

9.10.06

The Way We Live Now



The stroller set and the artist class almost mix outside Tillie's cafe in Fort Greene.

THE PRICE OF HIPNESS

Median monthly rent, with utilities, for apartments:

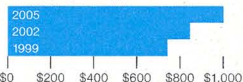
Fort Greene/Brooklyn Heights
(Brooklyn)



Williamsburg/Greenpoint
(Brooklyn)



Long Island City/Sunnyside/
Woodside (Queens)



Source: United States Census Bureau, 1999-2005 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey. Prices are for market-rate and rent-stabilized apartments.

Chart by L. Eckstein

Where It's At

Is Bohemia a mentality, a relic or an economic 'cultural district'?

By James Traub

In New York City, Bohemia is determined by real estate: artists gather in raffish neighborhoods where studio space is cheap; the new outposts of culture and consumption they establish make the quarter desirable, thus raising the rents to prohibitive levels; the artists then decamp for the next shabby enclave. Starting in the 1960's, what New Yorkers meant by "downtown" shifted from Greenwich Village to SoHo to TriBeCa to the Lower East Side. But Manhattan is a narrow island, and the portion of it dense enough to sustain the feeling of self-enclosure that Bohemia requires is quite small. And so, starting in the 1980's, as rents skyrocketed, downtown began to migrate across the East River to Brooklyn.

By now, those portions of Brooklyn first colonized by fleeing artists have almost completed the cycle of embourgeoisement. Williamsburg, the heart of

Brooklyn's gallery scene, has been thoroughly tamed by brasseries and boutiques; the kind of artists who aren't yet showing in those galleries are now moving to deepest, darkest Queens. But the middle-class householder geography of Queens offers too barren a soil for the rooting of a new Bohemia. Fortunately, there is lots more Brooklyn available.

There is, of course, something wishful, or perhaps wistful, about this perpetual hunt for the urban El Dorado. A place that can shift around so easily sounds less like a neighborhood than a mentality, or a species of nostalgia. In most of America, after all, "downtown" simply means "the city" — the place where things are close enough to one another that

you can walk. But in New York, where every square inch feels urban, downtown is a refuge from — a repudiation of — the conventionality of Midtown, and mid-everything. Downtown is a concept, and perhaps an archaic one.

The idea of Bohemia arose with the bourgeois city, against which it defined itself. In the Paris of "La Bohème" — the Latin Quarter, circa 1830 — the artist willingly courts starvation and disease as the price of freedom. The poet Rodolfo may be giddy as he shovels his manuscript into the fire to keep warm, but it's still the only source of fuel he has. Life was scarcely less desperate — or less delightful — in the downtown Manhattan of 1910, when the poet and propagandist John Reed, according to one biographer, "ate in obscure foreign restaurants, talked with the girls who walked the street in 'Satan's Circus'" and caroused with Spanish longshoremen.

Reed's latter-day descendants are threatened not by penury but by gentrification. How can Bohemia contend with the twin baby stroller? The other day, walking around Fort Greene, one of Brooklyn's current claimants to downtown cultural status, I stopped at an office building called 80 Arts. In the Museum of

James Traub is a contributing writer for the magazine.

Photograph by Jessica Dimmock