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## Why I Believe New York's Art Scene Is Doomed

Ben Davis, Monday, January 12, 2015

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High-wire act: Suspended Cirque performance at Galapagos Art Space  
Image: Courtesy Galapagos Art Space

This is an article about art and gentrification, the [inescapable topic](#). I have something new to add—that I think we may be coming to the end of a period where being an artist was synonymous with being urban, unless we are willing to fight for it—but before I start it, let me say that I have mixed feelings about my own conclusions.

On the one hand, I like New York, and I think that artists should fight for their place in it. I believe that this would take some serious coalition building and some effort to break out of the shoe-gazing, white-guilt bottleneck where the conversation always gets stuck.

It would not be impossible to do so. If you read Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan's "[The Fine Art of Gentrification](#)" essay from 1987 about struggles in the East Village, you can see that there was a time when political consciousness was acute enough within the arts community in New York that taking a stand *against* "artists housing" was actually the commonsense radical thing to do. Artists clearly saw that they were being used by real estate interests to drive out poor communities and communities of color, and put their future with a larger struggle to change urban priorities.

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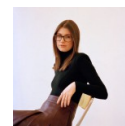
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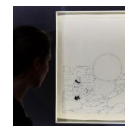
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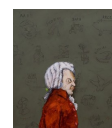
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Of course, those struggles failed to stop the gentrification of the East Village, so the contemporary version would actually have to be more sustained, more far-reaching. It could happen, and it's what I'd like to see happen. On the other hand, I think it's important to be honest about the hour, and the hour is late.

"The white-hot real estate market burning through affordable cultural habitat is no longer a crisis, it's a conclusion," Robert Elmes, the director of Galapagos Art Space announced this past year, saying that his organization was decamping to Detroit (see High Rents Drive Brooklyn's Galapagos Art Space to the Motor City). Shortly thereafter, the *New York Times* returned fire with an article stating that reports of New York's death as a creative capital are highly overstated. I actually appreciate wanting to do justice to the weird things still going on, even if I don't find the examples adduced—a rage for pop-up parties—that convincing. As long as there are interesting people, there will be interesting parties. But we are talking about a process that is still unfolding, and right now that process only goes one way.



The Night Heron, a pop-up speakeasy in a New York watertower

Photo: Courtesy The Night Heron

It is worth laying aside our NY-centricness for a second to note that this is part of a much, much bigger trend. This year you had Jen Graves's "How Artists Can Fight Back Against Cities That Are Taking Advantage of Them," from Seattle, and Christian L. Frock's "Priced Out" series from San Francisco, both examples of art scenes being smothered. There was even, at year's end, an article on how Asheville lost its cool. That's Asheville, North Carolina.

When it comes to my own city of residence, the best article I read last year was from the website Brokelyn. "There is nothing hip and cool happening in Brooklyn," community organizer Imani Henry told author Camille Lawhead. "It's a war."

He then begins to answer the question that gets lost because most gentrification stories are told from the point of view of the guilty consciences of first-wave gentrifiers: "If people can really think about it, there are people moving to the Poconos and Ithaca in their 70s. People with mental health conditions who have no place to go or live. Families are being pushed out of their apartments. There's nothing sexy, hot, or cute about it."

It's easy to think of this as just a process that will go on, the same as it ever was. But in the larger scheme of things, we are approaching or

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have passed a key inflection point, one that already has a branded name: "The Great Inversion," from Alan Ehrenhalt's imperfect but interesting book of the same name. In essence, the traditional relationship between suburb and city in American life is reversing. For a long period, the affluent used to move to the suburbs; over time, white flight emptied out inner cities of resources. But lately, the wealthy have been returning to the cities—gobbling them up, in fact. Some of those new apartment towers in Manhattan—such as the vast 432 Park, the tallest the city has ever seen, set to cast a shadow on Central Park—will not have much more than 100 units. That's the urban geography of inequality for you.



Artist rendering of 432 Park, which will be New York's tallest residential building and have only 104 units

Meanwhile, everyone else is being pushed out by the same process, while new immigrant groups are tending to settle in the suburbs as well. This trend has already passed an important threshold: in raw numbers, more poor people live in the suburbs now than in cities.

The "urban Renaissance" we are living through is a terrific example of solving a problem by not solving it, or rather, by turning it inside-out. We've imported suburbia to the city, recreating its bucolic aura via bike lanes and urban gardening, and its gated community vibe via "broken windows" policing. Soon it will have all those stereotypical negative characteristics of suburbia too: lack of human diversity, and commercial life crushed under chain stores (in his book, Ehrenhalt is strangely enthusiastic about Starbucks as a sign of the rebirth of city life). Meanwhile, we are exporting poverty to places where you need a car to survive.



Dumb Starbucks, a stunt parodying the omnipresent coffee chain (from the Comedy Central Show Nathan For You)

It is very possible that Detroit will become a new artists capital—Elmes says it is accumulating artists at "an astonishing rate"—but my guess is that all the same problems will follow artists there unless the political problems are solved (Galapagos is quite explicitly gambling on its ability to raise real estate values: "the arts are already in the real estate business—they just aren't being rewarded for it"). The pattern of hyping new funky hotspots is one real estate speculators have down cold, and have perfected in such a way that it has accelerated. (This is an international process: See the *New Republic's* piece on Berlin, "The Life and Death of a 'Cool' City".)

A little more than a decade ago, pundit Richard Florida put this all into a form ripe for marketers everywhere with his *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which told cities to court creatives as part of a development strategy, putting artists, whose incomes are very variable, into a confusing bloc with I-bankers and tech professionals. Now he admits that "creative class"-led development is not beneficial for all, because most people can't keep up with rising rents. Well, guess what else? His new thing is "Suburban Renewal." so get ready for the "creative suburb" to be a thing. "Maybe one day creative types will look down their noses from trendily sketchy suburban enclaves at those lame bourgeoisie in the cities," one author prognosticates.

Maybe that doesn't sound probable. But then 50 years ago when artists started moving into the blighted, abandoned industrial spaces in SoHo, no one would have thought that "loft living" would define the aesthetics of a new urban lifestyle. Well, the current conjunction looks to me like that particular cycle has matured, and a new one is set to begin. Somewhere, some new set of artists is inventing a new, very different way of being that will also look to have been inevitable in 50 years. In a very speculative way, I would say that Carlo McCormick's *ArtNews* article last year on the rise of the "hickster"—about artists leaving the city altogether—is a better hint of the future in a generation or so than Galapagos's move to Detroit, which seems just a stop on the way.

Neither is my favored option. My preferred option is a fight for the city. You've got to be clear on what that fight would take, though: It involves challenging a trend that we have already let go very, very far. Otherwise, gas up the car, because we are heading to the burbs.

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