

**FROM Governing.com**  
**Otis White's Urban Notebook**

**Fast Times in Bushwick**  
**The 'Next New Neighborhood'**

How does neighborhood gentrification get started? And why does the transition from desolate to hip happen so fast in some places while taking so long in others? A recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* gives us some clues: It has to do with transportation connections, a group with a pioneer spirit and the right price. And, of course, it needs real-estate agents and developers intent on discovering the "next new neighborhood" and moving in ahead of competitors.

The article looked at **Brooklyn's** Bushwick, a neighborhood that was about as far down in the early 1990s as any in New York. How far down? In the 1977 blackout, when the electric grid failed and the city plunged into darkness, Bushwick was a scene of some of the city's worst rioting and arson. Later it was ground zero for the crack cocaine epidemic, and even today the median income there is about \$22,000 and 20 percent of residents are on welfare. Curb appeal remains next to zero. There are, the article says, "soot-covered stores, forgotten [for the moment, anyway] tenements, forlorn housing projects, factories that may or may not be empty, auto-repair shops" and on and on. So what makes real estate agents so sure this will be a hot neighborhood soon?

Because the artists have moved in. Bushwick is filled with dancers, sculptors and painters who came a few years ago in search of live-in studios with cheap rents. And they've, in turn, attracted the hip restaurants, bars and groceries that are starting to lure young stockbrokers and corporate middle managers who can afford nicer places with higher rents. Hence, the near-certainty among developers and agents that, in a few years, Bushwick will be the next new neighborhood.

But let's rewind the tape. What caused the artists to move to desolate Bushwick in the 1990s? That's easy: It was cheap. But why Bushwick and not some other neighborhood? This is where it gets interesting. Bushwick is on the L line of the New York subway system, and the L train passes through two neighborhoods that artists settled years ago, the Lower East Side of Manhattan and Brooklyn's Williamsburg. By the mid-1990s, rents were climbing in those areas, so the artists did what suburbanites do: They moved a little farther out for more house (and studio space) for their money.

It wasn't easy being a pioneer, though. Some of the early Bushwick artists moved into spaces with no heat or water ("they used charcoal barbecues to keep warm," the article notes), and even the more fortunate saw lawlessness all around. "It was a war zone" where crack addicts and prostitutes had to be shooed off the doorsteps, one who came in 1996 remembered. Entertainment? Another resident recalled that going to the Laundromat on Flushing Avenue was the high point of her week. "That was it," she said. "It was like camping."

Things began to change when the first hip restaurant arrived in 2002, followed by bars and natural-foods stores. These places drew out the artists, and their visibility signaled to other artists that Bushwick was a good place to live and work. As the article says, "a kind of artistic critical mass" was achieved by 2003.

But almost as soon as the critical mass was reached, the tide began to turn again, this time against the artists. Developers are buying up the coldwater studios and turning them into condos. As the article says, "artists are already being kicked out, before more than even a handful of new home buyers get to live alongside them." As neighborhood transformations go, this one happened in the blink of an eye: from war zone to artistic critical mass to next new neighborhood for yuppies in the space of a decade.

Posted March 24, 2006

---