

**The struggle to belong:  
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban  
settings.**

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**Public Space in a Gentrifying Neighborhood:  
Branding and Exclusion in Williamsburg Walks**

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***Abstract***

Retail and demographic gentrification is well documented in the social sciences, but few studies have examined the impact of this process on a neighborhood's public spaces. This paper focuses on an annual street closure event in Williamsburg, Brooklyn—a former working class neighborhood that is now attracting wealthy members of the upper class. “Williamsburg Walks,” a New York City initiative, eliminates car traffic on the main commercial street for select summer weekends. During the closure, residents and visitors are encouraged to “rethink” their use of the street and public spaces. However merchants, residents, and event organizers each have different motives and expectations for “Williamsburg Walks.”

While the event aims to create more public space and “a celebration of neighborhood,” it also serves an implicit goal of branding the neighborhood for the wealthy at the exclusion of long-term residents. Using ethnographic data from the 2008-2010 events, I analyze “Williamsburg Walks” in terms of a branding strategy, following earlier research by Andrew Deener and Miriam Greenberg.

***Introduction:  
The Neighborhood***

Over the past two decades Williamsburg, Brooklyn has experienced dramatic demographic changes in the social and economic makeup of the neighborhood. In the twentieth century North Williamsburg had been a manufacturing district. The area was predominantly working class and residents were often immigrants from Puerto Rico, Italy and Eastern Europe. Throughout the 1980s manufacturing companies began moving out of the neighborhood, either to less expensive and less unionized rural towns or foreign countries. Manufacturers who were committed to staying in the neighborhood were eventually priced out by landlords (Curran 2003, pg 1252). At the same time young artists, students and other “avant-gardes” were attracted to Williamsburg because of the proximity to the Lower East Side and the inexpensive rents. Recently abandoned manufacturing sites made convenient spaces for legal and illegal lofts, studios, galleries and party venues.

Although these original newcomers were unlikely to have more money than the working class residents, they did have different tastes<sup>1</sup>. Cafes, underground parties and vegetarian bistros came to define Williamsburg, and by the mid 90s Bedford Avenue was a destination for the young and hip. Eventually upper-middle class singles and families were attracted to the neighborhood because of the still affordable rent, the easy transportation to Manhattan and not least, the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu described taste as “a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions of existence” (1984). While avant-garde newcomers may not be wealthy or even middle class, their interests in art, music, and bohemian culture direct them towards different tastes than many of their working class neighbors.

atmosphere that the avant-gardes had created (Zukin 2009). In the early 2000s, small entrepreneurial businesses began opening to cater to the newer, wealthier Williamsburg residents. Over the past 7 years an artisanal cheese shop, multiple yoga studios, and several expensive boutiques have come to dominate North Williamsburg's retail scene.

The retail, demographic and cultural effects of gentrification are well documented in sociological literature, with several articles focusing on Williamsburg itself (Patch 2004, Curran 2003, Krase 2009, Zukin 2009). I intend to fill a gap in this literature by studying how community events reflect the tensions and goals of a gentrifying neighborhood. Williamsburg Walks, a forerunner of NYC's Summer Streets<sup>2</sup>, is one of many 'community' events in Williamsburg that result in the exclusion of long-time residents. The event can be viewed as a strategy in the branding of Williamsburg as a luxurious and upscale community. Because Williamsburg Walks is part of a broader initiative proposed by the Department of Transportation and the City of New York it is important to understand how these events are planned and what effects they might have on diverse neighborhoods. This paper focuses on a case study of "Williamsburg Walks," a street closure event on the main retail and transportation street of North Williamsburg, Bedford Avenue.

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<sup>2</sup> The Summer Streets program started in 2008, Williamsburg Walks was the first of these public space "experiments." In its purest form the project entails closing the street to car traffic and encouraging people to use the space as they will, but over the years Williamsburg Walks has turned into a highly commercialized event. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/summerstreets/html/home/home.shtml>

### ***Initiating Williamsburg Walks***

Williamsburg Walks is a community event that started in the summer of 2008. The project, initially proposed by the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT), was designed to be “a celebration of the Williamsburg community, centered around a pedestrian-only Bedford Avenue” (Colvin 2008, pg4). The event has taken place for the past three consecutive summers, occurring on various weekends. The first event shut down the street for four Saturdays, the 2009 edition was extended to six, and in 2010 the street was closed for only one weekend in June. Each time, a few blocks of Bedford Avenue have been transformed from a busy thoroughfare into a venue for picnics, sports, and neighborly interaction.

While the event has changed over the past three years, the slogan “rethink your public space” has remained constant. With this mantra the organizers (several of them urban planning students from NYU and CUNY) hoped to communicate that the event is about community- it’s about neighbors getting out to know one another and using the newfound public space for just about anything non-commercial. Flyers remind residents and visitors that the event is not a street fair “there will be no funnel cake and no cheap tube socks...we simply want the community (YOU) to come out and enjoy the public space<sup>3</sup>” (Colvin 2008, pg 47). The emphasis for

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<sup>3</sup> This specific aversion to tube socks and funnel cake was also noted in many of the interviews I have done with the event organizers.

Williamsburg Walks, at least how it has been marketed, is that it is a social experiment— a new way of building community.

DOT began the planning process by contacting Brooklyn’s Community Board 1 and the transportation committee chair, Teresa Toro. Teresa had previously worked with business owners a few years prior when the L train was out of service for several weekends; she knew how important it was that the businesses support this change in vehicle transportation. Teresa said of the L train situation, “the businesses were really impacted at that time” so it was vital that local business owners understand “how DOT’s idea would differ from a street fair, [there would be] no sidewalk competition for the businesses.”<sup>4</sup> The Williamsburg Walks’ website and literature stresses that the event is about members of the community using public space, but the DOT website states “Local merchants’ associations, community groups, and business improvement districts host these Weekend Walks to provide a fun new way to highlight local businesses and cultural institutions” (Weekend Walks 2010).

The role of businesses in Williamsburg Walks is contentious. Some planners claimed that business owners had nothing to do with the concept while others, like Teresa above, acknowledge the need for their support. A few owners on Bedford Avenue have fought against the Walks initiative claiming it hurt their business, while other owners support the event in hopes that solidarity among local proprietors will facilitate the creation of a BID. Jason Jeffries, owner of the Bedford Cheese Shop and Verb Café, included a discussion of the Walks event in a recent

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<sup>4</sup> This quote, and any others that do not have citations, are from my interviews with organizers, store-owners and participants.

grant application for the Northside Merchants Association<sup>5</sup>. Whatever the capacity business owners play in the production of Williamsburg Walks, their opinions do matter. Complaints about lost profits and competition from street vendors resulted in fewer Walks for 2010 and strict policing of street vendors.

### ***Evolution of Williamsburg Walks 2008-2010: Planning and Execution***

The goal of Williamsburg Walks has always been to create a social experiment where people come out and use temporary public space however they would like. This goal was perhaps only realized for the 2008 edition, after which the event became more programmed and formalized. At noon on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008 Williamsburg Walks volunteers set up barricades along Bedford Avenue from Metropolitan to North 9<sup>th</sup> streets. Businesses on Bedford Avenue were allowed to use the sidewalks in front of their buildings as extensions of their restaurants or boutiques, and individuals were encouraged to enjoy and creatively use the street. For the most part people just walked down the street as if it were the sidewalk, but some made use of DOT tables and chairs that had been set up and others sat down with a book or even suntanned (See Figure 1). I observed informally at one of the several Walks days. It wasn't that well publicized in my neighborhood and I was confused, as were many others, about the point of the closure. Organizers later acknowledged that promotion was done mainly on the Neighbors Allied for Good Growth (NAG) blog and by word of mouth. From both my observations at the event

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<sup>5</sup> Jason also indicated that he and other owners drove the development of the event. Williamsburg Walks was hosted on his website Blenderbox for the first year. Connie Colvin, an employee at Blenderbox, headed logistics and a final report.

and photographs that were later posted on the site, the event looked overwhelmingly homogenous. Most people taking part in the event were young, white Americans. There were few families on the street, and the older Polish and Hispanic residents were almost completely absent.



(Figure 1, from [billburg.com/walks](http://billburg.com/walks))

After the first few Saturdays people began to vend on the street, and this was really the only Hispanic presence I observed at the 2008 Walks. A few people were selling food and others were having yard sales. Something that the planners did not anticipate was that for many people, amateur entrepreneurialism was how they would use their public space. The merchants complained that the commercial activities taking place on the street were detracting from their businesses, so for



2009 only street vendors who already had licenses to operate on Bedford were allowed to sell during Williamsburg Walks.

The 2008 event was organized by DOT, Community Board 1, and local businesses along with NAG. After the inaugural year the majority of the event was planned by members of NAG, specifically Michael Freedman-Schnapp and Gregor Nemitz-Ziadie. Michael had volunteered for the event in 2008, and he organized a planning meeting for the 2009 edition that April. There were 9 people at the meeting including the planners, 6 white men, 2 white women, and 1 young black woman. A few of the people in attendance were business owners, and one young man was a writer for L magazine, a sponsor of Williamsburg Walks.

Based on a survey from the 2008 Walks, there was a perception that people did not really understand the purpose of the street closure. Respondents also mentioned that they would like some activities to be provided (Colvin 2008). While commerce was a concern, the foci of the 2009 planning meeting was how to bring more programming to the street and to better promote Williamsburg Walks. They decided to have activities catering to “art, music, community organization, local food [and] family activities” (Williamsburg Walks 2009-2010 Report, pg 8).

From my observations the 2009 Walks were better attended. Walking south down Bedford Avenue I noted that many of the restaurants and cafes on the street had extended their services onto the sidewalks, a few of the boutiques placed clothing racks or merchandise outside of their stores. The usual sidewalk vendors set up their wares, and the street was a bit more active than the previous year. Children colored on a giant roll of paper unfurled on one of the streets, there were

intermittent performances- some planned, some spontaneous, and several local community groups had information tables on the street. Although illegal vending was prohibited, there were still some people selling food - a woman and her son cooking platanos under a tent, another woman selling horchata from large jugs. Again, most of the people I saw vending food were of Hispanic origin<sup>6</sup>. While the 2009 events were more successful in getting people to use public space, there was still an issue of illegal vending which became a very important issue for the 2010 edition of Williamsburg Walks. An internal summary document that the planners put together after the 2009 event stated “several people at the wrap up session complained that too many activities were taking place reinforcing the feeling of Bedford Ave as a ‘permanent Mardi Gras’ and diverting people from shopping” (Williamsburg Walks 2009-2010 Report, pg8). This indicates that by 2009 the purpose of Williamsburg Walks had shifted from being a “social experiment” to a local-commerce focused event.

On April 21<sup>st</sup> the 2010 “Williamsburg Walks Community Brain Storming Session” was held at Teddy’s, a restaurant off Bedford Avenue on the Northside. Many more people showed up at this planning meeting, 20 excluding myself. However, even though the group was larger it was more homogenous in age and race, unlike last year the proportion of men and women were more even. This year the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) was involved, in addition to NAG. Representatives from PPS gave a presentation on the mission of this years’ event: celebrate the neighborhood, relax, shop at local stores, rethink public spaces. Gregor

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<sup>6</sup> They did not have licenses on display and they were unauthorized according to planners.

helped to plan the event again this year, and he stressed that there were no commercial intentions aside from encouraging local businesses.

Illegal vending was a major theme at the meeting. The organizers stated that over the past two years they had realized the importance of enforcing a 'no vending' rule, and that vending would be policed for 2010. As a result of pressure from local businesses, the organizers decided that having a considerable police presence at the event would be preferable to a handful of illegal vendors. They maintained that vendors who were normally on the street would be allowed to continue selling, but no new vendors would be permitted. When one resident asked why it was such a problem Gregor replied that the extra vendors made it "too crowded," and they were trying to promote the established businesses. While promoting local business is one of the many benefits of Williamsburg Walks, it was clear from this meeting that it had become a primary goal. As the brainstorming continued people gave ideas about how to get Walkers to visit stores- a scavenger hunt or a booth where you could sew your own bag to use while shopping. One organizer said he wanted any ideas "that connect[s] the programming with the merchants."

The 2010 Williamsburg Walks was the most programmed version to date and the most like a street fair, just shy of the dreaded tube socks and funnel cake. More people were using the space than in years past, likely as a result of the engaging programs. The children's block had an outdoor gymnasium, an art competition was staged throughout the blocks, and a picnic area was set up by the local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) group. Williamsburg businesses who do not have a presence on Bedford Avenue were allowed to use some space in the

street. The boutique 'Peachfrog' had a table where they handed out flyers for their store and 'Jungle,' a garden supply store, set up a green oasis at one end of the event.

Brooklyn Brainery and Green Mountain Energy<sup>7</sup> both had booths set up in the street, although the former is based out of downtown Brooklyn and the latter has nothing to do with Brooklyn at all. Although these were not neighborhood institutions, they fit in with the ideals of Williamsburg Walks, and so they were permitted to table at the event. Someone who did not fit in with this image was Charles St. George (See Figure 2). Charles was selling jewelry at the corner of a side street. His NYC permit was clearly displayed but he was located on a cross street instead of directly on Bedford Avenue. I was surprised at this since he was clearly an authorized vendor, and at the planning meeting organizers confirmed that the usual vendors would be permitted. Charles showed me a letter he received from Williamsburg Walks planners stating that there would be no street vending allowed and police action would be taken if he set up his booth on Bedford Avenue. Charles is a usual fixture on Bedford Avenue, and has been for a few years—longer than some of the newer boutiques and bars. He said he appreciated what Williamsburg Walks did for the community, but he found it unfair that he was suddenly not allowed to sell in his regular spot. Groups like Brooklyn Brainery and Green Mountain, although not local, were encouraged to take up space on Bedford Avenue because these organizations reflect the concerns and hobbies of Williamsburg's

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<sup>7</sup> Brooklyn Brainery is a creative DIY 'school' where people sign up to take classes, topics ranging from cooking or crafts to American Sign Language. Green Mountain is a renewable energy company that provides solutions to business and private consumers.

wealthier residents. Charles' "street boutique" does not fit with these tastes and so he was explicitly excluded from the event.

Although the 2010 event was more successful in attracting families it was still not representative of the diverse community. Williamsburg walks has its own website where it hosts pictures and videos of previous Walks, FAQs, and a map of the planned activities. Blogs like "free Williamsburg" and "Greenpointers" also advertise the event. But the signs that go up in the physical spaces of Williamsburg are deliberately vague (See Figure 3), and for many people in the neighborhood this would be their only way of finding out about the event. The lack of outreach to the Polish and Hispanic communities in the neighborhood inhibits their participation. They might come to Bedford Avenue while the event is going on, but from my observations this only results in confusion.



(Figure 2, by Sara Martucci)



(Figure 3, by Sara Martucci)

I met Lilian and Stan, a Ukrainian and Polish couple, sitting on chairs on the sidewalk at the end of the event on Sunday. I asked if they had participated in any way “There’s nothing here for us,” Lilian replied. Gladys, a Puerto Rican woman, was studying the activities map with her husband and daughter when I approached them. It was around 5pm on Saturday and the event was packing up for the day. I asked if they had participated in Williamsburg Walks and Gladys replied that they had just wandered over because they were wondering why the street was closed.

The lack of outreach to the working-class and long-time residents coupled with the increasing focus on local boutiques and restaurants reflects broader tensions in Williamsburg. The community event can be understood as part of an active attempt to brand Williamsburg for the upper classes that are recently moving. This results in the inclusion and promotion of consumption activities and the exclusion of less wealthy residents from the physical spaces—an issue that is not only a problem for Williamsburg, but many gentrifying places.

### ***Analyzing Williamsburg Walks***

Williamsburg Walks certainly provides many benefits to the neighborhood. Having a car free street gives everyone (theoretically) an opportunity to enjoy public space. The children's block gave guardians the opportunity to socialize, possibly leading to the creation of various networks among parents. Residents and visitors were able to use the street to share food, play games, and make crafts—undoubtedly leading to a stronger, if temporary, sense of 'community' among participants. However there are serious problems with the execution and goals of Williamsburg Walks. The event has become a strategy in the branding of Williamsburg, leading to the privileged inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. Although the initial concept of the event seems benign, a critical exploration of the processes leading up to Williamsburg Walks exposes it as a microcosm of gentrification in the neighborhood.

Greenberg (2008) introduces a discussion of New York's crisis-laden '70s with a description of how the city's image was carefully branded. Post-Fordist New York experienced a grim period characterized by disinvestment, job loss and high

crime. Williamsburg went through a similar phase in the late '70s and early '80s. By the time the city was rebranded for tourists with "I Love New York," artists, musicians and other avant-gardes had just begun moving into the Brooklyn neighborhood. Williamsburg has been on the cultural radar as a hip neighborhood for about two decades, but it is only now that the neighborhood is being actively branded. The area at first transitioned from Polish and Hispanic working class into a hip atmosphere with cafes and galleries. However modern Williamsburg, in the throes of "super gentrification," is seeing an influx of upper-class residents and an active campaign to brand the neighborhood as luxurious (Lees 2003, pg 2488).

Andrew Deener explores this theme of branding at Venice Beach in Los Angeles where merchants and real estate developers collaborated to shift the image of the district (2007). "Local actors," as Deener refers to them, created an image of Venice that focused on the artistic history and effectively erased previous images that the neighborhood was associated with. This changed the main shopping strip into a manufactured experience, a destination for tourists at the exclusion of many long time residents. A similar process is now occurring in Williamsburg. Bedford Avenue features expensive restaurants and cafes, boutiques and bars to satisfy newer residents and visitors. The public and commercial spaces of the neighborhood predominantly cater to wealthier newcomers, at the exclusion of working-class residents. Williamsburg Walks can be understood as both a method and outcome of this branding process.



Dozens of condo buildings have been erected over the past 3 years as a result of a new zoning policy by City government<sup>8</sup>. As wealthy residents move in, the retail options in the neighborhood have changed. In 2007 the main Laundromat closed while several cleaners have opened around the condos- the wealthy bring their laundry to be done by someone else. *Penny Lane*, the whimsical vegan candy, store closed in 2009 and in its place is *Radish*, a pricey take-out spot with a 19<sup>th</sup> century décor. The ticketing corporation “Live Nation” now charges \$20-\$50 for admission to the summer “pool party” concerts that were once free in nearby McCarren Park. These changes reflect “product modifications...that privilege certain social classes” in Williamsburg (Greenberg 2008, pg 10). Through aesthetics, retail options and cultural events Williamsburg is becoming rebranded as a consumption destination for the upper classes. In addition to Williamsburg Walks, the neighborhood has started two new traditions in the past year “Taste Williamsburg”—a display of all the best local “food and beverage purveyors<sup>9</sup>”; and “Willifest<sup>10</sup>”—the first international film festival in the neighborhood.

Greenberg says this of the attempt to brand New York in the ‘70s: “None of these branded visions made reference to...[the] famously polyglot, racially diverse, proudly working class culture, except to extol the shopping and entertainment opportunities such culture at times provided” (2008, pg 11). This is true in Williamsburg’s case as well. In the 2000 census Williamsburg was “41% White, 43.6% Hispanic, and 5.7% Black” and these numbers don’t show the diversity within

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/greenpointwill/greenoverview.shtml>

<sup>9</sup> <http://tastewg.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.willifest.com/index.html>

those groups – Polish, Italian, American, Puerto Rican, Mexican and so on (Curran 2003, pg 1250). Events like “Taste” and “Willifest” celebrate the diversity of the neighborhood in only the most superficial way—as a means of consumption for people who can afford it. The only time Polish or Hispanic culture entered into Williamsburg Walks was in the CSA picnic that attempted to incorporate a “local cuisine” competition (local going as far back as the Keesachauge Indians). A few Polish and Hispanic restaurants were featured at “Taste Williamsburg” and “Willifest” had film representation from these cultures, but both of these events charged pricey admissions.

When I asked an organizer about the lack of Polish and Puerto Rican vendors and visitors at the first Williamsburg Walks he replied that the flyers distributed to merchants were not translated into Polish and Spanish early enough for the 2008 event. However these groups were also absent from years two and three, indicating that the problem lies not in the translation but rather a lack of outreach. These groups do not fit into the branding of Williamsburg as a site of luxury and convenience. Pierogi and arepas are items for consumption that attract foodies to the neighborhood, but the everyday aspects and aesthetics of the working-class culture—butchers, bodegas, and multi-lingual signage—are disappearing in favor of upscale restaurants and boutiques (the signage is mostly anglicized now but there is occasionally some French).

Williamsburg Walks reflects the processes of exclusion and inclusion that go on throughout the neighborhood as it gets branded as a site for luxury. The original purpose of Walks was to utilize temporary public space, but at the 2010 event

nearly everything one could do on the street (aside from viewing the art competition) served as advertising for local businesses. With a focus on consumption, less wealthy residents were not engaged in the activities. Certain groups- like the Children's Gym, Jungle nursery, Brooklyn Brainery, and the Vietnamese sandwich shop were allowed to sell or advertise on the street. This was a luxury that was not afforded to the book vendors and the Mexican food stands that are a daily fixture on Bedford Avenue and certainly contribute to the everyday public space of the neighborhood. For events like Walks these remnants of hip and/or working class Williamsburg do not fit into the brand because they do not cater to upper class tastes.

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