

# 2nd Rate Urbanism in 1st Rate Urban Areas?

*by Doreen Jakob*

*„New York is. You take it for granted that it's the arts' center of the world so you don't have to build that image. So we're fighting for dollars for our area. We fight with Manhattan. Each one of these areas is looking to brand itself. Red Hook is Red Hook, DUMBO is DUMBO. They're looking to gain a reputation. To build that. To make it a destination point in peoples' minds which drives economic activities, development and ultimately puts you in the mindset of the art world. That is valuable. We don't have the same challenges like a smaller town that may not have as much arts. We have different challenges.” (Director of an outer borough Council on the Arts)*

'Sex and the City' character Samantha Jones is outraged to hear that her new boyfriend's theater play shows in Brooklyn. Not only does she hate theater but she definitely doesn't 'do the boroughs'. The preview is sparsely attended though Samantha's PR expertise will quickly change that. The red carpet is lined with photographers waiting for New York City's socialites who all 'crossed the bridge' in their chauffeur-driven limousines. Of course this is

TV where many things are always a little bit more sparkly than reality itself. Yet this episode depicts well the resistance of many New Yorkers to leave their own borough or even neighborhood.

New York City's descriptions are manifold. It is the most populous city in the United States, a global hub, financial center, art metropolis etc. Nevertheless the city is not one entity but rather a mosaic and dense gathering of many distinct neighborhoods. Such places are localized communities often defined by a specific industry, population, or activity that determine a particular external image, an internal representation and sense of belonging. But besides the different characteristics that those areas entail, there also seems to be some 'unofficial' hierarchy and ranking of them in people's minds based on their experiences, knowledge, personal location, and mental maps. In this, especially outer borough, meaning, outside of Manhattan, areas become secondary locations within New York City regardless their often closer proximity to 'first rate' neighborhoods in Manhattan than between the different neighborhoods in Manhattan itself.

Hence to make people travel from what are assumed to be first rate to what are considered second rate locations is rather difficult as a Long Island City Designer observed: *"New Yorkers are wimps. Getting people to Long Island City is like trying to make them travel to Mars."* or a Williamsburg gallery owner stated: *"Going to Williamsburg is like trying to go to Zimbabwe to them."* (1)

In New York City, creative industries (2) are not confined to one location but proliferate throughout the five boroughs where they frequently form intrametropolitan clusters – geographically bound agglomerations of networks of mainly informal social relationships often represented by a specific place-based image and identity. A map of the share of workers that are in creative sectors reveals stark concentrations in the lower part of Manhattan as well as along the East River waterfronts of Brooklyn and Queens.

Many of them came *"to New York City to be in New York City and not on another periphery. If you come here, you come here for being in the city."*(Bronx artist) although, *"You really want to be in the center. But if you cannot afford that, you concentrate in the best place just right outside the*



Percentage of all creative employed on all employees in New York City 2004. \*

center – that's Williamsburg.”(Williamsburg based architecture firm) Yet for the director of the Sculpture Center there still a strong resistance to ‘cross the river’ as she claimed: *“There is definitely still a psychological barrier. New Yorkers seem to be unable to go out of their usual round. Many of them seem to have no sense of geography”.*

The president of a very successful and award winning New York City film company expressed her feelings about moving from New York City's ‘true center’ of the art scene (SoHo, Manhattan) after running an office there from 1975 until 1991 to the ‘second rate’ location Long Island City, Queens, the following way:

*“I notice that I seem to be overly concerned with the unfashionable aspect of Queens, as though I feel second rate living here. But that may be because LIC is not the true center of the U. S. art world at the moment. So my answer is, why would someone who wants to be the best in the world come here, particularly in a field so reliant on status and fashion? Why not go to Paris, Manhattan or Williamsburg? [...] I can't imagine LIC getting fashionable like SoHo or Williamsburg, because it is still and ever will be ‘Kweenz’ – meaning that it will never be cool for some people. Indeed, I had people make fun of me from the film business, and some trendier friends refuse to visit and have fallen away as friends. Even people outside of New York City, maybe due to ‘Archie Bunker’ and ‘King of Queens’, think of Queens as unfashionable. I have come to embrace that aspect. There is a kind of provincialism that I find very charming now, and I feel sorry for Manhattanites paying high rents to live in high rises which look very much like what used to be called projects. I read a New York Times article about the Upper East Side of Manhattan being home to the greatest number of used designer clothing stores – I got a headache just thinking how unpleasant that must be to have to run in that race again. It is a pleasure to live in such a small pond, so to speak, but still near Manhattan if I need to go in. But I must say, I breathe a sigh of relief as soon as I come over the bridge or through the tunnel into LIC. It is home to me now. So I started out with an inferiority complex. But now, without glorifying the downsides of LIC, I know am very lucky. We are still ‘second rate’ in the eyes of many, and therein lies the wonderful part of it. You know the movie ‘Basquiat’? That Manhattan art scene is just too hard to compete in; a nightmare. It interferes with the work. LIC is like comfortable pajamas that are unexpectedly flattering.”*

Though what is liberation to some of the more established creative entrepreneurs, seems a failure to younger entrepreneurs. The owner of a South Bronx new-media company said about Manhattan-centric location decisions:

*"A lot of artists live in world of delusion. They come to Manhattan because they want to be little Andy Warhols and look for a certain formula to achieve this. They are on a career race. They want to be on the right track. Moving out of Manhattan represents a failure to them."*

Creative industries are dominated by their sign and symbolic values whereby location and geographic origin signals status and success of the entrepreneur and its product. Asking creative entrepreneurs whether it is important where they are located within New York City in addition to being in the city in general, generated a storm of indignation especially when suggesting 'less successful' areas as possible other locations. Their reactions ranged from neutral statements of "It makes a huge difference if you have a New York City 212 phone number, for agents and funding." and defensive "*People do not listen to me, if I say I am a Queens girl.*" to affronted outcries of "*No way I would go to Astoria!*" and a Long Island City art space owner further clarified: "*People judge your art and other factors. They have to differentiate between you and your competitors and the big questions becomes: Where does she live?*"

Yet besides the status based implication of locating in secondary New York City neighborhoods there are also plain practical reasons involved as a designer explained: "*I can't really sell here. I have to sell elsewhere, in Manhattan stores. Sales depend on foot traffic and there is none here.*"

Others are inventive and find ways to grasp the attention of the Manhattan scene. "*We threw a big party for our opening and invited the whole Manhattan music scene*" remembered the owner of a Williamsburg recording studio "*to make them understand how easy it was to come here.*" And a studio building owner expressed: "*You always need a reason to get people together and then they will say 'Hey that's not too far. That's easy to get to.'*"

Thus many New York City creative entrepreneurs start to form place-based networks and engage in joint marketing strategies with the intention of collectively raising more awareness to their site hence their activities and products. In this, what was once perceived as 'second class', as an outside location from the actual center, becomes 'exotic'.

*"There are certain people who are trying to utilize and capitalize on the sexiness of the neighborhood, the exoticness of the neighborhood, get attention for their work through other means. I find myself doing that to a certain extent as well. I want to help my business. I want to establish a presence. I would love for my presence to be established solely through ideas and art. But maybe one needs to use other vehicles in order to get to the ideas of the art."* (visual artists)

Though not all New York City creative entrepreneurs share that view. In fact, some are rather annoyed and angry about their colleague's location-based branding activities as they feel it is more a defense mechanism than a sign of extraordinary quality. This Bronx interviewee claimed:

*"You hear Bronx artists say 'Oh Chelsea, oh it's such a joke.' You have artists here saying all they see there is shit and I am always correcting them. I am please don't get provincial. Don't even pretend that what we've got here is better than Chelsea. Simply because Chelsea won't take you in and you're not an exhibiting artist in Chelsea and you have a chip on your shoulder. Don't even pretend that you don't want to be exhibiting in Chelsea and that what we have here is better than Chelsea so there! Bullshit. What goes on in Chelsea is fucking amazing. Yeah, there's a lot of crap but there's also a lot of amazing stuff. From Berlin, from Johannesburg, from Tokyo, from the Bronx. It's Chelsea, come on. You put down Chelsea because they're not taking you in and build up a whole defense mechanism and invent a community that you're part of because you don't fit. These things creep me out."*

However, local urban growth coalitions (Logan/Molotch 1987) very much welcome those activities and are quick to assist and foster, more and more often even organize and initiate them. Inspired by Landry's (2000) 'creative city' and Florida's (2002) 'creative class' and general political strategies of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey 1989), creative industries become an

*'irresistible cocktail'* (Evans 2003) to city authorities because their visible presence provides 'free gifts' in forms of amenities, atmosphere, local perceptions, and images.

As stated in the introductory citation, New York City local, neighborhood based, growth coalitions engage in an intra-metropolitan competition around resources, investments, visitors, and reputation whereby secondary places are especially eager to climb up that internal 'New York City ranking ladder'. If located there, creative industries become the preferred strategy to re-brand the neighborhood. Thus local growth coalitions become the initiators of local creative industries networks, sponsor publications, maps, or festivals. For instance, the Long Island City Business Development Corporation and the Queens Council on the Arts brought together a group of Long Island City based cultural institutions that formed the Long Island City Cultural Alliance (LICCA), a network that is committed to

*"promoting and increasing the visibility and accessibility of Long Island City which is home to an amazingly diverse group of visual and performing arts organizations as well as cultural institutions and activities."* ([www.licarts.org](http://www.licarts.org))

Questioned about their involvement, local growth coalitions argued often like this:

*"To make a destination takes a lot of people. Local EDCs, it takes the Tourism Council, it takes local community boards, it takes local Chambers of Commerce, it takes local arts and cultural organizations to start talking to each other, to have a little festival, a parade. [ ] Like we did with Art Frenzy. We settled on an area and decided to do something in that particular area that was all encompassing. To contribute to the widening of the perception that there is all this stuff going on in Long Island City."*

And the Director of the Long Island City Business Development Corporation later said about the Art Frenzy festival: *"Art Frenzy brand marked the area as a cultural destination. There was a buzz, a new energy level."*

Whether all those efforts will eventually lead to the admission into the circuit of first-rate New York City neighborhoods is debatable and remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the direction seems right for this interviewee: *“There is still the perception that anything outside Manhattan is not New York City. But things change now. We are no longer just the guys over the bridge.”* (Long Island City studio building owner)

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#### Notes

(1) The quotations are all based on a study exploring the development of intra-metropolitan creative industries clusters in New York City unless otherwise noted. For further details regarding methodology and results please refer to Jakob 2007(a) and 2007(b).

(2) Creative industries within the context of this paper are defined as those sectors of the economy that produce goods and services whose sign- and aesthetic-value to the consumer is dominating compared to their utilitarian purpose encompassing advertising, film and video, broadcasting, publishing, architecture, design, music, visual arts, and performing arts.

\* Map: Doreen Jakob, 07/ 2004

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