

# The Williamsburg Renaissance

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*The year is 1990. A newlywed couple has just moved into the railroad style one-bedroom apartment across the hall. They'll like it here—the street is quiet, the building is clean. Your morning stroll down the block brings you to the corner of Roebling and North 7th Streets. But don't turn on North 7th just yet. Look down Roebling. See the factories? They're perfectly lined up on the left side, on the right side... all the way down to McCarren Park, to those large, looming trees in the distance. Pretty soon they'll be turning yellow, orange, red, then the colors will fall, spread themselves over the grassy patches and bumpy asphalt leaving the naked branches to prepare for the heavy snowfall ahead. Smell the bread baking? It's that factory right there. Now turn on North 7th. Walk past the three-story walk-ups. Greet the old man sitting on his stoop and his granddaughter riding her tricycle. Tell her how fast she's growing up, as if that matters to a two-year old. Walk briskly past the L train. Turn left on Bedford Avenue and head over to Pedro's Grocery Store. Go in, ask him how his wife is, buy a gallon of milk, some eggs... wish him a good day. Walk home perfunctorily—almost without looking, you cross the streets. Think about introducing yourself to the new neighbors. They seem nice.*

Williamsburg in the 1990s was simply that, an industrial and residential area whose inhabitants were mostly of European and Hispanic descent. Affordable housing was in abundance and, although the apartments were small, the rent never surpassed \$500 a month. The couple you read about are my parents. That railroad style apartment was their first place together after their honeymoon, and the place they would call home for the next eighteen years. Their '83 Buick Regal was parked in front of the narrow building; plenty of space available down the block and across the street as well. Little did they know that in just a few years, parking would become almost impossible to find.

## **Condos Cutting Corners**

*Fifteen years later, the couple has two daughters, one ten, the other twelve months. You hear the baby crying in the distance. Must be hungry. See the sunlight coming in through the fire escape window and decide to go jogging in McCarren Park. Go down two flights, through the two metal doors, down the steps. Walk past the bread factory and stop for a while. Hear a bulldozer in the distance, look toward the construction workers across the street, the bright blue scaffolding on the next block, the new traffic light at the corner. You know, that's one of the last factories left. They've been replaced with tall buildings. Condos, they call them. Spanning Kent Avenue from North 5th to North 10th, the brand new luxury condominiums hover around \$1 million. The apartments start at \$2,400 a month. You only paid \$485 a month when you first moved in! The*

*biggest of the waterfront complexes is called EDGE. You've heard some of the apartments are designated for lower income residents. The family across from you has already applied—maybe you will too.*

What sparked all the change? Developers noticed the proximity of Williamsburg to Manhattan. The L and J trains, which span the North and Southside neighborhoods, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Bushwick areas, provide easy access to Manhattan, making the area attractive. By constructing luxury housing, Manhattan residents looking to spend less for equal luxury and still be close to work are instantly driven to Williamsburg. But it is not a coincidence that a bunch of developers suddenly noticed Williamsburg's potential. This is something the city had been planning for years. Expecting the population of Manhattan residents to increase, they *had* to prepare for the overflow of New Yorkers into the surrounding neighborhoods. Williamsburg, of course, was the chosen one. So developers not only bought factories, but three- and four-story buildings as well, paying sky-high prices to landlords and tenants so as to have the buildings vacant. Why? To demolish them, of course, replacing them with luxury apartments, co-ops, and condominiums. And the factories *not* worth tearing down are turned into lofts. These new developments are strictly designed for the incoming Manhattanites. They are mostly from the East Village, single women and single men—artists, they call themselves. Some *are* couples looking to start a family, yes, and that's what the two-bedroom condos are for, but there are very few of those. However, EDGE is not the only new development. In recent months, high-rise buildings such as the Northside Piers, 80 Met, 568 Union, 88 South 1st, and 29 Montrose Avenue have seemingly popped up. And most recently, the Domino Sugar factory project was resurrected, an eleven-acre property bought by the Walentas real estate family for \$185 million. The plan is to create 2,200 apartments, 70% being what we call "luxury" (Bagli).

### **Booming Businesses, Not Bodegas**

*The year is 2008. You cross Metropolitan Avenue looking both ways and subconsciously realize this is the boundary between the North and Southside neighborhoods. It seems as though Southside residents have somehow managed to keep their Hispanic culture alive. Maybe this condo thing hasn't hit them yet. But keep your eyes peeled. Remember that beverage distributor across the street from Kellogg's Diner? It says Sunac Natural Food. Nice building, big glass windows. Go in. Grab a cookie. Gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free, and fat-free. Price? Two dollars. Without so many ingredients, shouldn't it cost less? Leave the cookie on the shelf, walk out slowly. Take Havemeyer Street. Certainly C-Town hasn't changed. Wrong. Notice the new floors, bright lighting, and wide aisles? Pick up a jar of peanut butter. Organic, it says. Pick up another. Organic again. Desperately look on the top shelves, bottom shelves. Isn't there any Jif? Oh, look. Skippy. Turn the jar over. \$5.99. Almost drop it. Look behind you to see if anyone noticed. Put it back on the shelf carefully. Leave the store looking confused. Decide to pay a quick visit to Pedro's Grocery Store. Stand on the corner of North 8th and Bedford Avenue and look up. Where's the bodega?*

*Quick, pretend you've lost your way from the train station, blend in with the crowd. Make your way back to Roebling Street without tripping over all the bikes parked on the curb. Wonder why Hub's Pub is where Pedro's Grocery Store used to be? Almost walk into a woman walking her three Labrador Retrievers on a leash. Jump when they all bark at you, blush at the woman's laughter. Find the family across from you bringing boxes down the steps. Ask them if they need help and put the boxes in the trunk of their Toyota Sienna. After wishing them the best, go up the stoop, but turn around to watch them leave. Catch the landlord crying. Jog up the stairs fighting back tears, put the key in your lock with a heaviness on your shoulders. Look across the hallway and notice the empty apartment. Let the tears roll down.*

After developers provide new housing and entrepreneurs establish their organic stores and “cute” little pubs in Williamsburg, residents are no longer oblivious to the change. In fact, many residents feel fear and helplessness. Who is going to be shopping in these places anyway? Cue the hipsters! An article from the *Village Voice*, popular among Northside residents, references a British newspaper that calls Williamsburg “the national capital for young hipsters” and depicts these new residents as having “beards, piercings, lots of tattoos, and belong[ing] to at least one band” (Coscarelli). A simple stroll down Berry Street and North 6th would provide sufficient evidence. But these *hipsters*, as they are called, have slowly made their way into the Southside as well, specifically Grand Street, converting a small food distributor into an expensive T-shirt shop, a DVD rental store into a candlelit café, and causing Key Food to be completely unaffordable for most residents of the area. An article published last year in the *Daily News*, very popular among Southside residents, spoke out for those who feel their neighborhood has been taken over. It starts off with “Hey hipsters, keep your skinny jeans out of my Southside Williamsburg neighborhood.” The article goes on to interview many residents who share the same fear of being evicted from their own neighborhood. One man sums it up pretty well: “You wake up one morning and you see the corner bodega is now replaced by a fancy café or restaurant and you see your neighbors being pushed out because they can no longer afford the rent... You begin to wonder ‘Am I next?’” Another gentleman who was interviewed grew up in the neighborhood years ago and remembers nostalgically a bodega that used to be on South 4th and Driggs Avenue. Today a small cardboard sign hangs behind the window with “Pies ‘N’ Thighs” written in black marker (Nelson and Morales).

### **From the Outside Looking In**

The family who moved out of the small apartment on Roebling Street four years ago is my family. When we moved out, rent was under \$800, but the new tenants in the building were paying way over \$1,000 a month. Fortunately, that wasn't a problem for them. Of course we would miss the area: the proximity to the L train (not that you could find your way to the train station anymore—bike racks and long lines for dollar pizza blurred it from view), the Mexican bodega where we always bought fresh tortillas (not that it would be there much

longer—the sign on the window said “For Sale”), the convenient laundromat on Driggs Avenue and North 6th, Northside Pharmacy on Bedford Avenue, the Deli Mart a few blocks down, Vinnie’s Pizzeria, and Brothers Cleaners... but who knows how long *they’d* be there? And our landlord did cry. She begged us to stay, but finally settled for a nice dinner sometime in the upcoming months. We hopped in the minivan on our way to Maspeth, Queens. It’s not that we hadn’t tried to apply for those nice apartments on the Northside. We did. Even in Bushwick there were new developments. But it was always a matter of waiting. And frankly, we could not wait any longer. The people from EDGE finally replied, but it was too late. We were already enjoying our new apartment.

Although I live in Maspeth, my grandma still lives in the Southside and my sister goes to school across the street from her house. I have seen more and more of these hipsters going in and out of the brick six-story buildings that neatly line up her block and their new businesses on Grand Street where I wait for the bus. But, most importantly, I have taken note of the new elementary school that is gradually replacing the one my sister attends. It is the same school I went to: P.S. 19 Roberto Clemente. Back when my parents first moved in together, there were over 1,000 students in the school. Now there are only about 300. After continuous poor performance, the Department of Education decided to phase out the school, leaving only grades 3 - 5. This year they introduced P.S. 414 Brooklyn Arbor, where all the kids wear green shirts and khakis, and the entire faculty is white, with the exception of one paraprofessional who is African-American. P.S. 19, on the other hand, had a vastly diverse group of teachers, and good ones at that. Sadly, the Department of Education waited until it was too late to fire the person responsible for the school’s downfall: the principal. Believe it or not, this has all been part of the plan. A church on Union Avenue and Stagg Street, for example, has recently been demolished to make room for a new luxury building and, surely, the people who will move in, along with all the new residents on Keap Street, will have children of their own looking for a “good” school to enroll their kids in. P.S. 19 Roberto Clemente brings an air of Hispanic pride, what the Southside used to be about, while P.S. 414 Brooklyn Arbor has a more modern, eco-friendly feel to it. Appealing to whom? To those hip, young, fresh-from-across-the-East-River newcomers who have already infiltrated all of Williamsburg.

It’s almost funny, actually. These new residents walk around with 100% recycled bags, shirts that promote saving the environment, and loads of groceries from their favorite organic, natural, and health food shops. Yet, if you stop by McCarren Park any weekend in July, you’ll find yourself face to face with 6,500 men and women scurrying about the streets looking for the park’s entrance, anxious to see a not-so-famous band blast their acoustics across the East River, leaving trails of trash behind them like an evil *Hansel and Gretel*. An article in the *New York Times* looked at these summer concerts through the eyes of a long-time resident in the area: “the rivers of trash strewn along the street and on her stoop, the thunderous noise, [and] the drunken revelers using the street as a toilet” (Leland). To make my point simple: How could a group of people so

determined to “save the Earth” (think 1960s hippies with a more snobbish flair), be so inconsiderate as to litter the sidewalks, relieve themselves in the street, and walk around the residential areas of Williamsburg late at night completely intoxicated?

### **Calling It Gentrification**

Instead of working to provide lower-class residents with better structures, lighting, green areas, and security, the city has simply pushed them to poorer areas, conglomerating already overpopulated neighborhoods like East New York, Brooklyn and Ridgewood, Queens. It’s almost as if they are too undignified to live in neighborhoods near the city, as if Manhattan residents coming in might feel uncomfortable with them around. This is not the case. In fact, if anything, it’s the other way around. It’s not that Williamsburg residents are intolerant of these vibrant young artists, but to kick residents out by making them feel unwanted with the intention of making the area entirely upper-class is simply unacceptable. This type of gentrification is not a mere displacement. It’s about rebirthing Williamsburg, a renaissance if you will, transforming the environment into one that ostracizes the very people who gave birth to it in the first place, who worked tirelessly in the factories, who took care of their neighbors, who opened up delis and pizzerias and bakeries, and planted those beautiful trees that line Roebling Street.

Maybe we should’ve seen it coming. Maybe that summer night my next door neighbor’s daughter and I bought ice cream while watching the fireworks on North 6<sup>th</sup>, we should’ve realized those beautiful views of the Manhattan skyline would one day be blocked by high-rises and organic cleaners. Maybe while walking from the train station to my grandma’s house one afternoon, I should have noticed the new sketchy-looking pub on Broadway and Hooper Street and realized it was the first of many. Maybe. But I didn’t. And now it’s too late. Let’s just hope I can still find my way around Keap Street and Borinquen Place—so long as my favorite Caribbean food isn’t replaced by another Duane Reade.

### Works Cited

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