



Artists and Industry: Friends of Foes?

Paul Parkhill

Anti-gentrification activists have castigated artists' lofts as the vanguard of gentrification, while cities have heralded them as neighborhood revitalization or affordable housing. Paul Parkhill argues that working artists and manufacturing businesses share common interests in affordable, long-term workspace, and that programs like the Artist Studio Affordability Project can create workspace for artists without disrupting urban industries.

In the spring of 2014, I attended a panel discussion in Gowanus, Brooklyn about the plight of artists in New York's current real-estate market. I was crammed in the back of a packed, stifling room (a man next to me actually passed out) as the panelists—some representing artists, some representing the city—pontificated about how to keep New York artists from moving to Philadelphia, Detroit, or Berlin.

During the question-and-answer period, one member of the audience asked why the city wasn't further expanding the Loft Law to help artists maintain low-cost housing in industrial spaces. Diana Reyna, a former city council member representing industrial East Williamsburg and currently the Deputy Brooklyn Borough President, responded by describing the impact of illegal conversions on the industrial neighborhood she grew up in, and where her mother once worked in a garment factory. Rewarding artists for living illegally in loft buildings, she argued, further destabilized industrial neighborhoods and drove out working-class jobs. Many in the audience were incredulous—surely no one could be against providing rental protections to predominantly low-income artists facing an ever-worsening real-estate crisis?

Artists and industrial businesses should share common cause, as they need similar kinds of affordable, low-performance space for their work. However, the historical tendency of NYC artists to live in industrial spaces illegally, and the city's willingness to let them, has played a critical role in undermining this relationship. Loft living creates the conditions whereby established industrial zones gradually become accepted as residential areas and attract amenities to support residents. This trend in turn becomes the rationale for wholesale land-use shifts through rezoning, and results in the displacement not only of industrial businesses, but of artists themselves.¹

By shifting the conversation away from housing (and strategies like expanding the Loft Law), and toward the preservation of affordable industrial space, artists and industrial businesses have the potential to create coalitions that ensure their mutual long-term viability.

¹ The displacement process in industrial zones is distinct from what I'd call the brownstoner gentrification process, characterized by middle-class or wealthy people moving into low-income residential neighborhoods. Brownstoner gentrification in New York is generally not artist-driven and has less to do with long-term land-use shifts and more to do with direct economic, social and racial displacement. There are certainly radiating economic and racial displacement implications to the transition of industrial zones, as many industrial zones in NYC abut low-income neighborhoods, but I would argue the impact is more indirect, and generally does not benefit artists.

The loft-living arc

New York artists began moving into industrial loft buildings almost as soon as the arc of manufacturing in the urban Northeast began its precipitous downward trend—one that is only stabilizing tentatively today. The reasons for industrial flight from New York were complex, involving not only global economic and policy shifts, but also typological and locational factors related to modern production and shipping. Importantly, many 19th-century vertical manufacturing operations used gravity as part of the production process and thus valued multistory loft buildings; after World War II, manufacturers increasingly favored the horizontal assembly line, which favors ground-floor space.²

These shifts led many manufacturers to leave New York entirely, building new facilities in the suburbs, or the South, or offshore. But others, particularly smaller manufacturers, remained in New York City, where access to a huge market and the availability of highly skilled labor still held advantages, even to this day. Starting in the 1960s, however, manufacturing activities increasingly took place on the ground floor of loft buildings, leaving portions of upper floors vacant. Industrial real estate had relatively little value in New York from the 1960s well into the 1990s,³ so selling off disused space wasn't much of an option. And it wasn't easy finding a tenant to occupy space above a manufacturer that likely made a lot of noise, used chemicals and solvents, and emitted a variety of toxic fumes, smells and exhaust.

Artists didn't mind

The high-profile examples of successful artists settling in industrial zones during the 1960s—Donald Judd purchasing a garment factory in SoHo, Isamu Naguchi setting up shop in Northwestern Queens—became an aspirational paradigm for artists for decades afterwards. The reality for the average artist tended to be a bit different, of course. Artist studios more commonly cropped up on upper floors of loft properties above long-standing manufacturing uses, or even mixed in side by side and floor by floor. When I worked at the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center between 1999 and 2012, I saw dozens of these arrangements in buildings throughout Brooklyn and Queens.

The use of vacant upper-floor loft space for working art studios represented a relatively symbiotic relationship, at least for a while. Working artists frequently have many of the same physical and environmental criteria as manufacturers: high ceilings, freight elevators, loading docks, and a high threshold for noise and toxic materials. Industrial property owners had few other uses for the space, and could offer the real estate to artists cheaply, as carrying costs were low and owners rarely held any debt on the properties. Artists were also capable of building out raw spaces themselves.

Deindustrialization vs. gentrification

Several things happened in the intervening decades that changed this symbiosis into something that, at least on the face of it, appeared more parasitical. First, New York City chose not to enforce its zoning, building and fire codes by letting artists live in their studios, in spite of the fact that many if not most of the buildings were not up to code and shared space with active manufacturing uses. The Loft Law of 1982 and the subsequent extension of the Loft Law in 2010 further encouraged illegal occupancies by requiring landlords to bring their buildings up to residential code and legalizing established residential uses.

² See Nina Rappaport, *Vertical Urban Factory*. More information available online at the following URL: www.verticalurbanfactory.org/OVERVIEW/index.html.

³ As an example, the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center purchased a 300,000-square-foot waterfront industrial property in 1994 from New York City for \$1. In the late 1980s, the city deemed the site a liability and had considered demolishing the entire structure.

Artists are by and large a low-income population⁴ and need affordable housing like any other low-income population. But as more and more artists chose to live in active industrial buildings, they increasingly lost their common cause with industrial businesses. Artists *working* in industrial spaces generally have a reasonably high tolerance for “low-performance” industrial uses, and moreover generally aren’t around when the forklifts start moving palettes at 6 a.m. Artists *living* in industrial spaces, possibly even raising children there, have a different perspective entirely.

The use (or prospective use) of industrial property as housing thus created an environment that, over time, facilitated speculation and the rapid acceleration of industrial land values. By creating the conditions for this speculation, artists also tend to take the blame for facilitating gentrification. Unlike brownstoners (see footnote 1), who tend to purchase property in existing low-income residential zones, artists in industrial zones play a far less direct role in gentrification, but a role nonetheless. Illegal occupancy helps justify further industrial displacement, which becomes a rationale for rezoning. This in turn leads to the speculative acceleration of land values and the subsequent displacement of working-class jobs and adjacent low-income communities.

Between 2003 and 2005, I was a member of the Rezoning Task Force set up by Brooklyn Community Board 1 to respond to the Greenpoint–Williamsburg rezoning proposal. The core purpose of the plan was to make room for more housing by rezoning manufacturing zones into residential zones (or mixed-use zones that were effectively residential zones).⁵ The framework document that the Department of City Planning put together prior to proposing the rezoning made a direct case that manufacturing was in its death throes, illustrated at least in part by the quantity of residential spaces scattered throughout the industrial areas of North Brooklyn.⁶ By failing to enforce its own zoning, the city had created the conditions that it now cited as the justification for large-scale land-use changes. Ten years later, workspace for both artists and manufacturers in North Brooklyn is far less available and far more expensive, residential rates are exponentially higher, and displacement is a chronic issue among historically low-income populations.⁷

Artists and industrial businesses share a common set of workspace challenges in a city where speculative residential real-estate development drives up rents, reduces supply and creates chronic land-use instability. While artists often unfairly shoulder the blame for gentrification, their propensity for the lifestyle choice of loft living (as opposed to the legitimate need for workspace), along with a tendency to participate in a discredited discourse of pioneering or reclaiming “abandoned” neighborhoods or buildings, at times makes them complicit in a developer-driven displacement process that, in the end, does not benefit artists. New artist-driven initiatives like the Artist Studio Affordability Project and the New York City Real-Estate Investment Cooperative have made strides toward addressing this issue directly. As the next wave of rezonings looms for what remains of the industrial outer boroughs, it is critical that artists and industrial businesses build coalitions focused on their mutual need for affordable, long-term workspace in stable industrial zones. Only by emphasizing their mutual space needs and affordability challenges can arts and industry regain their common cause.

⁴ Between 2005 and 2009, the annual median income for fine artists was \$34,000 (and only \$27,000 for women). Source: *Artists and Art Workers in the United States: Findings from the American Community Survey (2005–2009)*, The National Endowment for the Arts, 2011. Available online at the following URL: <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/105.pdf>.

⁵ See, for example, Laura Wolf-Powers, *Twilight Zoning*, Center for an Urban Future (commentary/op-ed), 2003. Available online at the following URL: <https://nycfuture.org/research/publications/twilight-zoning>.

⁶ “With the conversion of loft buildings to residential use in recent years, new residential uses have been emerging within industrially zoned areas. Though many of the conversions occurred illegally, they have nonetheless activated the once vacant upper floors of many older loft buildings”, *Planning Framework – Residential Growth, Greenpoint–Williamsburg Rezoning Plan*, 2003.

⁷ According to the NYU Furman Center’s *State of New York City Housing and Neighborhoods 2014*, the index of housing price appreciation in Brooklyn Community District 1 rose from a base of 100 in 2000 to 371.4 in 2014.

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