperous life<sup>4</sup>.

Unfortunately, during the post-war years, Brooklyn suffered from an industrial crisis: heavy manufacturers began to move to cheaper locations, port activity went down significantly with the gradual abandon of the dockyards and economic dislocation affected the whole borough. Residents too, started to move to the suburbs such as Queens, Long Island, Staten Island or New Jersey. Riots and turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s were later replaced by a moment of revival and regeneration in Brooklyn's economy: crime rates decreased and community engagement in culture brought many decaying neighborhoods back to life<sup>5</sup>. The today's population is 2.6 million and new immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin

4. L. KRISOFF BOEHM, *America's Urban History*, Routledge, 2014

5. J. BAUMAN, R. BILES, K.M. SZYLVIAN, *The Ever-Changing American City: 1945–Present*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011

Phase 1

# The Brooklyn Brownstone

**b**rownstone Brooklyn is a story on its own. A story of growth, massive development, immigration, mom-and-pop stores and finally, gentrification. It started in the late 1800s and completely changed the dynamics of an entire city, making Brooklyn and New York City in general what they are now. The Brownstone was such a powerful political instrument that carried in its meaning the whole transformation of entire neighborhoods, deciding once and for all their character and their identity. The legacy of it is still visible today, strolling around the borough, in its historic districts, where the brownstone typology is predominant or in its new ones, where it's lacking.

As previously mentioned, the opening of the steam ferry between Manhattan and Brooklyn sparked the 19th century building boom. The first attempt to build a new city was the effort of speculators and developers that wanted to transform farmland into profitable financial commodity; that's how the first suburb of New York started to develop in a rapid, reckless pace.

America and Asia are contributing to the borough's vast spirit of diversity, together with distinct artists communities, young professional and new young families (whose interactions will be illustrated in the next chapters).

In order to increase the profit from land, Brooklyn developers would buy large lots and plots of land to erect substantial tracts of housing that seemed raised overnight. The more demand, the more housing was built. As an expected result, the initial plan to build larger upscale mansions, surrounded by yards and lawns faded away when property value increased dramatically, encouraging speculators to erect multi-family homes and apartments to cramp in as many tenants as possible<sup>6</sup>. The infrastructures too grew along with the urban sprawl. Trolley lines got implemented, to link various parts of the borough, bordered by cheap three or four-story buildings featuring storefronts at the ground level.

*Brownstones vs. apartment building in Grand Army Plaza. Courtesy of M. Orsello* >

<sup>6</sup>. S. OSMAN, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn: Gentrification and the Search for Authenticity in Postwar New York*, Oxford University Press, 2011



## THE LATE 1800s

Where is Brownstone Brooklyn? The nucleus of Brownstone Brooklyn was the formerly known Clover Hill, now Brooklyn Heights, close to Downtown Brooklyn. The wealthier areas where white-collar professionals settled in the late 1800s include: Park Slope, Prospect Heights, Boerum Hill, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. These neighborhoods, gravitating around Prospect Park, form the so-called Gold Coast, a concentration of wealthy residents as well as the epicenter of the Brownstone's thriving development. Other neighborhoods boasting less elaborate brownstone row houses are: Crown Heights, Prospect-Lefferts Gardens, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick<sup>7</sup>.

The building boom that characterized 19th century New York finds its roots in the Brownstone typology. Among wood-frame homes, churches of different confessions displaying rich, questionable adornments, grotesque interpretations of European neo-classical styles, the low-rise, tidy template of Brownstones emerged, creating slower-

paced, more human-scaled neighborhoods. Cobblestone streets and other high-rises or condo buildings still popped around Brooklyn, defining incisive moments of rupture, but the Brooklyn's Victorian Brownstone cityscape represented not just a social class or an architectural typology, but an idea of city. In the words of Osman "The Brownstone was cityness"<sup>8</sup>.

What can be classified as Brownstone and why is it so central? According to the *Columbia encyclopedia*<sup>9</sup> the word brownstone refers to a red-to-brown variety of sandstone. All along the latter part of the Triassic period, it was deposited in present-day Southern Connecticut and New Jersey. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, quarries in these regions supplied brownstone to cities such as Baltimore,

7. Lockwood C., *Bricks and brownstone: the New York row house, 1783-1929 - A Guide to Architectural Styles and Interior Decoration for Period Restoration*, Rizzoli, 2003

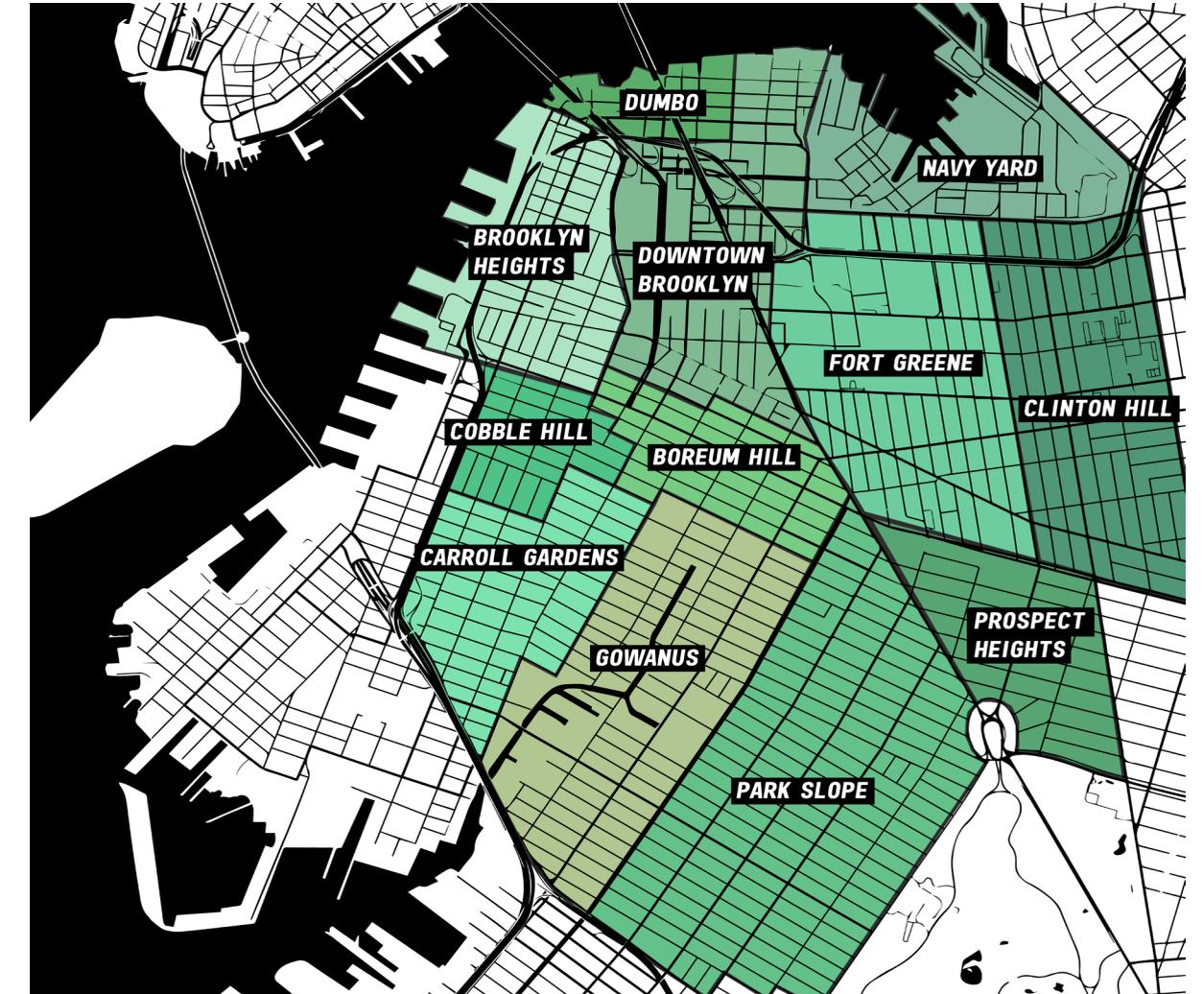
8. OSMAN S., *The Invention of Brownstone*, cit.

9. LAGASSE P., *The Columbia Encyclopedia (7th ed.)*, Columbia University Press, 2017

Boston and New York, to satisfy the demand for building stone. Consequently, today the word Brownstone also indicates a strict type of row houses, the typical brownstone-faced brick-houses of New York City. The stone, thus, was primarily used in the front part of the row houses: a 10 to 15 cm thick layer would cover the façade and the decoration elements, but there are also cases in which it was employed in more consistent ways. By the end of the 1950s though, brownstone houses were so numerous and well recognized that the name was frequently used to label row houses that had different facing too<sup>10</sup>.

*Brooklyn Gold Coast's neighborhoods* >

10. STEVENS CURL J., WILSON S., *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture (3 ed.)*, Oxford University Press, 2015



## THE ANATOMY OF A BROWNSTONE

The way Brownstone houses were made followed precise rules for the interiors and for the exteriors likewise. The templates and layout to be followed, allowed them to be built in selected parcels of land, complying with certain street measurements. This also came in handy when developers were to use the same design and repeat it elsewhere; additionally, the block could be filled in with a new Brownstone during different periods of time, allowing standardized techniques to be implemented and apparent diversity among the styles used. Despite the different exterior physiognomy and uniqueness, in fact, Brownstones, once undressed of their outer embellished layers, looked pretty much alike. The brick skeleton and interior layout had very little variations between one house and another. Developers willing to make large investments would usually buy a 85 x 100 ft plot of land with the intention to erect 3 to 4 different units at a time. They would, of course, start with the foundations, a few feet below street level and go up, reaching 2 to 4 storeys in height. Due to the simultaneity of

construction, most of the time the foundations were laid together and the cellar level was erected at the same time. This is why, for instance, still today, walled in passageways can be found in original Brownstones at the lower level: they were used by workers to move themselves and material around during construction. Nowadays, some of them have been re-opened when adjacent properties have been bought by the same family or investor, although they're still filled in with bricks for the most part (their presence and former function is hinted by the embedded brick lintel)<sup>11</sup>.

Throughout the research, a list of five recurrent elements has been made. These components are the main ingredients that characterize a typical Brooklyn Brownstone and can be encountered at all times.

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11. LOCKWOOD C., *Bricks and brownstone*, cit.

## THE DIMENSIONS

As previously stated, developers would prefer to buy considerably large parcels of land (former farmland) and start construction. In the beginning the houses were wider and could reach 27ft (8.22m) to 29ft (8.84m) in width, but by the end of the 19th century, middle-class families could inhabit houses that were as narrow as 16ft (4.9m) or even narrower. 27ft, though, seems to be the standard measurement in the Park Slope area; 22ft (6.70m) in less upscale, yet distinguished neighborhoods, such as Crown Heights or Prospect Heights. Furthermore, Brownstones are typically two to four storey high with a flat roof. Originally, they were designed to accommodate one single family from the elite and their servants. Needless to say, throughout the decades, because of changes in the real estate market, different needs from different social classes and the long period of economic crisis North America underwent following the Great American Depression, this kind of row house was frequently chopped off by owners and

developers into independent apartment units. These were suitable for more modest tenants but transformed the Brownstone typology de facto into a rooming house<sup>12</sup>.

## THE INTERNAL LAYOUT

In high-end neighborhoods the houses were usually one-family. The cellar level would normally be the lowest one and host a technical compartment and storage space (seldom used for the servants). It would be accessible from an internal stairwell and an outdoor hatch in the front yard area of the house. A level up and one would find themselves into the basement. Today this level, that was usually reachable from the outside via a dedicated door, a few steps underneath or next to the stoops and main entrance, is generally sold or rented out as independent unit and only rarely is still part of the whole house. In the Gold Coast's heyday, this floor would typically accommodate the kitchen in the back (although sometimes the

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12. OSMAN S., *The Invention of Brownstone*, cit.

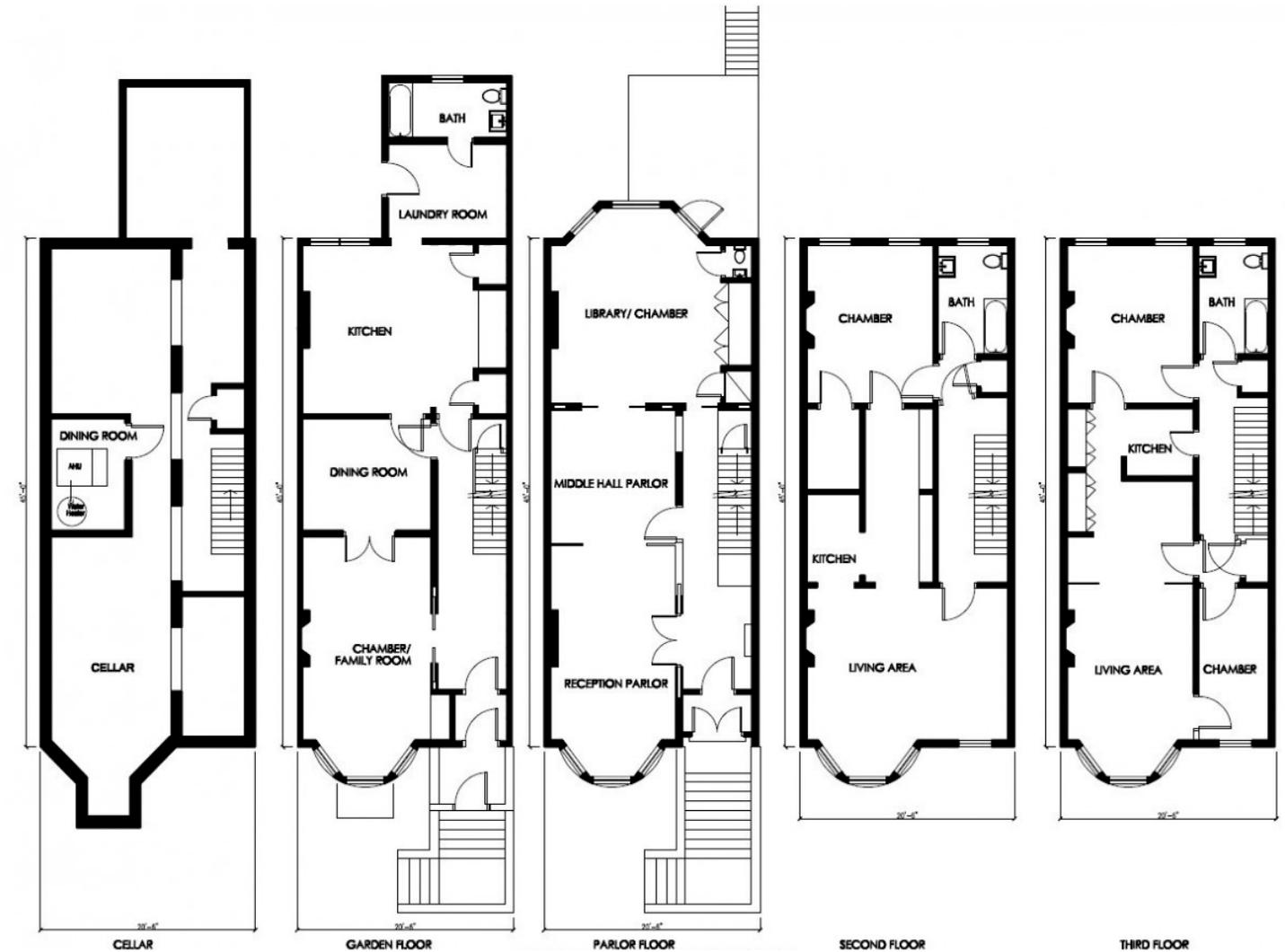
kitchen would be on the first floor), a dining room, a bathroom (which often included a laundry room) and a communal living space. On the first floor, the most institutional one, were located: the foyer, directly accessible from the stoops, the reception parlour, and usually a library, overlooking the back garden. This was the floor where guests would be hosted and gatherings and receptions would take place.

Going up one more level, one could find the bedrooms: typically, at the opposite sides of the building, they were connected by a narrow hallway. The master bedroom could easily occupy all of the width of the house on the street side, but through the course of time and in more modest dwellings, it would only take up two thirds of the width, leaving one window on a side usable for a walk-in closet, a bathroom or an additional small bedroom. The middle part of the house was notoriously dark and could only be lit artificially, so it was the ideal place for an extra kitchen, closet space or bathroom. These spaces came in handy when Brownstones were turned into tenements and boarding houses, because it

was possible to equip each floor with a small kitchen and restroom. The top level (if there was one) was usually destined for the servants' quarters or more bedrooms for the children. Additionally, the most important rooms and communal spaces in the house were equipped with a fireplace. In other neighborhoods of Brooklyn, the houses could also very easily be two-family, using the main stairwell as common circulation to reach the independent units.

### THE FACADE

Originally made out of a brownstone veneer, the facades' styles and configurations would always vary from one to the other, also according to the district in which they were located: the richer the neighborhood, the more elaborate the decoration. This was meant to provide variety and give an individual DNA to each house, so the owner could proudly tell it apart from the endless stretch of low-rise residential blocks of Brooklyn. At the same time, the



Typical original floor plans of a Brooklyn Brownstone house. Courtesy of BHS



Diagram of the typical Brownstone's architectural elements >

very essence of Brownstone Brooklyn was the middle-class landscape created by sequences of tree-lined streets and rows of houses different, yet similar to one another. The character of the neighborhood was enclosed in this repetitive, harmonious likeness that still today provides some areas of Brooklyn with their identity and sense of place. The myriad of geometric patterns that can be admired walking around the Gold Coast encompass rich flourish and detailed adornment. Federal, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne and Second Empire architectural styles were among the most used. They're all there, one next to the other, all so different, yet so alike, evoking the European ambiance in a confused, irrational manner.

The layout of the facade, though, would follow a more precise scheme: due to the width of the plot the facade usually would accommodate three windows per floor. The size of them could vary, allowing bigger windows on the first floor; sometimes the template could diversify, containing more



than three windows, if grouped together in a bay window or framed closely in pairs on one side. Nonetheless, the final layout had to embrace symmetry.

As previously stated, the quality of the stonework and brickwork wasn't always impeccable, but accurate enough to guarantee a clean, sleek facade. It is very common to find a mishmash of columns of European taste, decorations over windows and portals, string-course between floors to accentuate the width of the house and an iconic crowning composed of shelving elements, to top off the building in a more majestic way. Above-window tympanums or lintels would emphasize and dramatize the grandiosity of the mansion, together with hoods, sills and cornices. Moreover, decorative pilasters projecting from the facing would make the facade all the more tridimensional. In addition, rusticated masonry on the first level, juxtaposed to a smooth plaster ashlar was a technique frequently applied to recall the nobility of the Italian palazzo. In more modest scenarios, when two or more houses were part of a

single intervention and looked exactly alike, a change in color of the decorative elements would be the only demarcation between one another<sup>13</sup>.

The ironwork apparatus was just as opulent as the remainder of the facade and would include the stoops' handrail, window grates and light fixtures on the facade.

The back facade, instead, was usually left plain, or with little decoration. A frieze-free facade was ideal to run pipes and fire escape all along the height of the building; furthermore, there was no one to wow in the backyard<sup>14</sup>.

## THE FRONT YARD AND BACKYARD

Front and back yards were the result of accurate proportions. The front yard had to accommodate the length of the stoops and guarantee a set-back from the tree-lined street which would provide more light and air. It was also a buffer zone between the bustle of the public sidewalk and the intimacy of the private home. Children would leave their bikes and toys here, Halloween and

Christmas decorations would populate this space and, still today, on a Sunday afternoon, it isn't uncommon to find a father working in front of the house on a bricolage project. Its size can vary: it can shrink to as little as 8 feet in busy, major streets (e.g. 9th street in Park Slope), or expand up to 30 feet to host a real-size garden (e.g. President street in Carroll Gardens). The backyard, on the other hand, was, and still is a more private space. Its rectangular shape would follow the extension of the plot and border with the adjacent properties. It was devoted to family gatherings and kids' birthday parties, but also a space for nature. Lush gardens would find a place in Brownstones' backyards and entire blocks would hide with jealousy lavish forests behind the built curtain of row houses: this was dictated by the craving for nature New Yorkers always had. Today, residents tend to add one-storey extensions to their homes or a glass veranda; a very common intervention is an elevated wooden deck that overlooks the back garden.

13. MCCULLOUGH D. W., *Brooklyn...*, cit.

14. LOCKWOOD C., *Bricks and brownstone*, cit.

## THE STOOPS

The stoops represent maybe the most peculiar architectural feature of a Brownstone. Their name comes from the Dutch word “stoep”, which has the same pronunciation and means “stair”. The Dutch used to build stoops to keep their homes safe from flooding, but when they brought this element to the New World, it gained a new purpose.

In 19th century New York, all transportation was horse-powered; for this reason, horse manure was amassed in large piles in vacant lots. During summer especially it caused severe problems in terms of hygiene, bringing unbearable smell, millions of flies, rats and diseases. It was thus a necessity to rise above all that manure and avoid it seeping into the most significant room of the house, the parlour, during rainy day<sup>15</sup>.

This was the main reason why they raised the main entrance to the second storey and connected it to the street by means of a monumental, solid staircase decorated in countless ways. This elegant feature would create a remarkable main access to

the dwelling, providing a secondary, more discreet entrance to the basement floor. The design and articulation of a stoop, still today, can say a lot about the neighborhood where it is located. The most impressive ones can be found in the wealthy neighborhoods of Brooklyn’s Gold Coast, boasting custom ironwork for the handrailing and lampposts and meticulously assembled masonry made of rusticated large brownstone blocks.

According to the architectural style trending during a given period, the stoops could consist of a straight flight of stairs or have variations that would characterize a certain area of a neighborhood: the dog-legged stoop, for instance, was introduced when the Romanesque Revival and Queen Anne styles were into fashion and featured a side entrance, two levels and a turn. Other alternatives included the L-shaped stoop or a lower stoop, conforming to the Italianate style.

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15. LEVITT S. D., DUBNER S. J., *SuperFreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance*, William Morrow and Company, 2009

During the 1920s and 1930s, due to motivations previously explained, landlords started to chop up grand single-family Brownstones into apartments, to gain the maximum value out of their buildings.

To get the largest number of independent units, it was common practice to tear out the stoop and relocate the entrance of the building to the ground level; this way the stairwells become common hallways and circulation creating more space for the apartments, at least one on each floor.

Usually, the parlor floor hallway becoming a room, the original entrance was filled in and replaced by a window to guarantee consistency of the exteriors.

These examples are still visible in various parts of Brooklyn (in particular Brooklyn Heights, due to the elevated rent) and in some areas of Manhattan (especially East Harlem) likewise. In other fairly less affluent neighborhoods, such as Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant, the Brownstones (and consequently the stoops) weren’t as large and elegant. The materials and the quality

of the decoration were inferior: some of the houses were even wood-frame with an outer mineral facing and the facades were often simpler. The manufacture of the stoop was the ultimate tell-tale sign of a more modest dwelling. Nevertheless, this didn’t necessarily mean they weren’t as authentic as the row houses of the Gold Coast. On the contrary, due to the scarcity of economic means in these neighborhoods, the exterior alterations and conversions were very limited throughout the 20th century (because it wasn’t a priority). This prevented any major mutations that could have compromised their authenticity, despite undergoing major interior modifications.

Today, moneyed professionals who buy and restore brownstone houses tend to bring back the stoops. Beside giving the facade more harmony and proportion and dealing with the nostalgia issue, the stoop adds to the sale price: once again, in New York everything is money-driven. Despite even finding favor with historic and landmark preservation commissions, it can’t certainly be said that the new stoops are there for

historic authenticity reasons: replacing something that was removed in the past with something new pretending to be old (if not overtly contemporary) could be proven unacceptable according, for instance, to the European attitude towards restoration. Nevertheless, re-building a stoop today can cost between 35.000 to 100.000 dollars, due to the actual intervention, plus yearly fees to the city if the stoop sticks out to public property. Back in the day, landlords cared very little about the grandeur and prestige of the Brownstone as a whole, but recently, in order to sell or rent out at a higher price, the main access to the building can't certainly be located down three steps, next to the trash cans<sup>16</sup>. Why are stoops so dear to New Yorkers? They're more than just a part of the NYC culture and an ideal spot to place carved pumpkins during Halloween, they are a social gathering and public security tool.

The stoop sitting culture has been a tradition ever since the stoop started appearing together with the brownstone houses around the five boroughs: it is, de facto a public bench.

It isn't uncommon to come back home from work and find someone comfortably sitting on one's stoop to make a phone call or eat a sandwich. Generally speaking, New Yorkers don't mind such behavior, but when they do and it's seen as loitering, little iron gates are installed to mark private property (today is very common in Brooklyn and suburban areas). Notwithstanding fences, stoop sitting is an urban rite that endures in the city culture, especially during the summer nights. Now, more and more people are rediscovering the stoops: some block associations even hosts a ceremony each year to open "stoop sitting season"<sup>17</sup>. The few little steps separating a private home from the street are more than just a stage for hanging out in the nice weather, they add to the fabric of a neighborhood, providing a positive and

*A stoopless Brownstone with a new entrance. Courtesy of [www.brownstoner.com](http://www.brownstoner.com)* >

16. HARRIS E. A., *Stoops Grow in Value, and Not Just as Seating*, in "The New York Times, September 11 (2012), pp. A19

17. DULLEA G., *As an Urban Rite, Stoop-Sitting Endures*, in "The New York Times", August 15 (1989), online version



self-governing urban environment. It gives the sense of community, but it offers safety too. The famous expression "eyes on the street", conceived by American-Canadian urban writer and community organizer Jane Jacobs, expresses the crucial importance of a vibrant street life to neighborhood safety and community. In her acclaimed book *The life and death of great American cities* she describes stoop sitting as a "intricate ballet on the sidewalks" and lays down some ground rules:

*"First there must be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Public and private spaces cannot ooze into each other as they do typically in suburbia settings or in projects. Second, there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street, they cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind.*

*And third, the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in sufficient numbers. Nobody enjoys sitting on a stoop or looking out a window at an empty street. Almost nobody does such a thing. Large number of people entertaining themselves, off and on, by watching street activity"<sup>18</sup>.*

18. JACOBS J., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Random House, 1961

## GOLD COAST? MORE LIKE GILDED COAST

At first glance, Brooklyn's Gold Coast presents itself as a rigorously planned residential cityscape for significantly wealthy people. However, scraping underneath the golden surface, there's more than meets the eye. The outer golden coat turns out to be a gilded finish.

The grandiosity and ostentation of the exterior should not be confused with what goes on behind the facade. In fact, as already explained above, the individual brownstone houses, although they appear as separate, unique and exclusive projects, were the result of repetitive actions and designs of speculators; they are notoriously the ultimate suburban houses generated by the urban developments of the 19th century. As already mentioned, the building boom was for the most part triggered by the opening of the steam ferry across the East River. No architectural vision seemed to control this growth: developers would just buy plots of lands and erect entire city blocks with no intention to slow down and little civic vision. The units were rented as soon as they were finished. Although the land wasn't lacking,

it gained value significantly, after the first settlements had guaranteed a profitable revenue<sup>6</sup>.

As a consequence, the row houses started to shrink in size. In Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights they kept their status of single-unit houses, whereas in other areas they were built as multi-family dwellings. The demand was high everywhere in the Gold Coast and beyond its abstract borders as high-to-middle-class couples started to flock to a more affordable, more human-scaled, wholesome-looking alternative to chaotic New York City. Brooklyn seemed to be the ultimate place to raise a family and enjoy suburban life.

Since the logic behind Brownstones was (like everything in New York City) money, as previously explained, developers would do anything to retrieve as much benefit as they could from their investment with little expense. It was crucial, though, to make the visible parts of the constructed work as much elaborate and showy as possible. Home builders, all throughout the second half of the

19th century would ride the wave of financial gain, keeping the cost for building material and expertise or specialized, skilled labor as low as it could get. This also meant taking artists and architects out of the equation. The most important factor was creating and advertising a "neighborhoodness" that the new aristocratic clients or tenants would recognize as familiar and in which they would find home: a fancy, apparently luxurious house, something that was worth the investment for them, something to make them leave "the Island"<sup>6</sup>.

So, notwithstanding the fact that the houses themselves were put together with a swift and hurried process, the developers cared about the final result of the whole block or the portion of it they were implementing, extending their interest to the whole street that had to ooze with charm and consistency. As shown in the description of the typical facade, many different buildings would carry just as many architectural styles and decorations, in order to provide only one whole, unique atmosphere<sup>14</sup>. That's how sometimes the designs, rather

simple and repetitive, were used for many projects (this is particularly true for the Brownstones in Fort Greene, Boerum Hill, Cobble Hill and Carroll Garden), except for a few outstanding examples. Some other times, the clean cut of simple, straight lines was replaced by the abundance of elaborate ornamentation and embellishments (this is the case for Park Slope, Prospect Heights and Brooklyn Heights). Said décor was rarely the result of the skills of a local artist or professional (carpenters, sculptor), but was very likely to be a mere copy, inspired by an existing building or taken straight out of a certain building manual that did not follow any trend going on at that time in the city or any principle dictated by the site. It was just a preselected style to follow. A piece of decoration could even be reclaimed from another demolished building and reused in a new project, gracefully ignoring the context in which it was put.

19. OSMAN S., *The Invention of Brownstone*, cit.  
20. LANCASTER C., *Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's first suburb, including detailed analyses of 619 century-old houses*, C.E. Tuttle Co., 1979

When a skilled professional did work on the project it usually was a stonemason: they got good at certain designs that would repeat in different projects, not caring about trends and architectural fashion<sup>21</sup>. The quality of the work varied depending on the home builder, but, due to the obsessive, frantic rhythm, the stone material was frequently cut against the grain or laid down in an improper manner. This led to a greatly faster decay in the later years with crumbling exteriors and visible, prominent fissures.

Once again, what was important was the prestige the finished product would communicate and represent, together with the importance of fitting into a category: this is true for both the house and the future owner. In certain occasion the design was changed unexpectedly in the middle of construction, with all that that entails for the final, inconsistent result.

The Brownstone was indeed the result of the mechanical era: most of the complicated “unique” ornaments previously listed, seen on the facade could be part of a set of various pieces that had been prefabricated,

machine-cut and mass-produced thanks to the technological advancement in the cutting technique that allowed a greater distribution of these types of stone ornaments. This also applies to ironwork details, that could be reproduced in large numbers. Although seen as a symbol of authenticity today, crowds back then criticized Brownstones for

*Facades in Bushwick. Courtesy of BHS*



21. Lockwood C., *Bricks and brownstone*, cit.



## NOW AND THEN

being too new-fashioned and artificial. During the 19th century, in fact, and especially after WWII, critics attacked the urbanization process investing American cities and dismissed Brownstone rows as an example of monotonous, standardized suburban development. *"When one has seen one house he has seen them all, the same everlasting high stoops and gloomy brown-stone fronts, the same number of holes punched in precisely the same places. The architecture is not only impressive, it is oppressive. Its great defect is its monotony, which soon grows tiresome"*<sup>22</sup>.

This is the take on Brownstones in the 19th century. A Washington Post writer in 1886 continues: *"The majority are deceptive, fraudulent, pretentious mere shells, plated, so to speak, with a coating of brownstone in front and trimmed inside with cheap pine so that a poor man may boast a brownstone house. And they have alcove bed-rooms and marble buffet niches and factory-made stained glass door panes, so that the clerk may live like the shadow of a millionaire"*<sup>23</sup>.

One century later, society would praise that same monotony as the key quality of Brooklyn cityscape and see the same fakeness as authenticity.

Likewise, these critiques were delivered to the transportation grid that was being implemented at the time. A system of horse-drawn trolleys and streetcars shaped the Brownstone sprawl, creating a frightening grid that was suddenly seen as a modern, dehumanizing threat to the beauty of the Victorian cityscape. Moreover, certain residents saw the trolleys, become electric (and thus faster) by the end of the 19th century, as a hazard to public safety, after 11 casualties and many more injured Brooklynites in the course of one year. They were also outraged by the sight of electric wires and tracks invading their immaculate

*Drawing of proposed LME. Courtesy of BHS* >

22. OSMAN S., *The Invention of Brownstone*, cit.  
23. *Brooklyn's Growth, Some Interesting Facts About New York's Sister City*, in "Washington Post", October 18 (1886), pp. 3



residential streets. Then the car came along, and contemporaries suddenly regretted the trolley alternative. Robert Moses, a controversial public figure, also known as the "master builder" of NYC from the 1930s to the 1960s, can be considered the father of the car culture in the New York metropolitan area. His decisions as public official and politician favored the implementation of highways over public transit all around the five boroughs, triggering a dramatic change across the city's infrastructural landscape. In a matter of a few years (1946-1954) dozens of bridges and parkways were designed and built, generating new flows and new extended suburbs. He also approved the highway plan, a vision to transform the waterfronts into highways and let them run through the neighborhoods, dividing lots, separating properties and changing the faces of streets, just sitting atop of them. The already mentioned Jane Jacobs was the only intellectual who opposed Moses through a decade-long struggle to raise awareness towards the consequences of

these decisions on the city. In particular, she succeeded in avoiding the construction of the proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway, a broad highway through Little Italy, Soho, the Village and Washington Square Park that required 416 buildings to be torn down. While Moses pushed to build the corporate city, Jacobs struggles to preserve the urban village<sup>24</sup>.

The BQE (Brooklyn-Queens Expressway) especially, did not leave Brownstone Brooklyn untouched. Involving, here too, the demolition of hundreds of buildings, the construction of this elevated thoroughfare transfigured the density and texture of Brooklyn urban landscape for good. These choices, already criticized at the time, represent today major issues for the city.

Throughout the last three decades of the 19th century, a wave of Victorian nostalgia invested the neighborhoods of

24. Zukin S., *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford University Press, 2011

the Gold Coast. The new residents were suffocated and dazed by the brutal modernity that characterized the urban development of those years and found consolation in the remnants of the agricultural landscape that once was Brooklyn. The wealthy Brooklynites in particular, would reminisce lost farms, water streams and country's wooden homes that once stood in place of the Brownstones. Brooklyn's past was indeed made out of a constellation of small rural villages with curious, fascinating names from the Indian to the Dutch heritage and it was now part of the city's collective memory. This beloved nostalgia for a romantic rural past and natural landscape sparked by the end of the 19th century the implementation of large public parks and green areas across the borough. Although artificial, they would bring back that sense of connection with nature that residents needed.

Parks such as Fort Greene Park and, above all, Prospect Park were meticulously designed to recreate and restore the natural environment and give the sense of openness and infinity with large, endless meadows bordered by

trees and forest areas that hosted creeks and artificial lakes. Strolling around the park on a Sunday morning was a cherished social activity and form of leisure that catapulted bourgeois citizens to a pre-urban pastoral landscape and gave them the possibility to enjoy physical exercise.

Needless to say, this also boosted speculation all along the borders of the parks. A flock of new apartment buildings or private mansions appeared on Prospect Park West and around Grand Army Plaza. Investors thought that such new allure would attract the new rich; and they were right. The whole Park Slope neighborhood was indeed conceived as a wealthy enclave, boasting a luxurious proximity to a renowned city park<sup>25</sup>.

*Aerial view of Prospect Park. Opened 1967 in it covers an area of 526 acre (2.13 km<sup>2</sup>). Courtesy of BHS* >

25. LANCASTER C., *Old Brooklyn*, cit.



# The Brooklyn Brownstone

## WAVE OF IMMIGRATION

Less romantic aspects affected the “borough of homes” at the turn of the century. In fact, with the implementation and continuous upgrading of the transportation grid, and the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and the Manhattan Bridge in 1909, new apartment buildings started to pop up along the major roads of the borough. Brooklyn was now easily accessible for the Manhattan’s immigrant working class and developers tried to profit of it. A multitude of Irish, Italian and Jewish families moved to Brownstone Brooklyn to find shelter from the high-rising, suffocating rents of skyscraper Manhattan.

Meanwhile, white-collar workers also targeted the area. Whereas the first ended up working in the many factories of the borough and living in cramped boarding houses, the second found home in elegant Brownstones of the Gold coast or adjacent areas. High-rise apartment buildings were also being erected in many parts of Brooklyn and were dismissed by Brownstoners as hideous and outraging. Later in the 20th century, such building typology have been used as the solution to

social housing by the New York City Housing Authority. Large projects, like the Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan (promoted by Moses), Marcy Houses, Somner Houses in Bed-Stuy and Farragut Houses near the Navy Yard got implemented to provide affordable housing. Just by crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, Kings County-bound, one was welcomed by a multitude of tall boxed rectangles, one next to the other, that many Brooklynites considered an eyesore. This kind of high-rise apartment buildings was a far cry from the turn-of-the-century residential towers implemented to offer accommodation with a cheaper rent. As Osman describes: *“In Brooklyn Heights, larger luxury towers modeled after Manhattan’s majestic Beaux Arts apartment buildings such as the Ansonia rose along Montague Street. In response to the squalid conditions of tenements along the waterfront, local reformers looked optimistically toward the apartment as a model for affordable, modern housing for the poor and working class”*<sup>26</sup>.

26. OSMAN S., *The Invention of Brownstone*, cit.

## Phase 2

Two different social classes, thus, cohabited, divided into enclaves within a few city blocks from one another, transforming the area physically and socially. This is still true nowadays.

Workers that wanted to avoid slums in Lower Manhattan and Harlem and new immigrants rented rooms in daunting conditions in multi-family rental apartment buildings and boarding houses. Meanwhile, businessmen would sign a lease for small homes from greedy developers. Only significantly wealthy families could afford to own an entire townhouse and only in certain areas (notoriously the Gold Coast). Furthermore, with the increase in popularity of this new part of New York City, the price of land and, as a consequence, the rent rose dramatically. Families were struggling, and this is when the beautiful single-family Brownstone got turned into multi-units tenements. Households that could no longer afford the rent would take in boarders to cover the expenses becoming, de facto, boarding houses.

Also, it was during this period and more and more during and after the World Wars that numerous southern African American workers migrated to New York City. They first settled in overcrowded Harlem and other slums. When the living conditions uptown became unbearable because of the extreme rampant poverty, high crime rates and drug abuse, and thanks to the opening of the A subway line in 1936 from Harlem to Brooklyn, they started to move in droves. They targeted the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, which *“despite all the official signs to the contrary still does not look or feel like a slum”*<sup>27</sup> (Mccollough, 1983).

Industrial job opportunities weren’t definitely scarce during wartime in the many factories along the East River and in the Navy Yard. Landlords would profit from the situation, cramping as many people as possible in the already mentioned run-down, decaying small Brownstones and rooming houses. As more waves of migration followed, the percentage of African Americans in Bed-Stuy reached 66

27. MCCULLOUGH D. W., *Brooklyn...*, cit.

percent by the middle of the 20th century. These dynamics continued all throughout the century, and still in the 1970s the standards of living were very low.

Gazing at Brownstone Brooklyn, one could notice an uneven landscape made out of pockets of extreme poverty and those of wealth and luxe. This panorama included the rich Gold Coast, boasting a prominent enclave of white-collar workers, merged with middle-class professionals employed in public service, the arts and education. It was also made out of all those ethnic groups and congregations that created a fragmented tapestry of different cultures, languages and habits.

It's only when gentrification kicked in, in the second half of the 20th century, that clear neighborhood boundaries were traced. Prior to that, it was mainly the ethnic identity that allowed a rough separation of different areas of the borough. This strong sense of belonging forged cultural diversity. Foreign restaurants, signs in different languages and bakeries selling exotic pastries were the tell-

tale sign that one had crossed some sort of invisible boundary between two worlds<sup>28</sup>.

What was true for all second-generation African American, Latino, Italian, Polish, Middle East and Jewish immigrants was the possibility and pride to find their own ethnic authenticity and history in a common urban landscape, among a multitude of different other cultures. The Brooklyn Brownstones were looked at as a mosaic of different enclaves, of different homes, a playground of common reminiscence and identity.

The various waves of immigration each targeted specific areas for settlement. For instance, between the 1910s and 1930s, the three major steamship companies that ran their service between New York City and Puerto Rico on a regular basis unloaded passengers and cargo on Brooklyn piers. This caused a generous influx of Puerto

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28. DeSENA J. N., SHORTELL T., *The World in Brooklyn: Gentrification, Immigration, and Ethnic Politics in a Global City*, Lexington Books, 2012

Ricans in the areas immediately adjacent to Brownstone Brooklyn's waterfront: Brooklyn Heights, Downtown, Fort Greene. These neighborhoods hosted a high percentage of Puerto Ricans that was only adding complexity to the already delicate multi-ethnic coexistence. Immigration from Puerto Rico and Italy would only increase in the years directly after World War II.

African Americans, as already mentioned, would settle in neighborhoods more East, such as Bed-Stuy, Bushwick, East New York, Crown Heights, Flatbush and Brownsville. Their continuous influx fueled the endless urban expansion of the city towards Nassau County and, more in general, Long Island<sup>29</sup>.

## THE DECAY OF BROWNSTONE BROOKLYN

**W**hen manufacturing jobs became increasingly hard to find and the uncontrolled influx of immigrants would not stop, the living condition in Brownstone Brooklyn became unbearable and the

streetscape mirrored the inevitable decay. Unlike Queens, Brownstone Brooklyn always boasted a powerful sense of place and history, but during the middle part of the 20th century, the landscape was continuously changing, along with its residents. In fact, after World War II, many districts underwent a major racial transition, as white professionals would move out of the borough to settle in the suburbs and African American and Puerto Rican immigrants would take their place. Additionally, Brooklyn was a dispatched, polycentric and hybrid ensemble of enclaves, each one with its core.

For instance, surrounding the Gold Coasts and Downtown laid a sprawling landscape of Brownstones and townhouses turned into flats inhabited by large Italian and Irish Catholic families, together with the city's oldest Puerto Rican immigrant community, sustained by the near industrial waterfront.

Bed-Stuy was home of a rapidly growing African American population that also

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29. KRASE J., DeSENA, RACE J. N., *Class, and Gentrification in Brooklyn: A View from the Street*, "Urbanities", 5, 2 (2015), pp. 3-19

occupied a so-called “black belt” along Fulton Street. Due to rising poverty, run-down buildings and increasing seclusion favored by a strong concentration of non-white tenants, the neighborhood became de facto a ghetto.

As if it wasn't enough, the living conditions got possibly worse: the rent prices increased dramatically while desperate immigrants would squeeze in ramshackle boarding houses and kitchenette apartments. The buildings themselves were falling apart: in the 1940s and 1950s Old Brooklyn had the oldest, most dilapidated housing in the whole New York City, with one out of three building needing reconstruction or major repairing interventions and needing a private bathroom. Interestingly enough, while individual buildings were overcrowded in these areas, Brownstone Brooklyn resembled a ghost town for the most part.

As a result, in more at-risk sections of Brownstone Brooklyn (Crown Heights, Bed-Stuy, Bushwick) and in parts of the Gold Coast

likewise (especially in Park Slope), frustrated tenants started purposefully burning down old houses and dilapidated tenements, storefronts would close indefinitely, and crime rose with an impressive rate.

By the mid-1970s, the streetscape appeared as a disordered, deplorable post-war scene made out of empty lots, over-packed buildings next to abandoned houses and deserted residential and shopping strips. Little by little, a few businesses, owned and run by established African American or Latino immigrants, began to open, replacing former local shops. They offered services and products targeting a certain ethnic congregation and would include storefront churches, convenience and corner stores and exotic restaurants. Despite the effort, the streets weren't as vibrant as before.

All of this, together with the competition for finding a stable job in the manufacturing sector between whites and non-whites, locals and immigrants made race relations deteriorate and tension rise,

ultimately issuing fights and riots. “The Harlem riot lasted for five days, after which disturbances broke out in another New York City ghetto, the impoverished Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn”<sup>30</sup>.

According to the Columbia Encyclopedia,

1922 map showing NYC's industrial landscape. Brooklyn appears densely occupied by heavy manufacturing. Among 32,950 factories in total, the most important ones provided: food products and tobacco (yellow), women's wear (red), men's wear (blue), metal products (purple), wood products (green). Courtesy of The Merchants' association of New York >

30. BAUMAN J., BILES R., SZYLVIAN K.M., *The Ever-Changing American City*, cit.



## GENTRIFICATION DEFINED

**a** gentrification is the rehabilitation and settlement of decaying urban areas by middle- and high-income people. Beginning in the 1970s and 80s, higher-income professionals, drawn by low-cost housing and easier access to downtown business areas, renovated deteriorating buildings in many cities, reversing what had been an out-migration of upper-income families and individuals from many urban areas. This led to the rebirth of some neighborhoods and a rise in property values, but it also caused displacement problems among poorer residents, many of them elderly and unable to afford higher rents and taxes<sup>31</sup>. (Lagasse, 2017).

A more exhaustive and on point explanation can be found going back to the origin of this word. In fact, it was coined in 1964 by Ruth Glass, director of Social Research at University College London, to describe an urban phenomenon taking place in certain areas of London at the time. She essentially defined gentrification as the mechanism involving wealthy people

acquiring property in low-income and working-class communities in downtown areas. Middle class's occupation of the inner city of London was increasing, triggering many changes. During this process, older buildings got renovated completely and transformed into high-end houses or stores, offering exclusive services to a wealthy community. This cascade of actions would affect decaying residences, renovated from bottom to top and converted into expensive, fancy dwellings. The direct consequence was that the most part of the working-class tenants was forced to leave and move somewhere cheaper. This also caused the inevitable change of character of the whole neighborhood<sup>32</sup>.

But this is still too limited of a spectrum to describe what happened during the 20th century in Brooklyn and it's still

31. LAGASSE P., *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, cit.

32. SMITH N., *Gentrification Generalized: from urban anomaly to urban "regeneration" as global urban strategy*, in M. S. Fisher, G. Downey, "Frontiers of Capital: ethnographic reflections on the new economy", Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 191-208

happening today (as will be explained in chapter II).

*"Most people call this gentrification. But that is too narrow a term to describe the demographic and economic changes that have reshaped Brooklyn's physical fabric and its reputation. In-movements by whites, coupled with African Americans' out-migration, suggests a process or ethnic succession in reverse, with whites now replacing black and Latino and the corner bodega selling organic whole wheat pasta. Brooklyn's new "authenticity" reflects a different, upscale social character, where upscale means richer people on the one hand and taller buildings on the other"*<sup>33</sup>.

Gentrification though is not as simplistic as that: its process goes hand in hand with the concept of "rent gap". First developed by geographer N. Smith in 1979 to explain the economic mechanism involved by gentrification, it is *"the disparity between the price of land in its present use, and the potential rent that might be collected when the land or building is renovated.*

*Once this gap is wide enough, developers invest in the property and maximize on the profits. These developers then close the rent gap, which results in higher rents"*<sup>34</sup>. Additionally, *"the rent gap is produced primarily by capital devalorization and also by continued urban development and expansion"*<sup>35</sup>.

In the 1970s and 80s, American city governments encouraged rent gaps, and didn't hesitate when it came to evicting old tenants. Nevertheless, these theories don't take into account that, since the first use of the word in 1964, the term gentrification has expanded over time, to describe different dynamics and types of developments and gentrifiers at stake. In the case of Brownstone Brooklyn, for instance, as will be explained

33. ZUKIN S., *Naked City*, cit.

34. PORTER M., *The Rent Gap at the Metropolitan Scale: New York City's Land-Value Valleys, 1990-2006*, in "Urban Geography", 31, 3 (2010), pp. 385-405

35. SMITH N., *Toward a Theory of Gentrification. A Back to the City Movement by Capital, not People*, in "Journal of the American Planning Association", 45, 4 (1979), pp. 538-548

later, the target of gentrification is not strictly an inner-city district (the typical scenario), whereas a wider, less central area. Porter further explains that rent gap is bigger in areas adjacent to the CBD (central Business District) -in this case Downtown Brooklyn- in which land values are low relative to both the central city and the suburbs". These land values can thus trigger investments en masse and, consequently, gentrification<sup>36</sup>.

## GENTRIFICATION AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

New York City new middle class expanded from older gentrified Gold Coasts into SoHo, the Upper West Side, and other newly named enclaves surrounding Manhattan's midtown and downtown central business districts, to finally arrive in Brooklyn as well. Nevertheless, NYC is not alone in this process: gentrification broke out in a large number of American cities all throughout the

second half of the 20th century, always as (in a nutshell) a phenomenon leading to the embourgeoisement of a neighborhood and involving the displacement of less wealthy residents.

Brooklyn's Brownstone district was not alone: a similar version of brownstoning had already taken place in Chicago's Towertown and New York's Greenwich Village as early as the 1910s and 1920s<sup>37</sup>.

Boston's South End is another remarkable example of gentrification. In this case a well-established working-class neighborhood, boasting magnificent instances of Victorian brick row houses and mansions, underwent in recent times, a rapid transformation that led to fictions between new gentrifiers and old residents, promoting diversity<sup>38</sup>.

However, what has changed in the past

36. PORTER M., *The Rent Gap*, cit.

37. MEANEY T., *The nice and the not-so-nice*, in "The Times Literary Supplement", 5897, 14 (2016), pp. 13

38. TISSOT S., *Good Neighbors: Gentrifying Diversity in Boston's South End*, Verso, 2015

years is that it's no longer local residents in defined neighborhoods that trigger gentrification, but it is the effect of large real estate corporations and developers. To better understand this, it is useful to analyse in depth the development of gentrification as an urban phenomenon and the political, cultural and social dynamics that have influenced this process from the mid-20th century to today. Hackworth and Smith, have outlined a precise articulation of three different stages gentrification has undergone, three different waves, separated by two transitional periods caused by recessions. Despite they analyzed gentrification in Manhattan and DUMBO primarily, these arguments and the questions raised can certainly be applied to Brownstone Brooklyn and, for later reference, to Williamsburg<sup>39</sup>.

### FIRST WAVE: 1950s - 1970s

The first wave of Gentrification develops prior to 1973 and is for the most part sporadic and state-led. 1973 marks the beginning of a long period of economic

recession at a global scale, triggered by the international oil embargo and interested especially North America. Systematic gentrification dates back only to the 1950s and interested mainly disinvested housing in North Eastern cities in the USA and Western Europe: these properties became target for reinvestment<sup>40</sup>. Given their prime location, these instances were usually promoted and funded by the local and national public sector as part of a strategy to improve the market conditions of central city neighborhoods. The prospect of inner-city investment was significantly risky at the time, so governments had the best interest in adopting gentrification as a tool, using the amelioration of urban decline in those areas as an excuse. The results always privileged wealthier residents and usually worsened the condition of the working class living in those neighborhoods.

39. HACKWORTH J., SMITH N., *The changing state of Gentrification*, in "Journal of economic and social geography", 92, 4 (2001), pp. 464-477

40. HAMNETT C., *Gentrification and the Middle-class Remaking of Inner London, 1961-2001*, in "Urban Studies", 40, 12 (2003), pp. 2401-2426

## SECOND WAVE: 1970s - 1980s

When the recession began to loosen the grip in the late 1970s and markets started to breathe again, it was the moment for gentrification to rise. Pretty much everywhere in the United States, with greater emphasis on the East Coast, the city expanded, and urban sprawl devoured more and more land, creating new residential neighborhoods conceived as real estate heavens, with cities new at gentrification, suddenly advancing strategies to attract investment.

Despite the economic growth was slow after the recession, gentrification activity seemed to be mostly unaffected<sup>41</sup>. The public sector, however, managed to incite the private market, rather than playing a direct role in the gentrification game. Throughout the inner-city district, and especially in New York City, the recession was fairly mild compared to outer neighborhoods. This second wave was generally characterized by the assimilation of gentrification as a consolidated phenomenon at a global and national scale. This is particularly true in NYC, where it spreaded systematically, helped by the inflation of the

real estate market, and the snowball effect that affected areas such as SoHo (analyzed more in depth in the chapter II) and the Lower East Side, expedited and promoted uncontrolled investment. In these particular cases, the neighborhoods were celebrated as “alternative” and as one of major consequences, artists, homeless people and the local lower-to-middle class were evicted or displaced<sup>42</sup>.

Although resistance and opposition to this process was particularly strong in the Lower East Side, the magnitude of and domino effect of gentrification could not be arrested.

## THIRD WAVE: 1990s - ongoing

The third wave of gentrification kicked in after in the early 1990s. In fact, a new period of recession hit the US economy rather strongly by the end of the 80s, due to the stock market crash of 1987. It being significantly more severe than the previous

41. BALL M., *The 1980s property boom*, “Environment and Planning”, 26, 5 (1994), pp. 671-695

42. ZUKIN S., *Naked City*, cit.

1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
<b>First - wave</b>			<b>transition</b>			<b>Second - wave</b>						<b>transition</b>			<b>Third - wave</b>																
Sporadic Gentrification			Gentrifiers buy property			The anchoring of Gentrification						Gentrification slows			Gentrification returns																

one, gentrification slowed down in some inner-city markets and halted completely in the suburbs. Inner-city housing suffered from a shortage, but in 1993 investment restored and the third wave started. First in the central city, then in outer neighborhoods the economic conditions improved significantly, and this encouraged investors to engage significant financial assets. When it came to the respect and preservation of cultural factors the third wave showed them to be less and less considered into a greater equation of profit and capital gain: no other wave before was so money-driven. Additionally, the funds invested, and the scale of the interventions were larger than before. It is certain that during this period the interest in operations was the one of the corporate world<sup>43</sup>.

If we had to summarize the main differences

*Diagram: each phase of gentrification is marked by a particular socio-economic system of conditions in force at the time. Courtesy of Hackworth J., Smith N.*

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43. HACKWORTH J., SMITH N., *The changing state of Gentrification*, cit.

that characterize this last wave, four would be found. First, gentrification was not only a process confined to inner city neighborhoods, but also stretched outside of the central core. Second, larger developers became more involved in gentrifying neighborhoods. While such developers only entered the inner city once neighborhoods were 'tamed' they became the first to orchestrate reinvestment<sup>44</sup>. Third, resistance to gentrification dropped as the militant working-class residents and associations had been already displaced in previous phases. Fourth, State was more involved in the process than during the previous waves<sup>45</sup>.

As explained so far, gentrification is a cyclical process driven largely, but not completely, by investment flows towards formerly disinvested and devalued inner-city areas by an affluent middle class.

What is more fascinating for the purpose of this work is a recent and different phenomenon that has been affecting some world cities such as London and New York and a few neighborhoods of the Gold Coast

particularly, in the past decades. It has been a case now theorized by Lee while observing social and economic dynamics in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood<sup>46</sup>.

The question is: can we talk about super-gentrification?

Super-gentrification is a process that affects areas already gentrified and mostly populated by upper-middle class and transformed it into even more exclusive and expensive enclaves for the super-rich. This phenomenon has been reported mostly in Brooklyn Heights and Park Slope and has been fueled by fortunes from the global finance and corporate service industries. In fact, most of the people intensively investing in a Brownstone in these neighborhoods works in the financial sector either in Wall Street or Downtown Brooklyn. These favored spots have thus witnessed

44. ZUKIN S., *Loft Living: culture and capital in urban change*, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982

45. KUDLA D., *Who produces urban space? Gentrification and contestations over urban "authenticity"*, The University of Western Ontario, Electronic Thesis, 2013

46. LEES L., *Super-gentrification: The Case of Brooklyn Heights, New York City*, in "Urban Studies", 40, 12 (2003), pp. 2487-2509

high-standard renovations and a growth in the services related to the kind of wealthy clientele that settled here, not for cultural but for economic appreciation. It's already in the 90s that many residents reported an influx of newcomers starting renovation on their houses. More recently, a turnover has seen the new "financifiers" making their money from high positions in investment, insurance or technology corporations settling in. They don't mind investing ridiculous amount of money (still a minor part of their salary) for fancy, fashionable gut renovations they're only going to enjoy for a short period of time before moving out again. This transforms the district in an even upscale version of a dormitory.

Also, and more importantly, super-gentrification benefits greatly from the absence of a working class, already chased away from the previous gentrification process. What is in danger is the city's mix: these changes translate into the creation not just economic threshold but a cultural barrier between rich and poor, white collars and blue-collars, young and elderly and creating

standardization and homogenization among the endless urban landscape that Brooklyn is. Nevertheless, it should always be kept in mind that gentrification is merely another stage in a continuing historically contingent sequence of residential area evolution.

# The Brooklyn Brownstone

## WAVE OF RENOVATION

The epicenter of gentrification was Brownstone Brooklyn’s Gold Coast. Once again, it was fertile soil given its geographical position, so close to the central Business district, and already carrying an inborn real estate potential, due to its unique urban fabric and built environment. The process that brought Brownstone Brooklyn to become popular with white-collar professionals and businessmen from Manhattan in the late 1950s and 60s entails many factors and circumstances. What is interesting for the purpose of this thesis is that this dynamic did take place and did change the nature of the neighborhoods it affected.

As already mentioned a considerable influx of moneyed young professionals flooded neighborhoods such as Park Slope, Carroll Gardens, Boerum Hill, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn Heights, looking for single-family homes to restore and to inhabit. It was mostly wealthy young couples willing to start a family. This process also referred as “brownstoning” or “neighborhood revitalization,” brought

the decaying postwar and semi-abandoned urban landscape described in the previous chapter back a brand new life. “Small-scale renewals” was the combination of words that transformed the neighborhoods into sophisticated enclaves that by the 1980s had some of the most expensive real estate in the United States. Despite being once considered a symbol of a fading, decaying past to forget, a Brooklyn Brownstone is now a usual dwelling for middle-class circles of educated professionals, viewed as an architectural gem by many. The Brownstone itself is now seen as a reminiscence of wealth and elegance. Park Slope especially, created a model of aesthetically appealing inner-city living capable of attracting young professionals, intellectuals and up-and-coming artists, a creative class that, notwithstanding the positiveness of change, failed in celebrating the richness of the authenticity of the lower-class families already present and the historical buildings.

In a nutshell, the process was simple: young couples, mainly from the Island, would

### Phase 3

first arrive to Brooklyn and purchase a run-down vacant Brownstone. The next step was renovating the two-to-three-storey building, with respect for the past and enhancing signature architectural features (treated more in depth later) and eventually move in. This was enough to spark gentrification.

Entire street blocks have been completely transformed in a matter of a few years by the new enclaves of white-collar residents that picked Brownstone Brooklyn as their new home. Newly formed families would migrate to the area to start a new household in droves, on the quest for a more suburban life, still being close to the thrills of Manhattan. It’s the same principle that drew white-collars around the end of the 19th century to this very area in the first place (Brooklyn was still an independent city then). This was again a “movement of rich, well-educated folks, the gentry, into lower-class neighborhoods and the higher property value that followed them transforming a “declining” district into an expensive neighborhood with historic or hipster charm”<sup>47</sup>.

Today, although the social dynamics have changed a little (more on that later), Brooklyn Gold Coast still presents itself as a strictly residential family section of the territory, with plenty of schools, kindergartens and family services. Park Slope, especially was called Manhattan’s breeding ground for a reason and still now it is very unlikely to walk a few blocks down Seventh Avenue without crossing a couple of strollers or more.

As already explained in the previous chapter, we can easily classify the Park Slope case as an example of Supergentrification. Furthermore, one important aspect to take into account when analyzing the Park Slope phenomenon is temporality, as explained by Lees: what is new here, is that gentrifiers in Brownstone Brooklyn grew richer and richer. The condition nowadays to be a gentrifier, if not part of the corporate world, is that one has to be significantly wealthy to afford a single-family Brownstone; they have more

47. ZUKIN S., *CONSUMING AUTHENTICITY: From outposts of difference to means of exclusion*, in “Cultural Studies”, 22, 5 (2008), pp. 724-748

than doubled in price since the 1990s, as an outcome of the process that occurred in the late 20th century<sup>48</sup> (Lees, 2000).

What is Park Slope today?

21st century Park Slope has maintained its residential character and ambiance. As retired homeowners move out, new young families are moving in, continuing the transformation, creating a community densely connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation.

The signs of a gentrified environment are all there: wildly expensive townhouses, hip cafés, yoga studios, art galleries, fancy grocery stores and other kinds of upscale retail and services have replaced the long-gone mom-and-pop stores and the local restaurants.

It is true that this transformation made a neglected part of the city reclaim its splendor and grandeur and asserted Brownstone Brooklyn as a site of cultural consumption for a new middle class, attracting many Manhattanites. Nevertheless, it is also true that as a consequence of this, rents and

selling prices skyrocketed and forced previous residents to move out. The long-established immigrant communities made out of blue-collar workers at the local factories were bought out or made leave for cheaper areas of the borough, as a result of increasing taxes, property value and cost of living in general. The highly anticipated outcome of this gentrification process is the creation of a sumptuous, alluring, yet redundant and bogus cityscape, solely tailored for the new bourgeoisie.

## RESTORING BROWNSTONE BROOKLYN

a 1972 documentary titled *The Brownstones of Brooklyn* illustrates the revival of Brownstone houses during those years, depicting the different architectural styles and showing interviews of residents who have reclaimed their

48. LEES L., *A reappraisal of gentrification: towards a 'geography of gentrification'*, in "Progress in Human Geography", 24 ,3 (2000), pp. 389–408

Brownstone. Additionally, during the same decade books such as *Bricks and Brownstone: the New York row house, 1783-1929* and *New York's first suburb: including detailed analyses of 619 century-old houses* were published and became extremely popular amongst Brownstoners. They would lead the way towards a more rigorous, accurate renovation process and would educate the new owners examining in depth the varied architectural styles. They also would illustrate the ways of life of the nineteenth-century families who lived in the same homes<sup>4</sup>.

Certainly, the Brownstone revival trend generated negative social aspects, but it also brought about several improvements in the affected neighborhoods. Only a few decades ago, the Brooklyn stereotype was all about struggles, deprivation and working-class' efforts for better life conditions. Today, the borough is a well-established center for culture of global fame.

This is generally true all across Brooklyn, from Bed-Stuy to the Navy Yard; but it is

even stronger in the Gold Coast and its surroundings. Gentrifiers brought with them a new lifestyle and trends, but also government policies and thousands of new businesses, safer streets and overall more desirable urban environment (this can also be observed in the case of Williamsburg, explained in the next chapter). Once again, this all came with a cost.

In *The New Brooklyn: What It Takes to Bring a City Back*, Kay Hymowitz describes this new category of gentrifiers as follows: "*The postindustrial crowd settling in Park Slope had a somewhat different profile from their educated suburban cousins, a profile that continues to dominate gentrified neighborhoods everywhere. They were an artsy-literary bunch; today, we would call them the "creative class"...Whatever the reasons, the original gentrifiers were in conscious retreat from suburban conformity. Though gentrifier tastes have veered back towards mid-century modern, the Tiffany*

49. OSMAN S., *Inventing Brownstone*, cit.

*lamps, stained glass and Victorian antiques that the pioneers collected were a far cry from the harvest-gold kitchen appliances and plastic chairs and dishes favored by suburbanites*<sup>50</sup>.

Other positive outcomes of gentrification involve the re-blossoming of some of the busiest shopping streets of the past, such Atlantic Avenue (Brooklyn Heights), Smith Street (Cobble Hill), Court Street (Carroll Gardens) and Seventh Avenue (Park Slope). Landmark associations and preservation commissions were established throughout the years, in all the neighborhoods, as residents would come together to protect historical buildings and prevent them from being torn down.

The notable work of the Historic Preservation Committee of the Brooklyn Heights Association, for instance inspired other associations and raised awareness towards preservation. In a speech defending the value of the neighborhood and fighting for the Landmark preservation status, for instance, Otis Pratt Pearsall, co-chairman

of the Historic Preservation Committee, described Brooklyn Heights as “the finest remaining microcosm of our City as it looked more than 100 years ago”. He also named two of the biggest enemies threatening the area: demolition of historic buildings for erecting apartments and the decay and unsafety of existing structures caused by renovations that would not go through or weren’t well conceived from the start<sup>51</sup>. After a consistent series of demolitions that took place in “the Heights” through the years (notoriously during the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway) and especially in 1964, the neighborhood was named a National Historic Landmark in 1965 and designated a New York City Landmark in 1965. More Historic District designations followed: Cobble Hill (1969), Park Slope, Boerum Hill and Carroll Gardens (1973), Fort Greene (1978), Prospect Park South (1979), Clinton Hill (1981), DUMBO (2007).

50. Hymowitz K. S., *The New Brooklyn: What It Takes to Bring a City Back*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017

51. Osman S., *Inventing Brownstone*, cit.

Map displaying today's designated Historic Districts in Brooklyn. Source NYC Landmark Preservation Commission



## PROFILE OF A BROWNSTONER

Throughout the 20th century, Brownstoners have considered themselves urban pioneers. So far they've been described as the wealthy educated, but more precisely, they were mainly white-collar professionals in various fields: finance, law, education, publishing, the arts.

These Brooklyn's new residents advocated for a more vibrant street life and neighborhood feeling, involving real face-to-face contact and praising diversity.

Their pride was represented by the purchase and restoration of the decaying historic architecture, and gave them a sense of belonging and achievement. Their intervention was generally seen by local newspapers as the honorable rescue of forgotten and dilapidated gems, turned into rooming houses. "Brownstoning" was synonym of the research of sense of place and "neighborhoodness" in the core of the city. At the very beginning the word gentrification was not yet on the table and displacement wasn't so noticeable.

## COMING UP WITH A NAME

Various enclaved emerged gradually, as neighborhoods were restored and gentrified one at a time. The first one was Brooklyn Heights (formerly known as Clinton Hill), where bohemians, gay men and intellectuals saw the potential and allure of the Victorian cityscape and wanted to move there. Today the same area is inhabited by new forms of white-collar professionals and superrich: finance workers, IT specialists and other professions spun off of virtual services have sparked supergentrification<sup>52</sup>. Returning to the 20th century, the Brownstone revitalization movement gained momentum and affected all the other districts of the Gold Coast. By then they didn't have a name, nor did they have definite boundaries. Even institutional maps from the 1940s and 1950s didn't find precise labels. The entire area was generally referred to as "Old Brooklyn" or "South Brooklyn" and did have a distinctive topography with multiple slopes reaching 100ft (30m) in Park Slope and Fort Greene. Nevertheless, neighborhoods such as Boerum Hill and Cobble Hill were

53. LEES L., *Super-gentrification*, cit.

Poster made by the Boerum Hill Association to advertise walking tours. Courtesy BHA



and remain entirely flat, but the prestige related to a physical higher position carried a symbolic value and pride. Furthermore, the Brownstone revitalization movement grew larger and stronger throughout the decades and found more innovative ways to raise awareness and advertize the neighborhoods. The first home tours were organized to raise funds and advocate against demolitions of historic buildings. They were walking tours around the selected blocks of Carroll Gardens and Boerum Hill, showcasing the best architecture examples and boasting neat tree-lined, flower-covered streets. This is a tradition that still endures today. Additional tools used by the brownstoners to fight hostility from real-estate developers and banks were the many manuals and guidebooks published to uphold the fight. With titles such as *You Don't Need to Be Rich to Own a Brownstone* and *The Home Buyer's Guide to New York City Brownstone Neighborhoods*, these texts gave guidance on various matters including insurance, mortgages, taxes, and the actual architectural restoration of a Brownstone.

# ENDANGERED SPECIES

# Outcome

Various statements can be made on the effects of gentrification in Brownstone Brooklyn and many questions can be asked on the future of these areas.

It is safe to say that the interventions of urban renovation made in the neighborhoods of the Gold Coast have certainly succeeded in preserving and improving a neglected and decaying part of the “borough of homes” that cried for attention. The outcome of the heavy gentrification process that originated from those interventions caused a part of Brooklyn to become exclusive and inaccessible by the middle-to-lower class that once inhabited it. The sense of place and neighborhood feeling has been successfully restored but it is make-believe and solely a product for the consumption of the new generation of rich professional that now call Brownstone Brooklyn their home.

It is not the purpose of this work to say whether this social, political and cultural experiment set off roughly in the 1950s has been a success or a failure and an abrupt

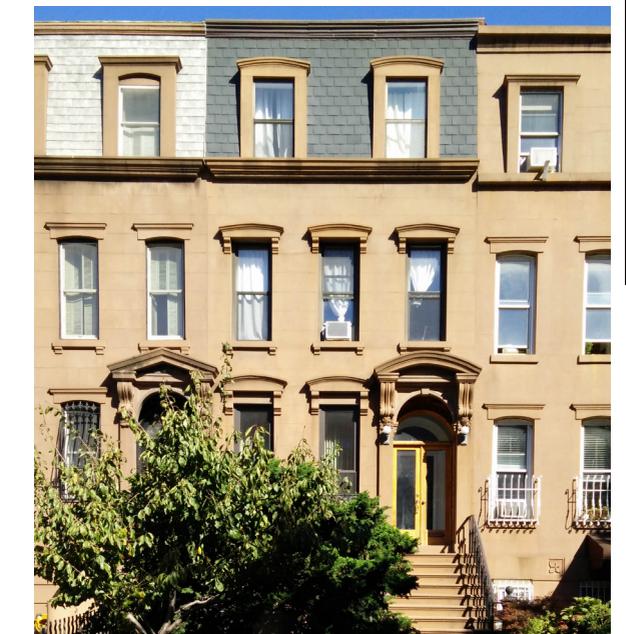
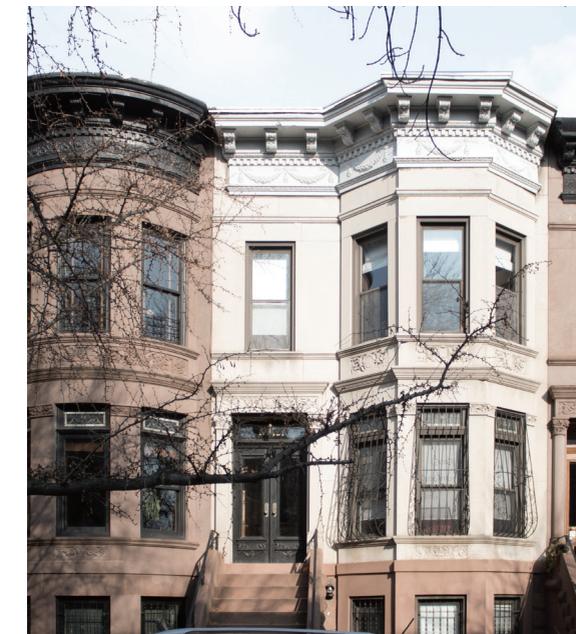
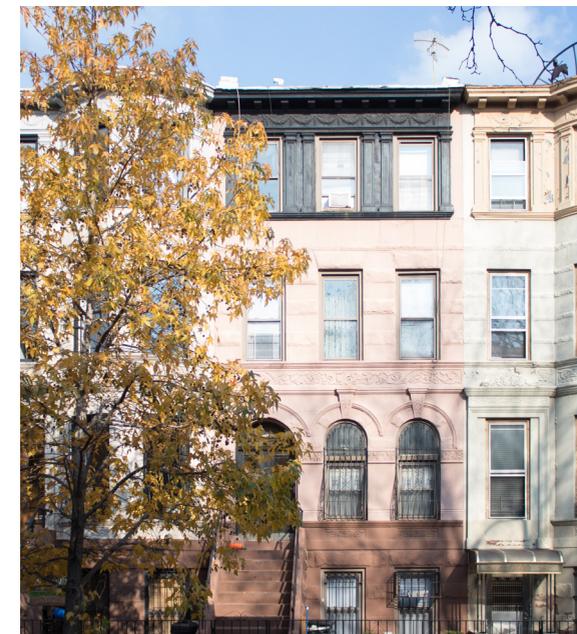
answer would never be able to take into account all of the aspects and actors involved, nor would it be unbiased. What can be said with certainty is that the typical perks that often come with gentrification did appear, privileging today only gentrifies themselves: street fairs, restored facades, new planted trees, safer neighborhoods, new vibrant retail districts are not benefits that apply at a scale larger than the neighborhood where they occur. The most important and impactful result and lasting contribution to society is perhaps the statement made through the restoration of the Brownstones: a manifesto of postmodern urbanism that the Brownstone revitalization movement brought about, shaping a mix-used cityscape and setting the importance of cultural and architectural heritage as a priority (although sometimes carried to extremes).

On the other hand, apart from the ongoing debate about whether gentrification is the sole cause of displacement, the economic and social impact of the influx of new money and restoration in a working-

class enclave have been so potent and permanent that can't be undone.

Lastly, a look at the growth of real-estate values of the areas affected, compared to Brooklyn's micro universe, sums up in an uncompassionate way the transformation the Gold Coast underwent.

# ***BROWNSTONE BROOKLYN: A CATALOG***



*Selected examples of Brownstones in Prospect Heights*



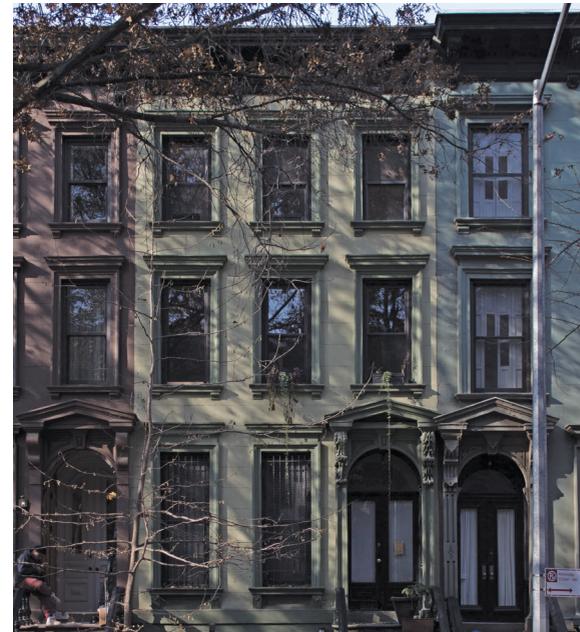
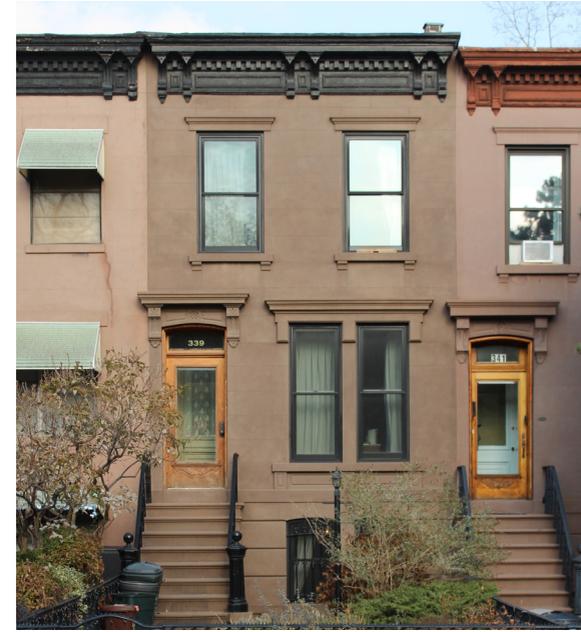
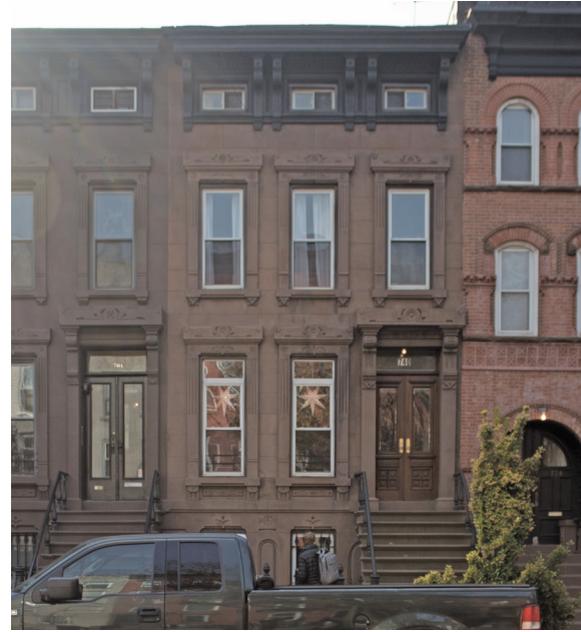
Brooklyn Heights

Selected examples of Brownstones in Brooklyn Heights



Park Slope

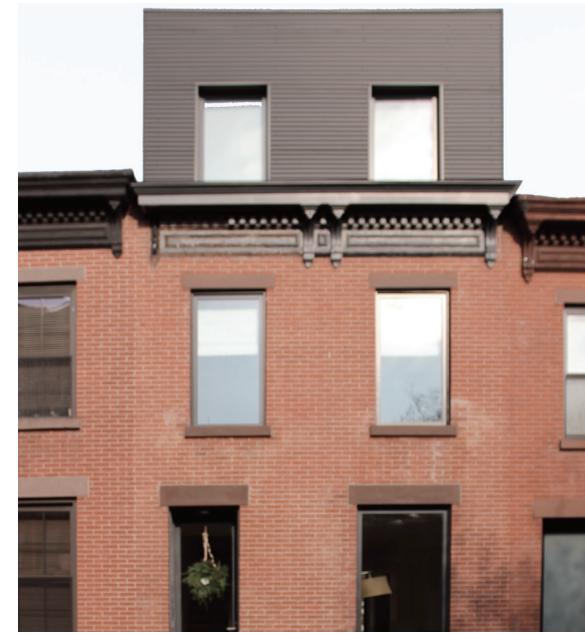
Selected examples of Brownstones in Park Slope



Carroll Gardens

Selected examples of Brownstones in Carroll Gardens

Boerum Hill



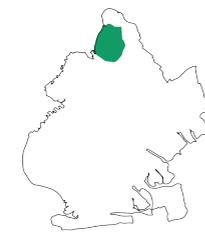
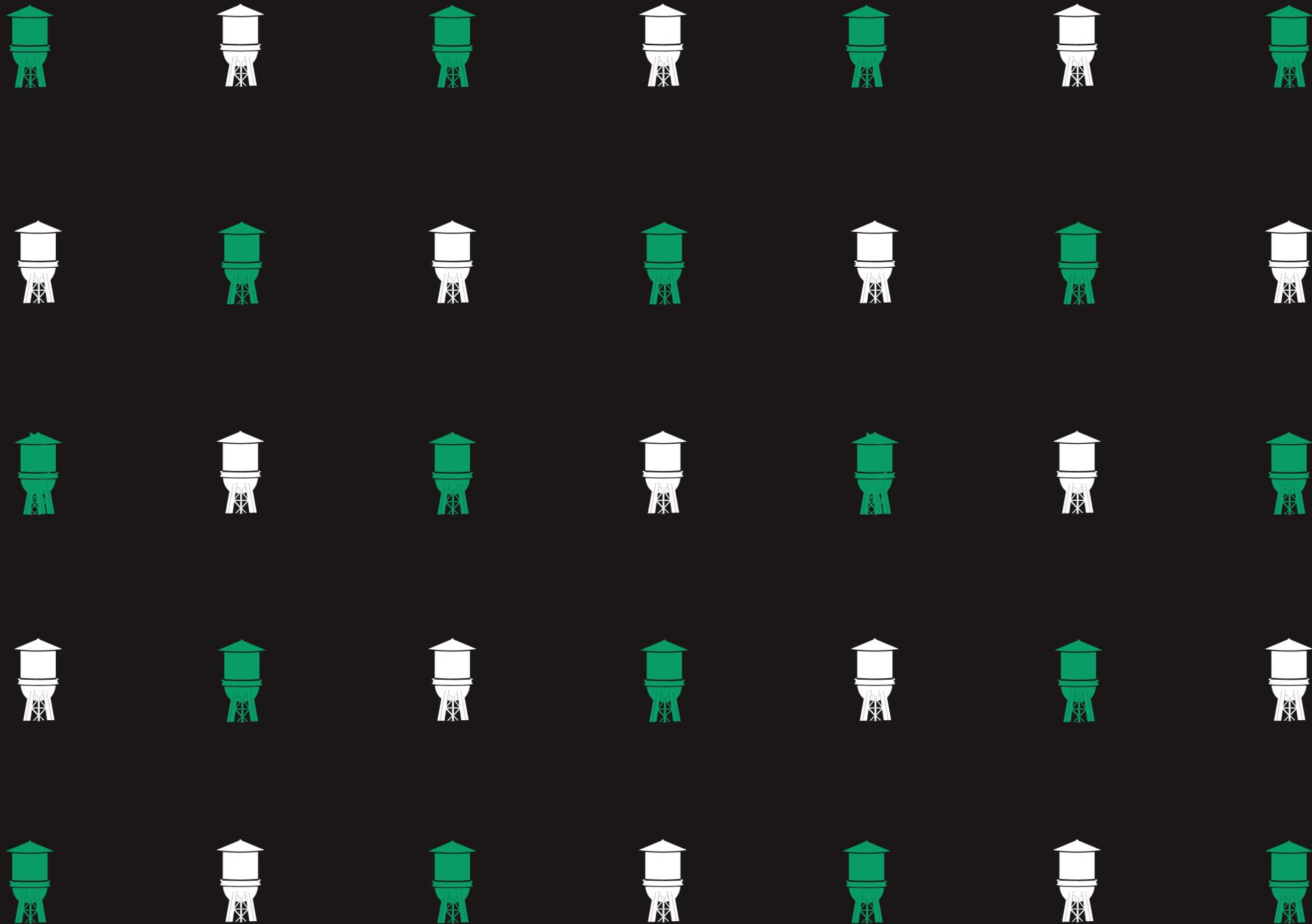
Cobble Hill

Selected examples of Brownstones in Boerum Hill

Selected examples of Brownstones in Cobble Hill



**WILLIAMSBURG:  
THE EPICENTER OF COOL 02**



# Artists, the new nomads: the SoHo Effect

**W**e cannot talk about Williamsburg, without talking about SoHo first. In fact, the processes that occurred in the neighborhood starting from the 1960s, caused major transformations and had a tremendous impact on the city economy and its residents. Still today, SoHo, (SOuth of HOuston Street) the district located in lower Manhattan and bordered by Houston street to the North, Canal Street to the South, 6th Avenue to the West and Lafayette Street to the East, is going through continuous change.

Described by Elizabeth Currid in "Bohemia as Subculture", the so-called SoHo effect refers, in a nutshell, to the process of transformation witnessed by the neighborhood from a manufacturing district, to an artists enclave to outdoor shopping mall and is currently used as a term to describe rapidly gentrifying artistic neighborhoods. The gentrification process that involved SoHo is one of a kind because it embraced social, cultural, economic, political and architectural developments interesting one

inner-city area<sup>1</sup>. At the time of its origins, the area was interested by the effects of the industrial revolution that made it expand significantly. This is also the time when the iconic cast-iron buildings were being built at a fast pace. In its heyday, cast-iron was considered the next architectural innovation and a cheaper alternative to brick or stone; the pieces were prefabricated from molds and casted in the many foundries active in the city at the time. The material also allowed more flexibility of the interior spaces and larger windows, which were important qualities to attract investors and new commercial clients. In the 1880s and 90s, big textiles companies moved in the area, transforming it into an extensive production and trade center for the city. Speculators began to peer at the area as well. It's after World War II, when most of the mercantile and wholesale dry-goods industries moved to the South that

<< Abandoned Domino Sugar Factory. Courtesy of G. Steinmetz

1. CURRID E., *Bohemia as Subculture; "Bohemia" as Industry Art, Culture, and Economic Development*, in "Journal of Planning Literature", 23, 4 (2009), pp. 368-382

the district was slowly left empty and most of the cast-iron building vacant. After a transitional period in which some buildings were replaced by sweatshops and printing and auto-repair shops.

An unwanted industrial, wasteland was lying in a core position of the island and it slowly started to attract the attention of artists. Their interest was triggered in the 1960s by the nature of the available factory spaces, the warehouses and the cast-iron buildings, featuring large unobstructed areas, tall ceilings, big luminous windows, cheap rent and an industrial character. The manufacturing lofts were soon occupied by bohemian artists and creatives illegally, since the spaces didn't comply to the building residential code, nor met the needs for residential use for the most part. The city government knew well the situation in SoHo but ignored the circumstances: the city's poor economy during that period and the declined industrial interest in the area allowed this laissez-faire and artists silently took advantage of it.

Nonetheless, the artists population grew

bigger and art galleries and studio spaces invaded the storefronts. The members of this movement had low budgets and were certainly not afraid of living in rough conditions. SoHo became an artists' enclave. Only at that point the zoning violations were acknowledged, and the law was forced. After a long struggle, the city abandoned permanently the hopes of a return to manufacturing and, pressured by artists' associations, in 1971 changed the zoning, permitting to certified visual artists to live in the area. Furthermore, the Loft Law of 1982, protected tenants in commercial buildings from rent increase and bad living conditions<sup>2</sup>.

Additionally, in 1973 the area was designated as a landmark with the name of SoHo - Cast Iron Historic District.

As Currid comments: "[...] *In turn, these changes attracted capital, reinvestment, and new residents into the area, pushing up real estate values and rents, pushing out the artists, and transforming the neighborhood*

2. ZUKIN S., *Loft Living: culture and capital in urban change*, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982

*into a high-end residential and consumption mecca for the elite*"<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, as soon as the area became trendy, upper-class people, attracted by the artistic allure of the neighborhood, began to invest in the area, renovating and reconstructing the cast-iron buildings, transforming the area de facto, in a high-end enclave for the rich, with one of the most expensive real estate in the United States.

The old galleries have been replaced by an impressive concentration of luxury fashion boutiques and fancy chain stores. As a matter of fact, as of 2010, SoHo had twice as many chain stores as boutiques and Designer boutiques, fancy chain stores and three times as many boutiques as art galleries<sup>4</sup>. High-end art galleries, expensive bakeries and restaurants are all part of the cobblestone street cityscape that is the neighborhood now. Hence, along with affluent residents, an increasing number of tourists clogs the sidewalks of Broadway, Spring, Prince and Lafayette Street, the crowdest shopping strips in SoHo daily.

Moreover, on an economic level, after the first waves of prosperity and economic growth around 2005, the new SoHo is now interested by new investments from overseas. The area is so intensively gentrified and so popular among the media that finely restored town houses are now sold by the affluent upper middle class to wealthy foreigners, transforming the neighborhood, from a manufacturing slum to a gentrified cluster for the new international elite.

Furthermore, artists weren't forced to flee directly, but the increase of real estate value and consequently of rent, caused for them to migrate to cheaper districts such as Chelsea, where most of the art galleries are now located. As the artistic trend became more and more captivating, Chelsea as well began to be gentrified, with expensive bars and elite stores. Artists displacement interested other areas of the city, places

3. CURRID E., *Bohemia as Subculture*, cit.

4. POWELL M., *An Urban Theorist Questions the Gospel of St. Jane*, in "The New York Times", Feb 19 (2010), online version

where lofts, rent and cost of life were cheaper; after SoHo and Chelsea, it was the Village and the Meatpacking district, then Harlem and, eventually, Brooklyn. Williamsburg, especially, seemed to be the most appealing to creatives in so many ways. Artists communities have spread elsewhere also because to be located at the core of Manhattan is no longer a necessity<sup>5</sup>.

An important example of a community that still endures is located in the West Village. Westbeth (named after the two streets he faces - West and Bethune Street) is the last stronghold of artists-in-residence reality in New York City. Ever since its opening in 1970, preceded by a reconversion from commercial space into studios and apartments by Richard Meier, it has provided permanent affordable living and working space to generations of artists. This seems to be the only example from the past of active and cohesive artists community still living on. Despite its cultural and architectural resonance, it was designated as national landmark only in 2011<sup>5</sup>.



Artist Donald Judd in his studio loft at 101 Spring Street in 1972. Today his house is a museum. Courtesy of Jonathan Griffin

4. DURE E., *Village is losing artists to Brooklyn, Bronx due to a 'surging economy'*, in "The Villager", August 17 (2017), online version

5. ROSENSTOCK B., *Westbeth comes of age: A unique artists' complex tries to stay afloat*, in "The Villager", 78, 32 (2009), pp. 6-14

## CITY POLITICS INVOLVED

From an economic point of view, there were multiple reasons why gentrification broke in from central SoHo to a more remote neighborhood, such as Williamsburg. Geographer Neil Smith explains how the private market expansion in inner-city neighborhoods such as SoHo that made them easily gentrified exhausted itself pretty quickly. In the 1960s, the State had a very direct role in organizing and encouraging gentrification. By the time this process kicked in, inner-city reinvestment was very risky so tax incentives, land assembly and property condemnation were all tools the State used as part of its strategy to make affluent people move to areas like SoHo. It turned out to be an efficient approach until the area saturated and by necessity, gentrifiers had to look for other profitable investment opportunities in economically risky, more remote, mix-used neighborhoods<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, major causes of these shifts and movements in the economic structures and logic of investments are also to be attributed to the dramatic growth of services and a direct decline of manufacturing. Personal

and financial services make up today the most part of the employment of service activities, shedding labour, transportation and distribution. These changes have started to slowly take action since the 1990s, leading to instrumental function as the dominant cause for the new built environment taking shape in world cities. The purpose of this, according to Deutsche, is to obstruct the perception and the organization and planning behind the city and the real meaning of the urban space we inhabited today<sup>7</sup>.

Shifted onto Williamsburg, social processes and the meaning of space, seen in this light, appear as a product of a precise strategy. Involving spatial reforms and planned changes in the social structures, they instead seem controlled by a natural chain of social events and organic laws at first sight. This is also true for the policies that exercise control and shape the new Brooklyn.

6. HACKWORTH J., SMITH N., *The changing state of Gentrification*, in "Journal of economic and social geography", 92, 4 (2001), pp. 464-477

7. DEUTSCHE R., *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, MASS: MIT Press, 1996

# Williamsburg then

Originally a rural village, then unified with Brooklyn, in the 20th century Williamsburg was a marginal immigrant, working-class neighborhood, enclosed between Bed-Stuy on one side and the water on the other. Italian and Puerto Rican lived here and worked in local factories on the East River. It was notoriously seedy and dangerous and, much like the rundown tenements and boarding houses around Downtown Brooklyn at the beginning of the 20th century, buildings here often lacked central heating and water, even the toilet sometimes.

This reality was truly depending on industrial work on the docks and piers and in the factories, yet it did not lack authenticity. Industrial prime and ethnic diversity were the strength of this sketchy neighborhood: Polish meat markets, Jewish pasty shops, Mexican grocery stores, Italian watering holes and breweries were institutions that endured until the 1980s. Mainly because of the 1975 fiscal crises, first the port and the piers closed, then the many

breweries followed. The bigger employer of the area, the Domino Factory, a sugar refinery shut down too, but the government decided not to rescue sinking companies and to cut off all budget to this area, letting it die, since it did not see much potential in it<sup>8</sup>. Older residents died out or moved away from the area and so did the ethnic enclaves and most of the industrial presence in the neighborhood dissipated as factories were shutting down for good. The demographics of Williamsburg was changing as well: from white and Puerto Rican working class, to a generation of creatives. The people so rooted and settled in the neighborhood were de facto slowly disappearing. In the early 1990s there were already more than two thousand artists living among 115,000 residents. This ratio grew bigger as the network of active artists became stronger. By the end of the century, twenty

8. W. CURRAN W., *Gentrification and the Nature of Work: Exploring the Links in Williamsburg, Brooklyn*, in "Environment and Planning" , 36, 7 (2004), pp. 1243-1258

## Yesterday

percent of residents in Williamsburg were writers, graphic designers, furniture builders and artisans. Artists would move from the main Island and get empty living and working space and a cheaper rent. They normally would sign a commercial lease (which wasn't exactly legal), since landlords would do anything to occupy vacant space that was not used anymore for manufacturing purposes.

*"Lots of artists were moving into industrial spaces in Williamsburg. Most were renters and they renovated the spaces at their own expense, just as we did. Our landlord gave us two space heaters and installed a water pipe to the bathroom. We on the other hand, emptied our bank accounts and put in eight months hard labor, scraping the ceiling, stripping the old linoleum, building a kitchen, bathroom, bedrooms, studios and eventually, a garden. The landlord told us at the outset that we could live there but he gave us a commercial lease and the city turned a blind eye. This was common practice at the time"*<sup>9</sup>

9. FRIEDRICH S., *Gut Renovation*, 2012, documentary



# The Next Big Thing

**t**he city has been for long transformed by major intervention that changed its face and brought dissatisfaction and discontent among the citizens. Prior to the institution of landmark preservation commissions, historic buildings were often torn down to make place for soulless towers and the disappearing of the small-scale identity was (and still is) an issue in numerous neighborhoods. Ever since the 1980s this process has gained momentum, and what people called “revitalization” was really destruction and replica of a new expensive modern city with no taste (Schulman, 2012). As for the manufacturing, as already mentioned, it’s mostly gone. During interviews conducted in 2007, W. Curran tried to investigate the cause of industrial displacement in Williamsburg: *“Current and displaced business owners with whom I spoke agreed that Williamsburg was a good place to do business, with good access to customers in Manhattan and enough public transport to allow workers to get to work. Of the displaced businesses, all but one business owner cited issues related*

*to real estate as their primary concern or reason for moving [...] No business owner cited global competition or larger economic trends as the reason for their displacement. All commented, in one way or another, on the rising costs of real estate, lack of appropriate space, changes in the neighborhood and policy decisions specific to the gentrification of Williamsburg as their reasons for moving or closing”* (Curran, 2007).

The story repeats itself, in another way. A story of greedy avidity, the rhetoric of gentrification; the accumulation of cultural capital fueled the rising real estate values. This translated directly in the interest of developers and city government. Much like for SoHo, artists and artisans have always been on the quest for a cheap place to live and work and let the creative flow run its course but, moving in large groups or inhabiting large spaces all at once, they inevitably triggered a shift in the surrounding area. *“This almost accidental practice of artists transforming a neighborhood is not a recent*

**Today**

*Funky pedestrian crossing light in Williamsburg.>  
Courtesy of D. Alexander*

*phenomenon. Artists have historically sought out less expensive neighborhoods with ample space such that they can afford to pay the rent along with having enough space to do their work. The active cultivation of art as a part of the development process is, however, something new”*<sup>10</sup>.

In fact, something that developers and city planners don’t take into account in the decision-making process is the importance of art and culture not just as a symbolic capital, but also as a tangible economic revenue. According to a 2007 report, the art industries in New York City produce an economic impact of \$22 billion yearly<sup>11</sup>. Economy of art, culture, food, fashion and entertainment is one of the strong points of New York City and it has provided it with nourishment and misery at the same time<sup>12</sup>.

10. CURRID E., *Bohemia as Subculture*, cit.  
11. ALLIANCE FOR THE ARTS, *Arts as an industry: Their economic impact on New York City and New York State*, New York: Alliance for the Arts, Report, 2007  
12. KUDLA D., *Who produces urban space? Gentrification and contestations over urban “authenticity”*, The University of Western Ontario, Electronic Thesis, 2013



The experience of SoHo in Manhattan and Williamsburg in Brooklyn prove that the city is not yet fully aware of the potential it hosts and how such capacity and value is not only neglected but also sabotaged at times for a money-driven entrepreneurship that is transforming it into a bland, repetitive landscape.

Artists, as already stated, have never been afraid of gritty, dangerous and dirty neighborhoods or to sleep in manufacturing buildings. As artist and filmmaker Su Friedrich describes in her 2012 documentary: *"When we moved into Williamsburg in 1989, it was a working-class neighborhood, a home to Italians, Poles and Hispanics. It was also a thriving manufacturing area"*<sup>13</sup>.

Artists, actors, writers, filmmakers, all crossed the East River. They would move in old warehouses and former factories or storage facilities. This was the beginning of a gentrification process that would, once again, take place in a former industrial neighborhood.

*"In 1989, my girlfriend and her ex-girlfriend fell in love with a beautiful, dilapidated loft in Williamsburg. They started renovating it and with mixed feelings, I joined them. It was originally the Hecla Iron Works building, built at the turn of the century. I mean, the other century. They made decorative wrought iron pieces for many buildings in New York like Carnegie Hall, The New York Stock Exchange, Saks Fifth Avenue and the Waldorf Astoria."*<sup>13</sup>.

We can try to understand how the interest in Brooklyn, and in Williamsburg especially, grew so rapidly. From an economic point of view, for the logic illustrated above, it made sense to invest in neighborhoods far from the inner-city district and considered unexploited resources and financial underdogs.

On a cultural level, the 1980s were decisive years to establish Williamsburg as a new phenomenon. Spike Lee's movies, such as *Do the right thing* were set and shot in

13. FRIEDRICH S., *Gut Renovation*, cit.

Brooklyn; rappers were singing about the 'hood; TV shows sold an idea of the borough that made it increasingly more appetible to the masses.

By the late 1980s new communities of artists had invaded Williamsburg until the concentration peaked by the end of the century. It was mostly creatives migrating from mutating artists enclaves in Manhattan (notably SoHo). The growing reputation of Williamsburg as a hipster venue was also marked by the reuse of old buildings as incubators for new activities (also facilitated by low rents)<sup>14</sup>.

The attractiveness of the industrial character of the area was enough to be considered cool, local and ethnically diverse as a contrast with and halfway between the expensive neighborhoods in Manhattan and the notoriously working-class ethnic enclaves of Brooklyn, The Bronx and Queens<sup>15</sup>.

First, the indie music bars, then the exotic restaurants brought attention to alternative Williamsburg, the new epicenter of cool. The first art gallery, Ledisflam,

opened in 1987. Then, more and more storefront galleries and performance spaces, just like in SoHo, followed.

Moreover, despite the slow death of industrial production, Williamsburg young entrepreneurs fueled its growth: new breweries and microbreweries would open, evoking the heritage of the neighborhood, crafting artisanal beer: Brooklyn Lager moved here its headquarters in the 1980s, long before the area could be considered safe, with shots in the night, muggings and stripped cars set alight. Brooklyn Industries, founded here as a signature clothing company and is now an internationally known brand.

Once again, much like for SoHo, the role of technology and media was dramatically important for the future of a neighborhood. In that case, the commercial success was catalyzed by a persistent global media coverage. Likewise, in the case of

14. ZUKIN S., *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford University Press, 2011

15. LEES L., *Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?*, in "Urban Studies", 45, 12 (2008), pp. 2449-2470

Williamsburg, a crucial role in turning a run-down sketchy neighborhood into an up-and-coming, alternative middle-class enclave was played by media and consumption, word of mouth and extravaganza<sup>15</sup>.

The brand of Williamsburg was expanding and becoming more and more popular. “Art and culture rely significantly on their social and informal ties, and thus planning and development must aim to preserve and strengthen these relationships and the places in which they occur”<sup>16</sup>.

The neighborhood thus became “the next new thing”, hosting famous hip parties and the new underground scene, ultimately getting its own chapter in generic city guidebooks. The advertising was huge and for the first-time people would come from Manhattan to Brooklyn to attend concerts and venues. *Organism* and *Cat’s Head* for instance, were famous parties that gathered people from all over the city; Galapagos became and institution for underground events.

In the 2009 documentary *Brooklyn DIY* (Do It Yourself), Martin Ramocki examines the history of Williamsburg art scene, depicting the creative renaissance of the neighborhood, up to the market crisis that followed the 9/11 attacks<sup>17</sup>.

By tracing the arrival of artists in the neighborhood and conducting spot-on interviews, the director paints the picture of the “Bohemian life” that characterized Williamsburg, a coherent art scene, the home of one of the most vibrant and rebellious artistic communities in the 1980s. Today this picture is less clear, less coherent and made inconsistent by the real estate development that contaminated an utopian artists’ universe, a bridge and tunnel away from Manhattan.

15. ZUKIN S., *Loft Living*, cit.

16. CURRID E., *Bohemia as Subculture*, cit.

17. RAMOCKI M., *Brooklyn DIY*, 2009, documentary

## The Rezoning

Private developers and public officials have transformed the neighborhood identity and history, the main factor of attractiveness, into a brand and ultimately destroying all that made the city authentic. This is impressively visible in the neighborhood of Williamsburg.

Today authenticity had shifted in meaning, involving style more than origins: it is no longer a matter of quality of things, places or people, but quality of experiences, it’s all about branding a neighborhood (the artistic neighborhood, the financial neighborhood, the sophisticated, high-end neighborhood) au lieu of distinctive cultural identities, the “feeling of a neighborhood” is sold to masses on city guidebooks.

The modern gentrification involves a continuous change in society, identity and culture; a continuous rotation of values, taste and needs. In the words of Sharon Zukin: “artists displace manufacturers in live-work lofts and are displaced in turn by lawyers and media moguls who buy these lofts as luxury condos; a gourmet cheese store or quirky

coffee bar replaces a check-cashing service or take-out food shop and is in turn displaced by a chain store that pays many thousands of dollars each month for the location”<sup>18</sup>.

Starting in the early years of 2000, the city underwent a major readjustment of its economic balance; this was mainly due to the fear of not finding investors after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001. To kick out that fear, Mayor Bloomberg enforced this to gather economic investments in the city from national and international private capitals, trying to “sell” New York as the most profitable investment choice<sup>19</sup>.

This strategy is visible everywhere in the city, from the site of the World Trade Center, where the atmosphere is a mix of mourning and consumerism, to the superskinny and supertall skyscrapers poking out of Midtown Manhattan, home to wealthy Russian tycoons and petrodollar Middle Easterners. It has to be said that this strategy did succeed in boosting

18. ZUKIN S., *Naked City*, cit.

19. W. CURRAN W., *Gentrification and the Nature of Work*, cit.

the city economy and dodging the ghost of yet another economic depression. It did not come with no consequences though<sup>20</sup>.

What happened in Williamsburg is that the Bloomberg administration decided in 2005 for an upzoning of the riverfront and of the major avenues, once commercial, to a residential use and a downzoning of the smaller, already gentrified side streets. The rezoning interested a total area of 170 city blocks, mostly along the East River, stretching from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to the Greenpoint neighborhood. By switching from manufacturing to residential use, tall buildings were also allowed: 30-to-40-storey condos could be erected right on the water, privatizing the riverfront and blocking the views of Manhattan for the residents or, better yet, ensuring them for a handful of privileged ones.

These decisions generated de facto a new village, with a new bogus authenticity at its core and a shiny glass-and-steel waterfront, defined by the demolition of old warehouses

and factories for the implementation of large-scale, insipid developments. It is famous the case of the former Dutch Mustard factory closed in 1994 and since then used for parties and events: it was demolished in 2008 to make room for an out-of-scale, out-of-context apartment building complex.

According to the New York City Department of City Planning, the area has been turned into a R8 district which is so outlined: "*R8 zoning districts are high-density apartment house districts that encourage mid-rise apartment buildings on smaller lots and, on larger lots, taller buildings with less lot coverage*"<sup>21</sup>.

The purpose was to upscale de waterfront, getting rid of the remaining industrial structures and reclaiming such an appetible space for high-rise residential construction. The strategies adopted aimed de facto at the "Manhattanization" of Brooklyn<sup>22</sup>. Ever since

20. ZUKIN S., *Naked City*, cit.

21. NYC DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING, 2017

22. GREENSPAN E., *How to Manhattanize a City*, in "The New Yorker", October 23 (2013), online version



Recent housing developments along Kent Avenue.  
Courtesy of D. Alexander



2005, developers would start going around the blocks to take photos, measurements, wearing a suit and a helmet. This practice has sadly become more and more popular in New York City, for the reasons explained above and has since privileged real-estate profit, without taking into account the real needs of the residents and the permanent consequences of such concessions. Political and economic advantages have always been the engine of the city growth as a machine; decisions taken looking at a map, sitting at a table don't always consider the spatial and social environment that they will generate. Williamsburg has now patches and entire blocks that resemble Miami.

Furthermore, the rezoning was meant to be a model of "positive" gentrification that would benefit all actors involved. For this reason, officials estimated that thirty-three percent of all the brand new housing units would be affordable. However, many developers purposely decided not to take advantage of the incentives granted by the city for projects that included that

percentage of affordable apartments, causing the policy to be fairly less socially and economically sustainable<sup>23</sup>.

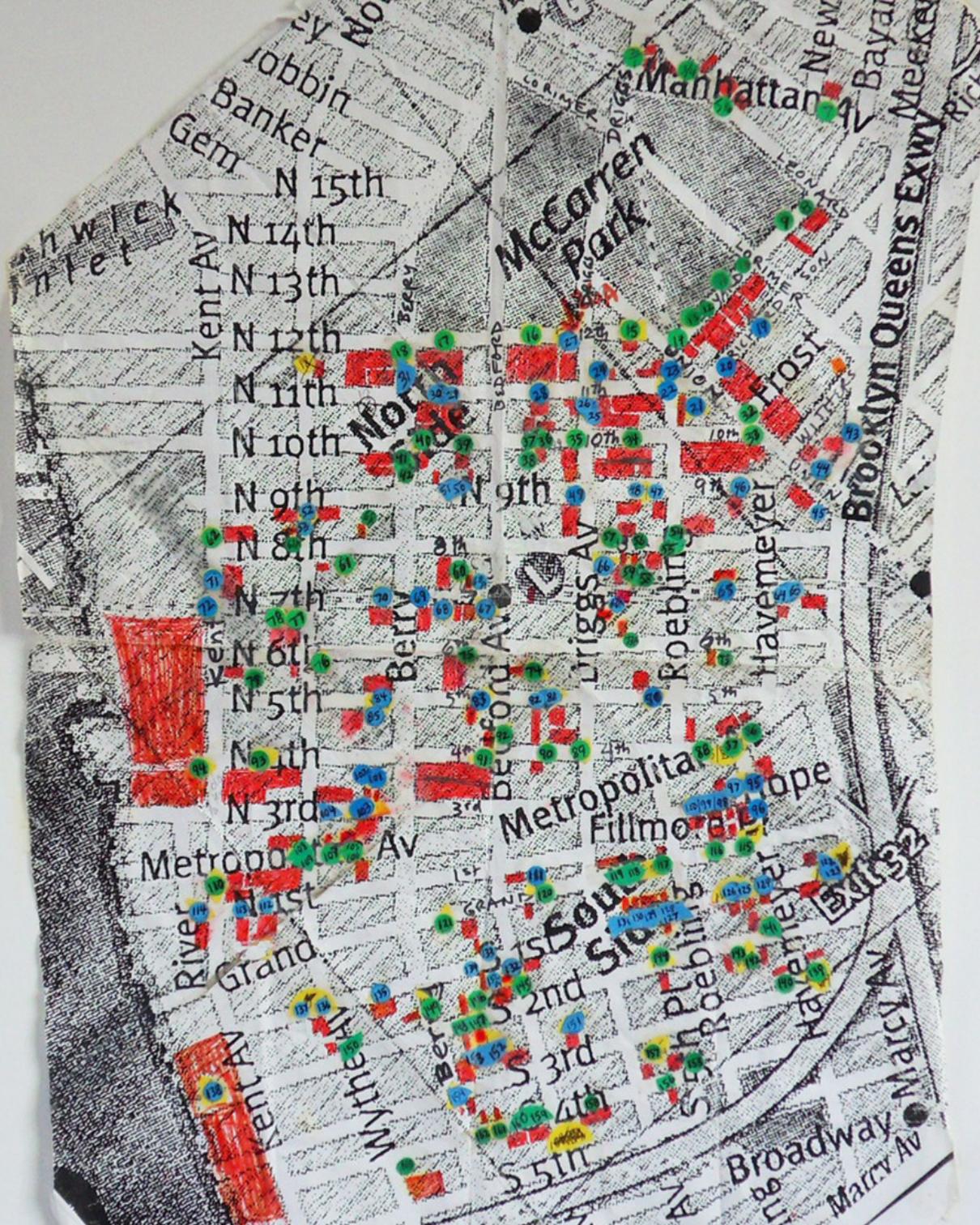
Artists haven't certainly remained in silence, watching their neighborhood been taken away, block by block by the property sharks. The already mentioned artist and filmmaker Su Friedrich has been a Williamsburg resident since 1989 and has seen the whole process of gentrification taking place underneath her eyes. She has documented the eternity transformation of the neighborhood in her 2012 documentary *Gut Renovation*. Her sentimental, yet critical approach lets us understand the power of city development and "progress" and the enforcement of the law against legal residents<sup>24</sup>.

In the documentary every single demolition is mapped out as well as every single new development and the results are impressive. Friedrich would also go around in the disguise of a potential buyer to visit new apartments freshly built condominiums to test the quality of the finishing and of the space offered. In

many occasion the property developer turned out to be the same for multiple interventions and the sizes of the units and character of the living spaces seemed to be disappointing, bland and cheap. This last word can't certainly be used to describe their cost that would vary according to the exposition, floor number and view. What appeared to be true for all of the project visited was the abundance of offered amenities. A package, a lifestyle with fancy names, made out of futile and redundant gyms, saunas, rooftop pools and bars, very distant from the affordable and essential living standards dear to Williamsburg loft and warehouse residents. Despite the saturation of the real-estate market with hundreds of unsold overpriced apartments, construction is still up and running and "now leasing" signs are hung everywhere along Kent,

Map drawn by S. Friedrich in "Gut Renovation" featuring new construction in Williamsburg from 2005-2011. Courtesy of Microscope Gallery

23. MULLER M., *Artists Displacement*, in "Gotham Gazette", November 21 (2016), online version  
 24. HOLDEN S., *A work in Progress, from the inside out. Gut Renovation's Friedrich's look at gentrification*, in "The New York Times", March 6 (2013), pp. C7



Berry, Wythe and Bedford Avenues. Friedrich experienced displacement first-hand and she describes it well in her documentary:  
 "In mid-July they started pile-driving the main beams for the new building. From then on, there was constant relentless infuriating NOISE until mid-September. We had 9 months left on our lease, and we hoped we could at least stay until then! So we were without heat or hot water from October to December... So it's September 29, it's about a week and a half after the beginning of the bailout crisis and none of us today knows what the hell's gonna happen. It seems terrible and on August 20, the Department of Buildings raided our building, essentially showed up, there were eight or ten inspectors, showed up and said that they had been a gas leak reported and they needed to look in the spaces so they came through and this is a building which extends all the way around the block so they're many, many units. There are businesses here, there are people living here, artists live, work, you know, in

the building. So they did all of that and then the fire department came and you know, we were freaking out, and said what's gonna happen, they said well you should be prepared, you know, you might get thrown out today because that's what happened down to another building on Kent St in our neighborhood about a year and a half ago and they were thrown out for a period of months. Well then they decided not to throw us out but to take the gas meters out and then they posted a lot of violations and all of the violations had to do with residential use of the space because it's zoned for commercial. Erected partitions which to translate means bedrooms, installed water and waste lines for three-piece bathrooms creating residential use in a commercial building. Comply with code forthwith. Well, the problem is they've known for 19 years that we've made partitions in order to have bedrooms. What else? Well failure to maintain building as due to the fact that the landlord has been collecting rent, real estate tax, water sewer taxes and we have paid all the utilities for 19 years. The only thing he

has spent money on was to pay a super to clean the building [...] there was no mention of a gas leak in any of the violations, so it was really clear that they wanted us out of here for some other reason. We didn't know who it was, we didn't know if the landlord somehow manipulating this so that he would get us out of here, so he could, you know, give it over to other people or what"<sup>25</sup>.

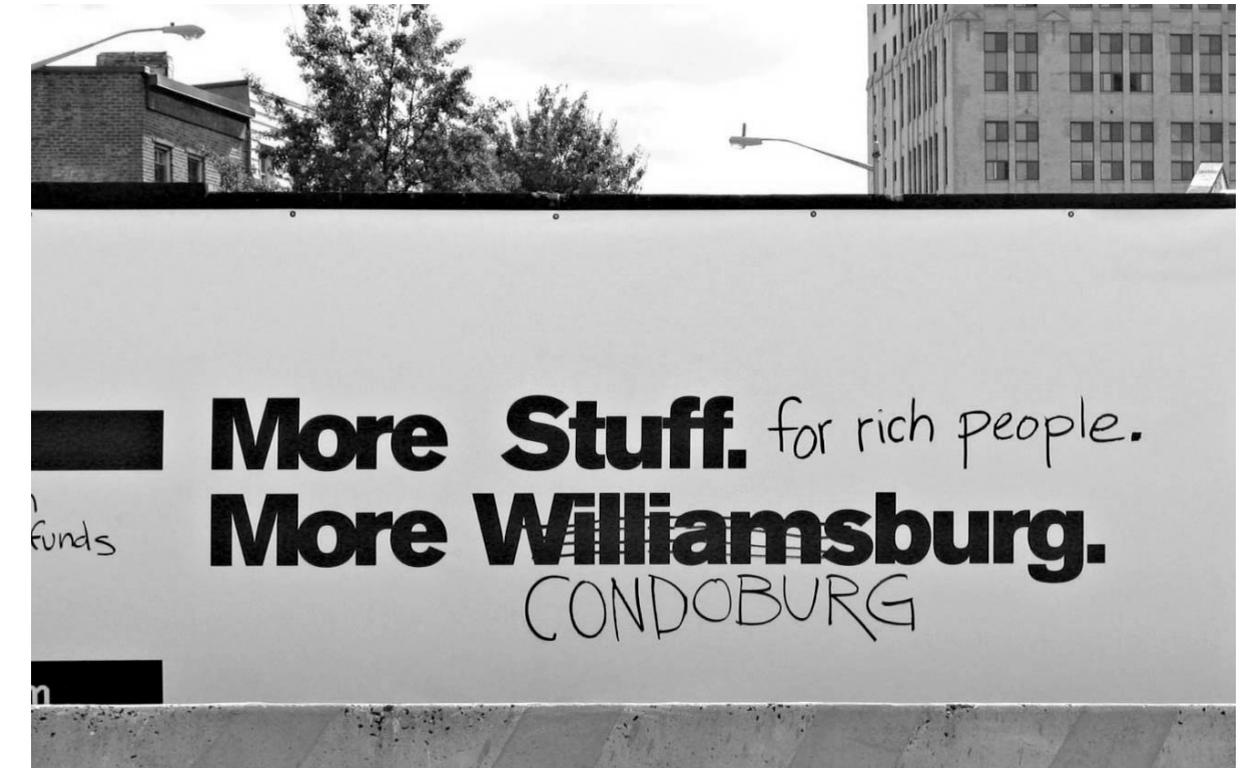
What followed evictions and general displacement was the closing of many small stores and business and the relentless emergence of trendy boutiques, fancy restaurants of hipster-themed bars and clubs. Once the offer of consumption of hipster/artsy culture was ready to be hand out to masses there came the need to house said masses. Alongside with the already mentioned real-estate developments at every corner of the neighborhood, sophisticated hotels started popping out. The recently completed William Vale Hotel, for example, boasts outstanding views of Manhattan and North Brooklyn, extending up to Long Island City and its Miami-like architecture can be seen from the whole neighborhood. Many others followed,

including the Williamsburg Hotel (evoking a more familiar image of New York with its brick-covered facade) The McCarren Hotel & pool and a couple more boutique hotels proposed along the BQE. Renovations of older residential properties also began to increase and become common<sup>26</sup>.

The rent was skyrocketing everywhere in the neighborhood and even modest row houses (not even Brownstones) soar over the millions of dollars. All along Bedford Avenue, the core of Williamsburg, and in Grand Street and Metropolitan Avenue, the over 145 art galleries that not long ago characterized this artistic neighborhood have now almost entirely disappeared, making room for yet another Starbucks, Whole Foods Market, Apple Store, We Work coworking and Dunkin' Donuts (rocking a fancier-than-usual sign). As one exits the Bedford Av. subway station is overwhelmed by the feeling of being catapulted to Main Street Disneyland.

25. FRIEDRICH S., *Gut Renovation*, cit.

26. KRASE J., DESENA J. N., *Race, Class, and Gentrification in Brooklyn: A View from the Street, "Urbanities"*, 5, 2 (2015), pp. 3-19



A re-decorated billboard advertising a new condo development. Courtesy of D. Alexander

The custom sign of a Dunkin Donut location right next to the L train station. Courtesy of D. Alexander



1. Map displaying the shadows cast on a winter day by the new high-rise real-estate developments in Williamsburg. The concentration is higher on the riverfront and around the McCarran Park. Courtesy of The New York Times
- 2-3. Warehouses are replaced by new condominiums like these on 11th Street and Bedford Avenue
4. New Apple store on Bedford Avenue, a clear tell-tale sign of gentrification
5. The William Vale Hotel and its signature architecture, rising on a former factory site.
6. High-rise apartment buildings on the former Dutch mustard factory site. They provide open views of Manhattan
7. "Now Leasing" is sign that can be spotted easily in Williamsburg. This recent development on Kent Avenue boasts one large enough to be seen from the Williamsburg Bridge and Manhattan. Its construction required the demolition of many low-rise brick buildings.

Pictures 2-6: courtesy of D. Alexander

# The search for authenticity

## A.K.A WHO IS TO BLAME?

What happened in Williamsburg is strongly related to the sense of place and authenticity seen as a marketable product. Bizarre restaurants, curious bars, coffee shops, farmers' markets and other kinds of entrepreneurial activities made the neighborhood a safe place to perform an alternative consumption of goods and services, compared to Manhattan.

The atmosphere manufactured by this kind of consumption is enough to create a sense of authenticity, uniqueness capable of attracting a young clientele looking for singularity. This new cityscape started to be advertised, directly and indirectly and proposed as opportunity of escape from standard life to the masses. As previously described, what followed was the arrival of a broader consumer base, a mainstream taste for things, in other words, gentrification. Movies and music videos got shot in the streets, a sandwich went for over 10 dollars, possibly more. The residents and tourists came to experience the bohemian subculture, attracting more outside investment. Hip

culture was mixed with luxury apartments, expensive coffee drinks, overpriced pseudo-artsy boutique and thai restaurants; little is left of the real authenticity that once denoted the neighborhood.

All of this to say that in this scenario, artists and, consequently alternative consumer, are major agents of change and cannot play the role of the victim. The violent redevelopment experienced in Williamsburg is a product of the image of an iconic reality delivered by artists in the first place. However, to solely blame it on artists and how they moved in, in the first place, is very short sighted. The alternative middle class was attracted, thanks to media, by this idea and moved in droves to the area that, as previously described, little by little lost its soul<sup>27</sup>.

The irony was that the more they tried to preserve the culture and integrity of

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27. ZUKIN S., *CONSUMING AUTHENTICITY: From outposts of difference to means of exclusion*, in "Cultural Studies", 22, 5 (2008), pp. 724-748

the place, the more they would encourage gentrification. The paradoxical outcome of this is that the very artistic soul that attracted redevelopment in the first place gets priced out by real-estate development itself and is forced to move out<sup>28</sup>.

Regardless, the real victim is, perhaps, the working class that once resided in this particular section of Brooklyn; it has been displaced as part of a larger redevelopment plan including dynamism and high-end living, but not affordable housing for ethnic minority consumer<sup>29</sup>.

## PROS AND CONS

It has to be said that, as many sociologist and academics argue, gentrification per se isn't bad. This phenomenon doesn't necessarily have to be condemned as it is part of a process involving change. When gentrification implies displacement, then it is bad; if its impact on property value is not inevitably dramatic and it's not sold as "urban regeneration" or "revitalization", there is no

reason to fear gentrification. Unfortunately, most of the time (and this is the case) that's not how it goes. Seen as a natural process of progression, the pattern repeats itself and displacement kicks in, bringing new affluent people and forcing the old tenants out, together with the neighborhood character. Today Williamsburg presents itself as a overbuilt city environment, where most of the reminiscence of both the old rural village and the industrial heritage are completely gone. Everything is now standardized: the amount of unsold luxury condos and apartment units is very large, yet old warehouses continue to get torn down to make room for tasteless cookie-cutter buildings<sup>30</sup>.

Nonetheless, gentrification came with positive effects as well that can't be denied. As discussed all of this development eventually brought safer streets, smoother

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28. EVANS G., *Hard-branding the cultural city. From Prado to Prada*, in "International Journal of Urban and Regional Research", 27, 2 (2003), pp. 417-40

29. CURRAN W., *Gentrification and the Nature of Work*, cit

30. SANNEH K., *Is Gentrification Really a Problem?*, in "The New Yorker", July 11 (2016), online version

and more efficient infrastructures, better transportation and better public spaces. What went lost, though, was the distinctive character of the streets, brought to life by the richness of diversity, by the small stores, by the inevitable difference of social classes that denounced the complex patchwork the city was. Not long ago the Williamsburg Little Italy was a flourishing community; now it can barely be spotted by the few fire hydrants painted the colors of the Italian flag and a couple of delis selling imported goods. The same goes for the numerous enclaves once thriving in Williamsburg. Apart from the nostalgia, the majors problems persist: most artists and musicians have now migrated elsewhere, eastward towards Bushwick, Bed-Stuy and Flatbush or even in Queens and manufacture and the working class have been pushed away by city decisions almost in their totality.

*New apartment building rising over the former industrial fabric of Greenpoint, overlooking Manhattan.*  
Courtesy of M. Orsello





**WHERE NEXT?  
A PROPOSAL FOR RIDGEWOOD 03**



# A new narrative for Ridgewood

The goal of the third and last part is finding a neutral context where the gentrification and displacement conundrum can be addressed, ultimately proposing a possible architectural solution to deal with both. The investigation conducted so far has found and analyzed two major issues:

> the phenomenon of gentrification or supergentrification in the neighborhoods of the Brooklyn Gold Coast, where the Brownstone house is used as a social and political tool, instrumental in creating the ideal upper class enclave;

> the artists and working class displacement in Williamsburg, as a consequence of the upscaling of the neighborhood by the city government, through wild real-estate development. This also implicated the loss of authenticity and the ultimate banalization of the cityscape, with the rise of a bland make-believe district for the young money.

parameters taken into account suggest that the this particular area could attract outside investment and development in the near future. Ridgewood, being fertile soil for gentrification (as explained more in depth in the following paragraphs), is the ideal scenario to implement the strategy conceived to find a possible solution, matured from the previous researches.

## THE CONTEXT

Ridgewood appears to the eyes of the visitor as a low-rise residential chunk of the city, sitting at the border between Brooklyn and Queens. The neighborhood encompasses elements of both boroughs and it is not entirely clear where one finishes and the other begins. As border disputes continue nowadays, the identity of Ridgewood is very defined, unlike many other neighborhoods in Queens that were shaped by immigration influxes.

Further research for a more neutral neighborhood led to Ridgewood. Many

1. C. J. HUGHES C. J., *Ridgewood, Queens. Living In - Architectural Eye Candy*, in "The New York Times", January 1 (2012), pp. RE7

<< *Ridgewood's low-rise cityscape. Courtesy of The New York Times*

Much like for most neighborhoods of greater Brooklyn, Ridgewood was a small Dutch settlement that saw a rapid growth by the end of the 19th century, thanks to the development of public transportation. From horse-drawn cars to trolleys to the elevated tracks of the subway that cut through the neighborhood, transportation was always the key for the urban expansion and advancement of the neighborhood, in terms of commerce, retail and housing. Formerly a part of Bushwick, it was consolidated with Brooklyn in 1898.

During the early 20th century, a significant wave of German immigrants settled in the area and started a radical construction campaign (from roughly 1905 to 1915) that involved the development of entire city blocks into townhouses and Brownstones. Part of them today is protected, since more and more streets each year are designated historic districts in Ridgewood.

The Germans worked mainly in the

many breweries and textile factories at the border with Brooklyn and were a prominent presence until the end of the century. They brought their own traditions, their pretzels and beer, but mostly workforce for the many warehouses of the area. According to the NYC census, the German population dissipated from 70 percent in the 1950s to only 2,700 of 47,400 Ridgewood residents<sup>2</sup>.

All throughout the 20th century, the neighborhood has been characterized by a immigrant blue-collar population. It was the Germans at first, then came the Italians, the Polish (who relocated here after being displaced from gentrified Greenpoint) and a significant number of Romanians and Albanians. All of them settled in a specific section of Ridgewood: for instance, Fresh Pond Avenue was, and still is a stronghold of the Polish community. More recently, Dominicans and Puerto Ricans took up residence in the Western part of the neighborhood.

2. NYC CENSUS, 2010

## Diversity

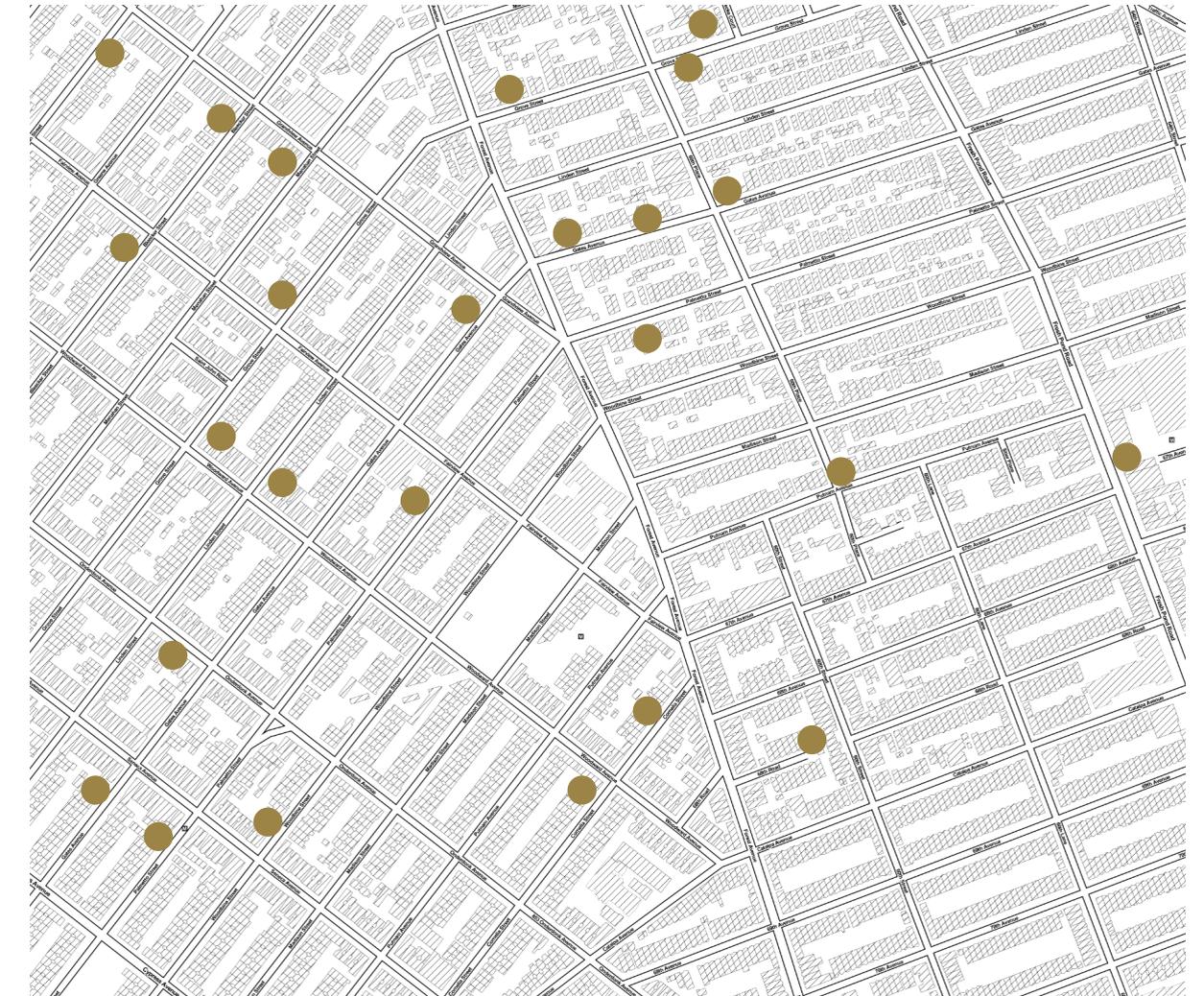
Despite that the German roots remain strong, diversity and distinct heritage are the keys to read the cityscape and also its richness<sup>3</sup>.

It is no surprise that, right from the beginning and for more than a century, Ridgewood has been a solid, multifaceted working-class enclave. The households are modest, lower-to-middle class and the buildings do reflect the turnover throughout the years. Today the old generation is dying out, as grown up children decide to move to the suburbs in Long Island or New Jersey, selling their parents' townhouse or splitting it into multiple renting units. The character of neighborhood, although for reasons different from the ones that transformed Williamsburg, is vanishing here, too.

Architecture wise, neat tree-lined streets are bordered by elegant row houses, fairly less adorned than those in Brownstone Brooklyn, yet adequate and respectable.

3. WILSON C., *A Neat Enclave enriched by Waves of Immigrants*, in "The New York Times", April 9 (2006), pp. A19

Map showing vacant lots in Ridgewood. Source: livinglots.com



Some yellow-brick facades include arches, columns and other architectural elements that enrich the entire building, others incorporate bay windows and the typical elements of the Brownstone tradition. It is no coincidence that 350 buildings already boast a landmark status, with more perspective ones, that will raise the number to the same amount present in more established neighborhoods such as Brooklyn Heights. Nevertheless, there are examples of vinyl facing and other kinds of cheaper facades that disrupt the built consistency. Furthermore, the urban fabric per se is very compact and dense: it is very unlikely to bump into a vacant lot or an underdeveloped area. This is generally true for all of Brooklyn and Queens, but Ridgewood has the distinction of being a compact, high-density, solid urban environment, where everything is attached. Today the neighborhood looks rather similar to what it did in the past; just a handful of new developments mark the transition to the new century.

Today's housing market is less vibrant than more inner-city districts, still a continuous

turnover guarantees availability in the housing stock. The majority of buildings are two-to-three-family houses and only a few condos or tenements can be spotted around the neighborhood. Because of Ridgewood's tradition of immigration, it is still the first place where many newly arrived immigrants come, thus most of the residents are renters, with fewer homeowners that typically live in one apartment, renting out the remaining ones. This has gone on for generations<sup>4</sup>.

## EARLY SIGNS OF GENTRIFICATION

As of today, prices in Ridgewood are already increasing, but not nearly as fast as in the neighborhoods previously analyzed. It is also well connected to Manhattan via subway (only 20 minutes away) which is a huge pro and con at the same time, as was previously evaluated. The neighborhood sits very close to already gentrified realities such

4. WILSON C., *A Neat Enclave*, cit.

## Perks

as Bushwick, Williamsburg and Greenpoint and might receive in the future the influx of displaced artists that got priced out of their loft or studio spaces.

Furthermore, low-income population is also at risk of displacement, as history shows that multiethnic working-class and immigration enclaves benefitting from stabilized rent are the first one to go and fabricate fertile soil for gentrification.

Other additional aspects point out that in all likelihood this part of the city, too will under the radar of the property sharks. The real-estate value is very low compared to adjacent Brooklyn and is now considered a bargain and a great investment to purchase a two-family house and make a profit out of it. A few new three-to-four-storey condos are sprouting here too, with more developments planned for the near future. Additionally, the neighborhood boast an already established and rich commercial core, with goes hand in hand with good transportation and great walkability.

## ZONING DISTRICTS

As of today, most of the areas included in Ridgewood's borders fall into the R6B zoning. The rules allow construction in built-up, medium-density areas of the city with a distinctive architectural character and more precisely:

*"R6B districts are often traditional row house districts, which preserve the scale and harmonious streetscape of neighborhoods of four-story attached buildings developed during the 19th century. Many of these houses are set back from the street with stoops and small front yards that are typical of Brooklyn's "brownstone" neighborhoods, such as Park Slope, Boerum Hill and Bedford Stuyvesant."*<sup>5</sup>.

Interestingly enough, some areas, along the busiest commercial strips and major transportation lines, near the Bushwick border, have witnessed a change in the zoning, which now follows the R6 norms as it follows:

*"The character of R6 districts can range from*

5. NYC DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING, 2017

# the Proposal

*neighborhoods with a diverse mix of building types and heights to large-scale “tower in the park” developments [...] on larger lots, tall buildings that are set back from the street”<sup>6</sup>.*

This is meant to encourage larger developments in specific parts of the territory, with consequences that would undoubtedly trigger a real-estate value rise and boost the interest in the area, changing the low-rise profile of the residential neighborhood.

**f**or all of the reasons listed above, Ridgewood has been picked for the purpose of this thesis work as the ground where to implement a new solution to cope with future changes.

This portion of territory, straddled between Brooklyn and Queens is de facto a deteriorating neighborhood, where families of old generation immigrants, well-established in the community, are aging and whose kids have moved out. They need new life, a generational change, a spark to be engaged in the community.

This area has been chosen for its very nature of predominant residential land use and its already dense housing stock. The aim is, among others, to avoid a tabula rasa effect that is often brought about by the advent of gentrification, where tall, new buildings replace old ones and the striving local communities are priced out of their house owned for years. A good strategy is to infiltrate slowly a regenerating agent: that’s how the neighborhood character and the community built around it are preserved.

## Potential

The proposal attempts to introduce artists in the already rooted urban fabric, bringing in new blood to mix with the old one, a social catalyst that can trigger positive interest in the residents and create a relationship that could benefit both sides.

Community is, in fact, really important to artists, as shown by the numerous active artists collectives in Bushwick and Bed-Stuy. Small or large groups have migrated from SoHo to Chelsea, from the East Village to Harlem, from Williamsburg to Bushwick throughout the decades.

## THE STRATEGY

**t**he ultimate purpose is not just to increase the density and the housing stock, but also avoiding gentrification and its negative outcome; avoiding, thus, the “Manhattanization” of the neighborhood and the same effects that transformed former artists neighborhoods touched by it. With that in mind, a list of questions and conditions has been put down, in order

to meet all needs and elaborate valid parameters. For instance, it has to be taken into account as a major need that artists privilege living where they work: that’s also why they prefer loft space.

Moreover, artists moving in flocks to a neighborhood can cause gentrification to sprout and residents to be displaced as a consequence of more “attractiveness”.

Other questions concern the type of dwelling they could inhabit: can artists live in a Brownstone? Can a Brownstone be flexible? How to reinvent a Brownstone in a contemporary way?

By mapping and fining vacant lots, the pilot project suggest the design of a two-family house that can host artists-in-residence community. Two to maximum four artists can be accommodated and live together in independent rooms, sharing the working space and a communal kitchen. This layout is meant to be a repeatable model that can be implemented elsewhere in the neighborhood, over different periods of time. It being a new building and

6. NYC DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING, 2017

## THE DESIGN

As already shown, the zoning regulations for the most part of Ridgewood allows primarily a contextual rowhouse district, limited to low-rise, one- or two-family at most. Following the zoning and taking advantage of it, the strategy foresees the implementation of a rent-controlled, three-storey contemporary Brownstone that can be inhabited exclusively by artists. Hence, despite the very limited availability of empty lots, a creative nucleus is created: there's no space for gentrification, since artists cannot move in droves as they did in vacant commercial lofts when it was still legal.

The real challenge is the quality of the space created, since this kind of tenants are used to the flexibility of large, luminous loft spaces. The size of a Brownstone house, as specified in chapter one is very limited and generates narrow and dark spaces, not suitable for working. Additionally, flexibility was never a quality of Brownstones (not considering the possibility of simply dividing it into independent units) due to the insufficient width of the spaces and the lack of light.

**t**he accurate reinterpretation of the Brooklyn Brownstone house with its typical elements and features (as explained in chapter 1) in a contemporary language is the architectural tool used to trigger regeneration in Ridgewood.

The aim of the work is not to come up with a precise architectural design, but instead, to suggest feasible parameters for an intervention that respects the context, without imitating it, yet preserving the low-rise cityscape and the neighborhood identity. The five main components that characterize a typical Brooklyn Brownstone (analyzed in chapter 1) are here the base for the composition of the inhabitable spaces and the key to read them.

The ordinary Brownstone has never been particularly flexible, but in this case no bearing walls would create constraints and an open shell concept can be envisioned, especially for the shared work areas.

The proposal offers live-and-work experiences with private and shared zones and areas suitable for hosting exhibitions and open-studio events for the community.

The layout should also be able to endure and live through time, accommodating changes, thus guaranteeing flexibility and adaptability (unlike the typical Brownstone).

The floor plans and the other schematic diagrams show a flexible internal layout. The skylight well, often present in most row houses to guarantee fresh air and sunlight in the darker, central section of the building, is here evoked and reinterpreted. An open atrium pierces all levels and generates a communal space, a vertical art gallery. This way, the common areas of the building are shared also in another dimension.

Additionally, the bay window feature is here included in the design in a contemporary way: the large opening give the facade a sharp connotation (still preserving its symmetry) and make the inside more airy and luminous.

Different degrees of flexibility can occur in many ways, but two scenarios were envisioned for this specific layout:

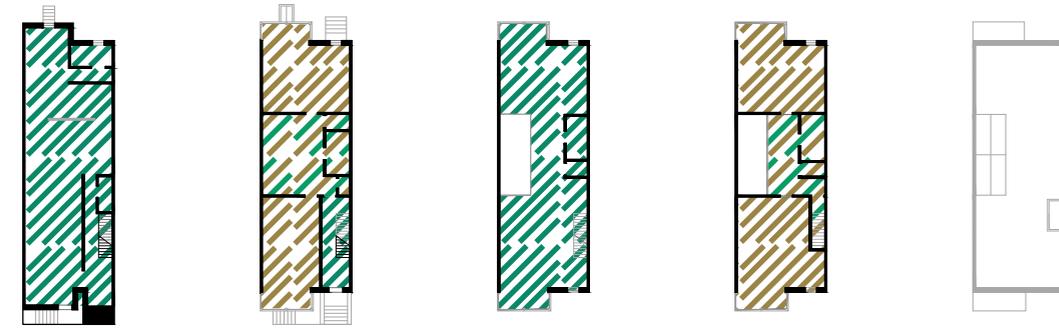
### SCENARIO 1

The artists-in-residence building is inhabited by four active artists. Each one occupies a private bedroom on the first floor and third floor. The second floor is a large shared space with a kitchen and dining area, and, more importantly, a common art studio. The light well, as previously suggested, can be used as a vertical gallery. Moreover, the basement hosts a storage space and a share exhibition space for art shows open to the community.

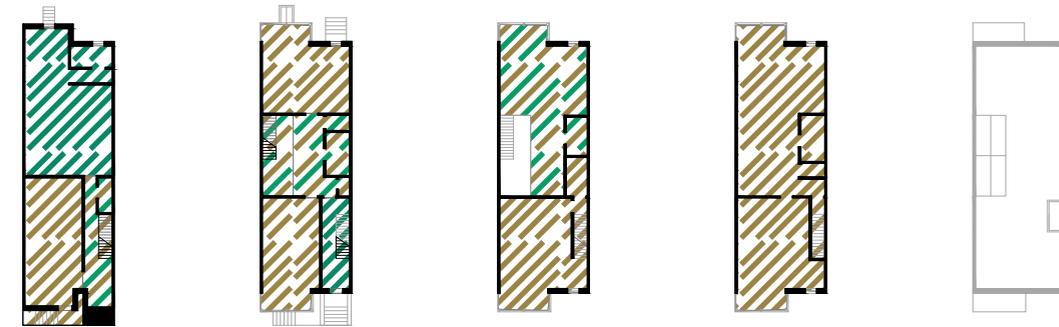
### SCENARIO 2

This second scenario foresees the artist living on the top floor needing more independence. This as a consequence of marriage or the birth of a child. The third floor thus becomes a separate two-bedroom apartment, featuring a private studio on the second floor and access via the common stairwell. The two remaining artists are still sharing the first floor and can access, by means of a newly positioned staircase, the communal area on the second floor. The controlled rent would

be proportioned accordingly. The basement is split in two: the side facing the street hosts the independent artist's exhibition space, whereas the rear is shared by the two other artists as additional studio and exhibition space.

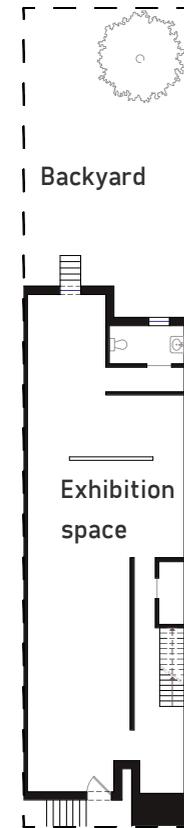


SCENARIO 1



SCENARIO 2

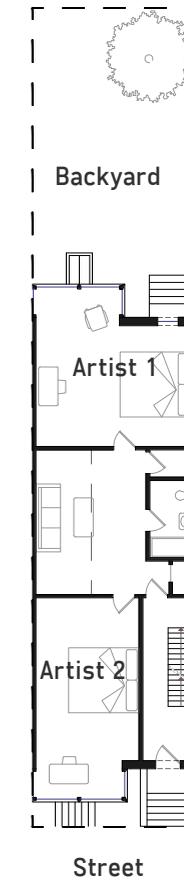
**BASEMENT**



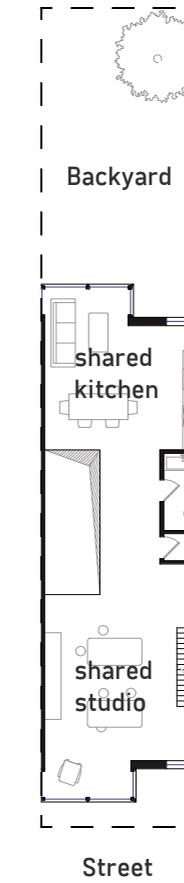
**SCENARIO 1**

Four artists living n the house

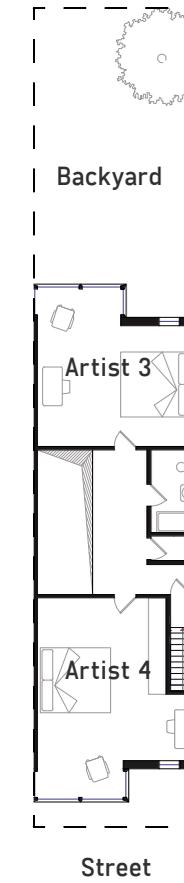
**FIRST FLOOR**



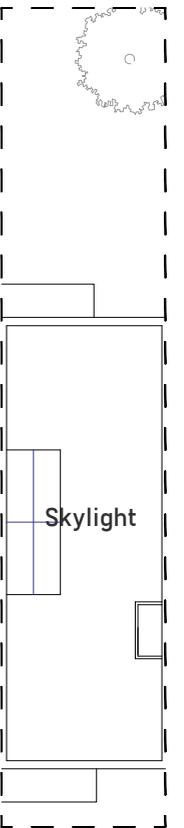
**SECOND FLOOR**



**THRID FLOOR**



**ROOF**



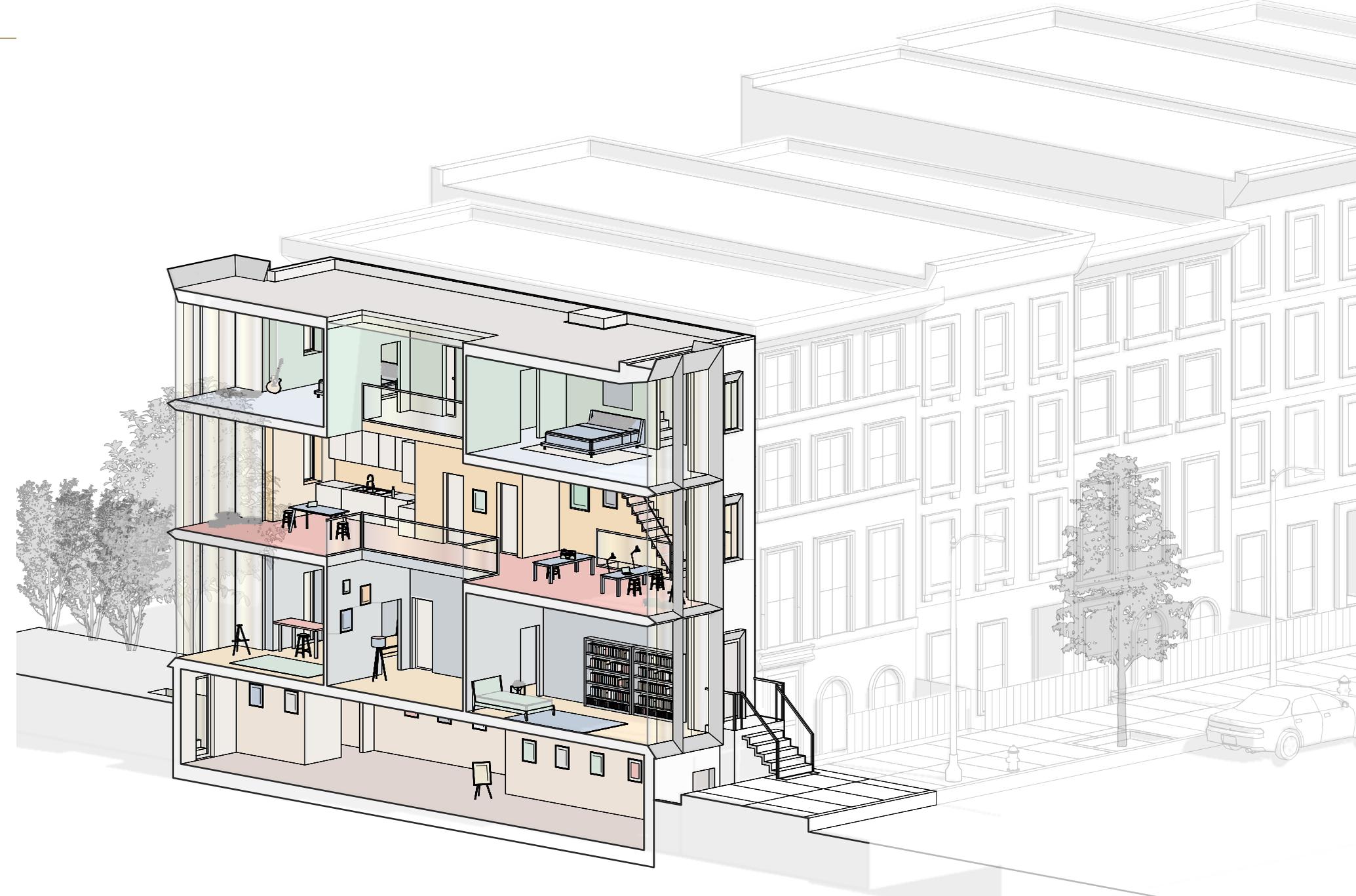
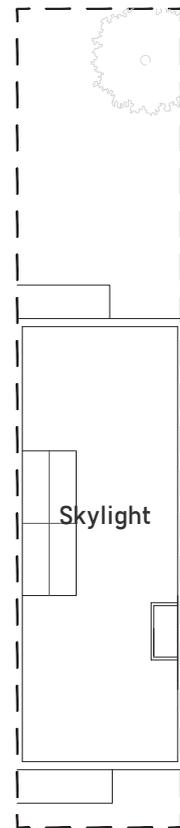
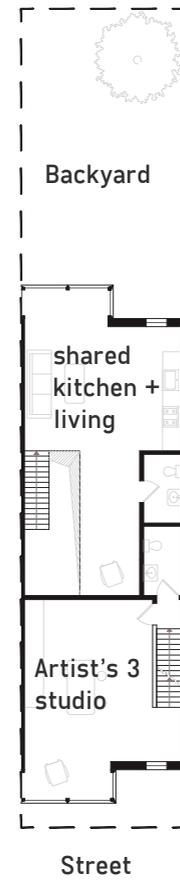
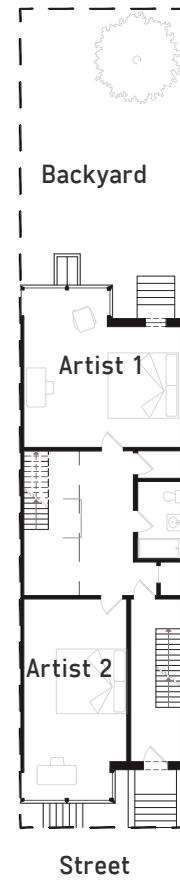
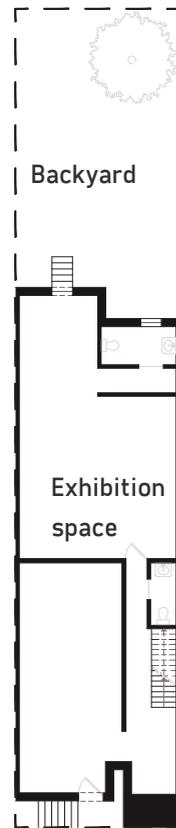
**BASEMENT**

**FIRST FLOOR**

**SECOND FLOOR**

**THRID FLOOR**

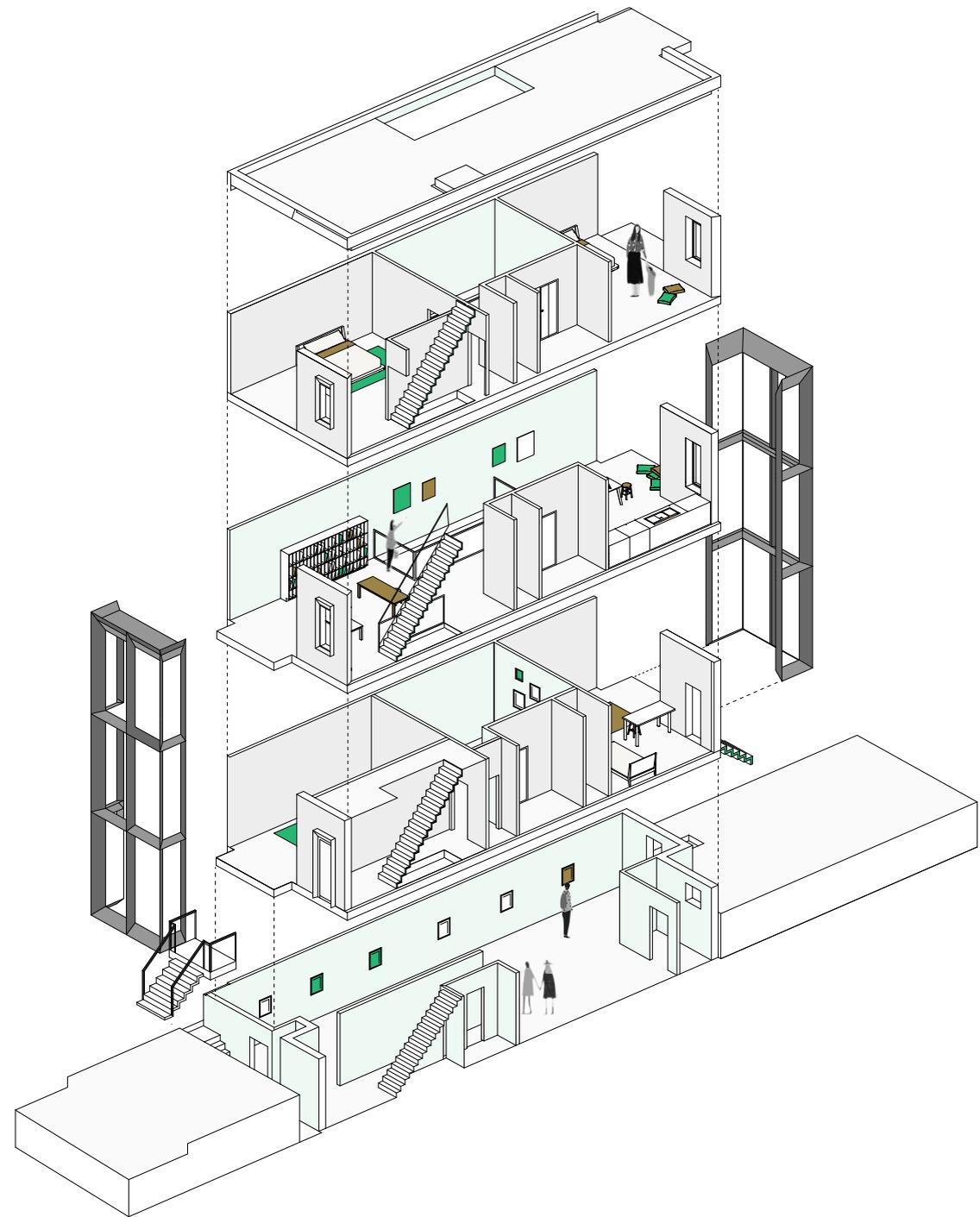
**ROOF**



**SCENARIO 2**

Three artists living n the house

Axonometric section of the proposed artists-in-residence building



*Exploded axonometric view*



*Perspective cross section of the Artists-in-residence building*

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