

## Gentrification and the nature of work: exploring the links in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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**Abstract.** This paper looks at the linkages between gentrification and the displacement of small-scale manufacturing and blue-collar work in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Although the link between global economic change and gentrification has been made for the upper classes who are the consumers of the gentrified landscape, very little work has been done on the blue-collar work and workers that remain in the central city despite the assumption by policymakers that deindustrialization is complete. I argue that manufacturing is still a viable sector of the urban economy that is increasingly at risk of displacement because of the conversion of industrial space to residential use and speculative real-estate pressure. In this way, gentrification is encouraging industrial displacement, which in turn is leading to the degradation of the blue-collar work that remains and to the increasing informalization of work.

### Introduction

Gentrification and deindustrialization are global processes related to the changing structure of the international economy. Deindustrialization is largely the result of a fundamental shift in the economy from production to services. This shift has created a population of white-collar workers whom Ley (1996) has termed the new middle class. This new middle class is attracted to the centrality and culture of the inner city and has been a major force in the gentrification of urban neighborhoods. The urban neighborhoods that are now the location of gentrification are those that suffered from widespread deindustrialization in the post-Fordist era. The devalorization of urban land that resulted from deindustrialization and the collapse of many urban economies has been central to the creation of a rent gap that Smith (1996) argues is a causal factor in the gentrification of urban neighborhoods.

Though deindustrialization has been central to the creation of a gentrifying class and to gentrifiable landscapes, deindustrialization in the inner city is far from complete. Viable manufacturing enterprises still exist and thrive. These businesses, and the workers they employ, are increasingly threatened with displacement because of the residential conversion of industrial space and the speculative pressure on industrial real estate that gentrification has encouraged. The continued existence of a manufacturing sector and of a blue-collar workforce in gentrified neighborhoods is something that is missing from most accounts of gentrification. Although much of the work on gentrification has recognized the potential for residential displacement, less attention has been paid to the displacement of work and to the changing nature of work in a gentrified neighborhood.

In this paper I explore the linkages between gentrification and the changing nature of work in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, one of the two most industrial areas in the city. The experiences of manufacturers and workers in Williamsburg will be used to illustrate how gentrification is linked to industrial displacement and the changing employment opportunities for blue-collar workers. I argue that gentrification is linked not only to the displacement of industrial uses but also to

the degradation and informalization of the blue-collar work that remains. I want to expand our understanding of the process and experience of displacement by exploring the wide-ranging and long-lasting effects of gentrification on working-class urban residents by analyzing the effects of gentrification on work. As Bridge (1995, page 241) argues, “any appreciation of gentrification must begin with labour, labour market and workplace relations”.

## **Towards a theory of gentrification and work**

### **Economic restructuring and gentrification**

The changing nature of the global economy has been central to the creation of gentrified landscapes. The globalization of production and the rise of the postindustrial economy in developed countries are the result of capital’s search for increased flexibility in the face of the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist accumulation regime. As companies search for flexibility both in production and in the labor market, there is an increasing polarization in the labor market (Storper and Scott, 1990) as capital attempts to increase the use of part-time and temporary workers and move away from collective bargaining. This results in a new form of uneven development, as companies move from traditional industrial areas to new agglomerations of production in suburbanized and offshore locations (Scott, 1988).

This shift in the labor market is not only a response to globalization but also an attempt by capital to put labor ‘in its place’. As Peck (1996, page 2) argues, “the hidden hand of the market is not an even hand: the imposition of market forces is associated with the degradation of labor.” Far from being an entirely new regulation regime, globalization and the inequality, flexibility, and mobility associated with it are a continuation of capital’s attempts to control labor (Jonas, 1996). Jonas argues that the scale for analysis of this process is not the global scale, but the local level. Gentrification is one of the processes through which these changes in the global economy affect local labor markets. Sassen (1991) presents gentrification as a visual spatial component of the shift to services and the associated transformation of the class structure, in which manufacturing workers and their unions have lost their wage-setting ability. Deindustrialization has weakened the position of workers. This is an important precondition to gentrification, because the production of gentrified landscapes requires a vast supply of low-wage workers. Gentrification itself is labor intensive. It requires renovation of residential, commercial, and industrial space, furniture design, wood-working, and other customized, labor-intensive goods and services. Subcontracting, including the use of sweatshops and homework, becomes common, leading to an increase in low-wage jobs. It also increases demand for other low-wage services, such as maintenance, cleaning, and delivery. The decline of high-wage, unionized manufacturing jobs, combined with the increased demand for low-wage work, leads to what Sassen (1988; 1991) refers to as the downgrading of manufacturing. This demand for low-wage workers leads to an increasing informalization of work. Importantly, this downgrading occurs not just in declining industries, as is frequently assumed, but in growth industries as well. The demand for low-wage workers to service those with high-income lifestyles is one of these key growth sectors.

### **Emptiable space and the narrative of obsolescence**

Gentrification is one of the strategies through which urban space and urban labor markets are restructured. The discourse on flexibility, labor agglomerations, and new industrial spaces provides the logic behind the restructuring of space in urban areas. It serves as the justification for the creative destruction of the urban landscape of industrial production. As Sack (1986, quoted in Steinberg, 1994, page 465) argues,

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“Capitalism’s need for capital accumulation and growth make change paramount and, geographically, change means a fluid relationship between things and space ... Territory becomes conceptually and even actually emptiable and this presents space as both a real and emptiable surface or stage on which events occur.”

The language of globalization and deindustrialization provides the economic rationale for the removal of certain people and uses from urban space. In the case of industrial uses and blue-collar workers, a narrative of obsolescence has been created which makes the removal of industrial work and workers politically palatable (Weber, 2002). Constructing industrial space as obsolete makes the removal of industrial factories and warehouses that remain in central cities, as well as the jobs they provide, in order to open up industrial areas to high-end uses a pragmatic response to global economic change. This discourse frames blue-collar work and workers as peripheral, “relics of a bygone era” (Lowry, 1996, page 37). Those industrial uses that remain are framed not only as obsolete but also as dirty barriers to progress and a more beautiful urban landscape. Though gentrification is certainly not the cause of deindustrialization, it plays a crucial role in displacing industrial uses that do remain in areas of the city newly defined as desirable.

### **Creating the rent gap**

Smith (1996) argues that gentrification occurs when the difference between the actual and the potential ground rent is great enough for major profit to be realized by landowners or speculators. Deindustrialization creates the devalorization of certain landscapes in the city, namely, landscapes of industrial production and of the working classes. These areas then become the next frontier for ‘urban pioneers’ looking for new profit opportunities. Industrial spaces have provided a particular opportunity for profits, as rents charged for residential uses in loft spaces are two to three times those charged for industrial uses, and industrial areas are frequently located in desirable areas of the city: on the waterfront, close to the central business district, near transportation.

Central to the realization of these profits is the recreation of the loft as a desirable residence, the creation of a ‘loft living’ habitus (Podmore, 1998; Zukin, 1989). Lofts, previously spaces of production, are turned into spaces of consumption, with artists at the forefront. Zukin (1989) refers to the existence of an artistic mode of production (AMP) which connects accumulation and cultural consumption. In so doing, the AMP transforms ‘old’ industrial space into a ‘new’ space for finance, while fundamentally restructuring the local labor market and reducing the immediacy of industrial society to a historical perspective (page 178). Besides driving out existing manufacturing employment, the AMP restructures labor markets around low-wage work, part-time work, and work at home, at the same time creating the image of a city that has reached a ‘postindustrial plateau’ (page 180). Jobs are lost and businesses closed because new residents want the neighborhood “to *look* industrial, not *be* industrial” (page 104).

Urban policy can play a decisive role in facilitating the shift to a postindustrial, gentrified landscape, as Zukin (1989) recognizes in her landmark study of loft conversions in Manhattan’s SoHo neighborhood in the 1970s. SoHo was one of the first neighborhoods to undergo the conversion of industrial lofts to ‘loft living’. Illegal conversion of land zoned for manufacturing was tacitly accepted by the city government and eventually made official by rezoning. In the process, a number of small manufacturing firms were displaced or shut down altogether. Zukin attributes this to a long-term strategy of urban deindustrialization by the state, in which the continued existence of manufacturing is seen as an impediment to the reconquest of downtown for high-end uses. Zoning, urban renewal, landmark status, tax breaks, and subsidies are all government policies that can encourage deindustrialization and create or constrain

opportunities for gentrification in certain areas (Beauregard, 1986; Darton, 2000; Fitch, 1993; Harvey, 1985; Marcuse, 1986; Sanders, 1980; Turok, 1992).

The facilitation of gentrification by urban administrations is part of the shift in urban policy from managerialism to entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989, page 5) in which, "investment increasingly takes the form of a negotiation between international finance capital and local powers doing the best they can to maximize the attractiveness of the local site as a lure for capitalist development." In this way, cities have become what Logan and Molotch (1987) term 'growth machines', organized as enterprises devoted to the increase in rent levels through intensification of use.

### **Industrial uses in the postindustrial city**

Despite widespread deindustrialization, the urban core can have a surprisingly diversified economy. In New York City, manufacturing provides over 250 000 jobs (PICCED, 2001). Although this is a small share of the city's three-million jobs, manufacturing is particularly important to less educated workers, as manufacturing is the largest employer of workers without a college degree, with an average wage rate of US\$12 an hour (CUF, 1999). Manufacturing in New York employs 52% of foreign-born workers and 62.7% of workers with English-language problems (NYIRN, 1999). The manufacturing that remains is not simply a holdout of the industrial past. The Industrial Technology Assistance Corporation (ITAC, 1998a) found that a solid core of growing manufacturers exists in New York, and that two thirds of these companies were started within the last eighteen years. Large manufacturers that could benefit from suburban locations or overseas production left long ago. Interviews with business owners and advocates for manufacturing indicated that those manufacturers that remain do so because an urban location is essential since their businesses are integrated into the larger urban economy. Indeed, ITAC (1998b) found that location in or close to the central business district is the most important feature of industrial location in New York City. Romo and Schwartz (1995) came to the same conclusion, finding that small manufacturers in New York State are particularly embedded in place. In their study of Worcester, MA, Hanson and Pratt (1992) found that employers develop close ties to a highly localized labor market which they are reluctant to disrupt.

However, gentrification can put small-scale manufacturing jobs at risk. According to the Center for an Urban Future (CUF, 1999), a lack of affordable real estate is the 'number one' problem for small-business owners in New York. One study found that 58% of firms had had their rents raised within the previous year (ITAC, 1998b). Skyrocketing rents are typical in gentrifying neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, where real-estate agents report that industrial rents have increased by as much as five times since 1998. Landlords are hoarding industrial space in an attempt to realize the higher rents for commercial or residential uses. Businesses are being displaced and jobs lost because of conversion of manufacturing space to other uses. Of the more than twenty owners of displaced business I interviewed, all but one cited eviction by the landlord in order to convert the space or the lack of affordable space in which to expand as the reason for their moves. This process has been documented not only in New York but also in San Francisco (Solnit, 2000), Chicago (Giloth and Betancur, 1988; Phillips-Fein, 1998; Rast, 2001), and Sydney (Watson, 1991).

As gentrification becomes a more generalized, globalized urban strategy (Smith, 2002), with an ever larger role being played by urban governments (Hackworth and Smith, 2001), it is important to recognize how gentrification is reshaping the city. The decline of the productive base of the city is accepted as fact without an appreciation of the diversity of uses and populations within the inner city. In her study of SoHo in the 1970s Zukin (1989) recounted how manufacturers and workers were being driven out

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by the rising rents resulting from the residential conversion of industrial space that resulted from gentrification. Twenty years later, these supposedly obsolete uses still exist and can thrive, but they are threatened by the same economic and political forces that view the highest possible rents as the ultimate goal for urban space.

## **Gentrification and work in Williamsburg**

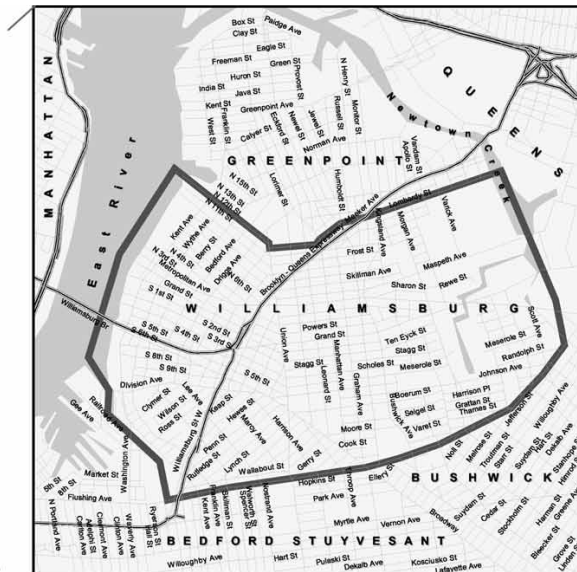
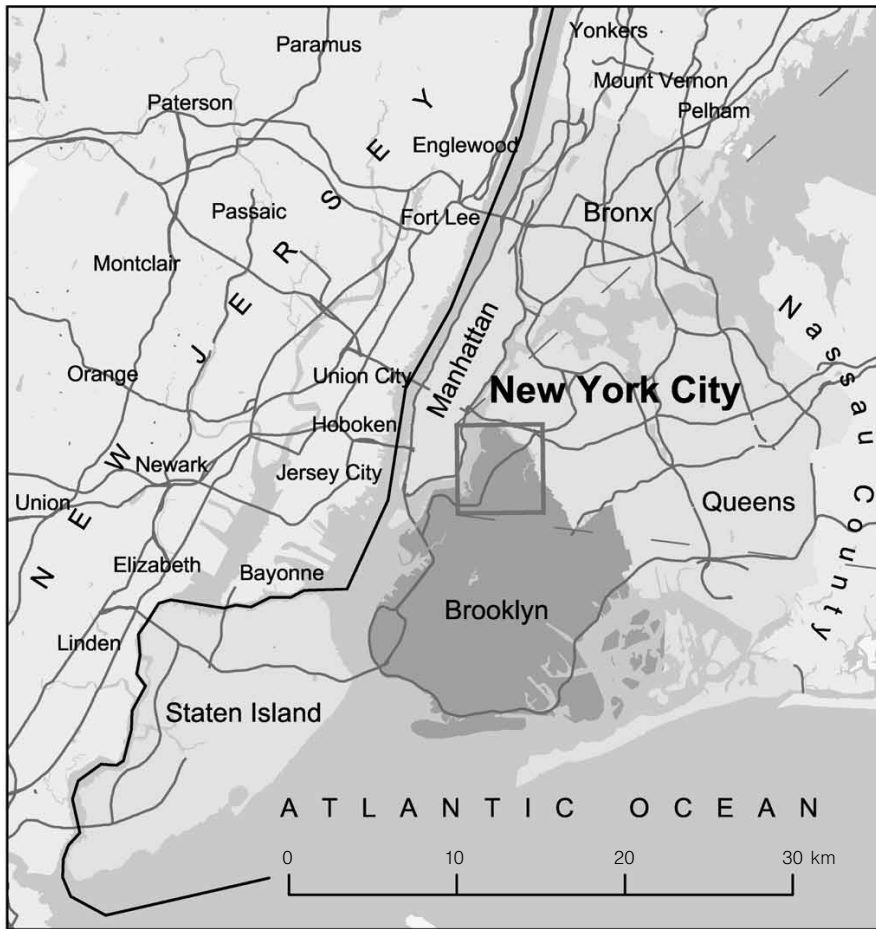
### **Study area**

New York City has been one of the prime areas of study for gentrification theorists. As a world city, it exemplifies the processes of globalization, the shift from a production to a service economy, the role of international finance in real-estate speculation, and the polarization of social classes. Smith's (1996) theory of the rent gap as the basis for gentrification is based largely on research in New York. Although this work focused on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the frontier of profitable gentrification has expanded to locations in Brooklyn and Queens (Smith and DeFilippis, 1999), and Hackworth (2001) has identified northeastern Brooklyn as an area that experienced increased investment during the recession of the early 1990s and also a disproportionately large increase in residential sales after the recession.

The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn (see figure 1, over) is one of the prime areas experiencing this increased investment. It has become an extension of the Lower East Side, not only geographically but also culturally. In 1903, when the Williamsburg Bridge was completed, Eastern European Jews fled the confines of the Lower East Side for homes and jobs in Williamsburg. In the 1990s Williamsburg again became the recipient of an influx of residents from the Lower East Side, this time of young artists, hipsters, professionals, and students in search of hip stores, restaurants, loft-like apartments, and spectacular views of Manhattan.

The gentrification of Williamsburg not only has entailed a shifting population in residential uses but also has affected the structure of industry and work. Williamsburg is one of the remaining centers of manufacturing in New York City. In Community Board 1, in which Williamsburg is located, 55.9% of the land area is zoned for manufacturing uses, compared with 14.9% of land in Brooklyn, and 13.2% for the city as a whole (FCREUP, 2002). Gentrification has led to conflict over land use as more and more new residents look for housing, driving up land prices and converting manufacturing space while battling with business owners over noise, traffic, and parking. Already, the downsizing of New York's manufacturing sector has been significantly more pronounced than at the national level (FPI, 2001), and Williamsburg is experiencing a decline of manufacturing jobs at a rate faster than that of the city as a whole (PICCED, 2001). If a neighborhood like Williamsburg, with one of the largest concentrations of manufacturing land in the city, is allowed to gentrify completely and to zone out industrial uses, it will severely constrain the ability of any industrial use to locate in the city, and therefore affect the ability of thousands of blue-collar workers to earn a living (PICCED, 2001). This struggle makes Williamsburg a 'conceptual war zone' (quoted in Rogers-Dillon, 2001) (see figure 2, over).

Initially planned in the early 19th century as a bucolic upper-class community for the well-to-do, Williamsburg became a working-class industrial area when land speculators turned to rooming houses and industrial uses in their search for profits. Williamsburg became known for the density and diversity of industrial uses. The success of industry in the area led wealthier residents to flee, and Williamsburg became a district of 'moderate means' (Danforth, 1978, page 12). As one historian noted, "People poured into Williamsburg for one reason: jobs" (BHS, 2000, page 5). No other area in the city had as many industrial workers (*Brooklyn Eagle* 1920).



□ Williamsburg study area



Figure 1. Study area: Williamsburg, Brooklyn (map produced by Guido Schwarz, November 2003).



**Figure 2.** This former sweater factory was turned into a minimall, with loft-style apartments above (source: author's photograph).

The onset of deindustrialization severely affected the area. Warf (1990, pages 85–86) describes the change:

“The shipbuilding and repair industries succumbed to containerization: in 1966 the Brooklyn Navy Yards closed, generating severe negative multiplier effects through its extensive system of backward linkages. The closure of breweries, tool and die companies, food producers, textile plants, metalworking shops, and other firms were accompanied by falling private and public investment, rising unemployment, declining property values, and the widespread abandonment of buildings.”

The age of industrial buildings in Williamsburg, the limited space, the availability of cheap suburban land, and competition from abroad all combined to facilitate the removal of manufacturing.

Urban renewal also dealt a significant blow to industry in Williamsburg. The construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway through the heart of the neighborhood displaced homes and businesses and cut off businesses from the water. This was part of a pattern of decisions by urban planners and policymakers that encouraged the deindustrialization of the area. Tabb (1982) argues that manufacturing was viewed as a nuisance by the city, which was happy to see these land uses go so that corporate offices and support services could follow. In the 1970s the city discarded its garment cutting tools, its breweries, its freight connection with the mainland, its port. As such, “New York rid itself of everything that blocked its potential to become the biggest and best FIRE [finance, insurance, and real estate] and producer services city in the world” (Fitch, 1993, page 13). The displacement of manufacturers also represented the lack of political power on the part of industrial business owners and workers. Small-scale manufacturing business owners tend to be Jewish or Catholic and tend to employ a minority-group, low-wage workforce, both very different from the individuals who dominate the city's corporate world and decisionmaking structures (Tabb, 1982).

The shift to a service economy and the loss of manufacturing jobs coincided with the worst fiscal crisis in the city's history in 1975. In the face of massive public debt and the virtual shutdown of city government, the city followed a policy of ‘planned shrinkage’ (Fried, 1976). The term, coined by Housing and Development Administrator Roger Starr, advocated an acceleration of population decline in certain areas so that

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further cutbacks in city services could be concentrated in these areas. Residents complained of being ignored by the Housing and Development Authority, by the Fire Department, by Sanitation, and by the police. The extent of the decline was so severe that the *New York Post* termed the area “Brooklyn’s Badlands” (Alvarez, 1974, page 2).

Susser (1982, page 11) argued that the fiscal crisis “represented a speeding up of the transformation of New York from a city structured around light manufacturing and a poor working-class city to a city oriented toward middle-class people employed by major corporations.” Susser (1982) in an in-depth study of the working-class population in Greenpoint and Williamsburg during the fiscal crisis, portrayed a neighborhood in which work was insecure and transient and reliance on public assistance essential. Housing was substandard and improvements impossible because of redlining. Economic competition led to racial tensions. Life was marked by constant conflict with city agencies.

Many local residents believed that this withholding of services by the city was purposeful, part of a policy to let the area crumble, while developers scooped up cheap land to upgrade it later to condos and other high-cost residential uses (Breen, 1987; McCallister, 1984; Sanchez, 1990). As Jackson (1985, page 207) stated, “The City cannot avoid censure for its complicity in the development of a luxury market in living lofts.”

This process began in Williamsburg in the 1970s and was so widespread as to warrant an industrial study by the Department of City Planning (DCP, 1987) because firms were being displaced by illegal residential use. Indeed, the DCP found that there was residential conversion of industrial space in every manufacturing district. The trend was particularly destructive in Williamsburg, however, because in 1987, when the study was conducted, it was the only one of eight industrial areas in Brooklyn that had experienced a net gain in manufacturing jobs, an increase of 8% between 1977 and 1984. Employers cited proximity to customers and an excellent labor force as attractions of the area. Of the 508 firms that responded to the survey, 164 reported that they planned to expand. Yet in the same report it was found that available manufacturing space had steadily decreased, by 44% from 1983 to 1987, and that purchase prices had increased 100%.

The report concluded by endorsing the active retention and expansion of industry in the area, and found that, “Despite citywide job losses in the industrial sector, employment in the study area is increasing, demonstrating the underlying stability and strength of this key industrial area” (DCP, 1987, page 49).

The process of gentrification in Williamsburg was piecemeal in the 1980s, but it took off in the 1990s, and there is no part of the neighborhood that remains unaffected. This transition was recognized when the *Utne Reader* declared Williamsburg the third hippest place in America, thereby making the L train that serves the area the hippest train in the subway system (Kennedy, 2001, page B3), with one rider noting that, “how cool you are depends on which stop you get off at in Brooklyn.”

The process of gentrification in Williamsburg, however, is far from complete, and the area is still one of ethnic and economic diversity. According to the 2000 Census, the area is 41% White, 43.6% Hispanic, and 5.7% Black. These numbers obscure more than they reveal, especially the diversity within the White and Hispanic populations. Specifically, they may fundamentally misrepresent the make-up of the neighborhood, as reporting has shown that the census has undercounted New York City residents, specifically in areas with concentrations of Hispanics. Two of the six census tracts where the undercount was believed to be highest are in Williamsburg (Navarro, 2002).



With gentrification has come social polarization. The median income is US\$23 567, but 4.6% of the population make over US\$100 000 with 0.5% earning over US\$200 000, a category that did not exist in the 1990 Census. Although Williamsburg is the site of an increasing population of upwardly mobile residents, it is also the home to concentrations of poverty. Census data show that only 51.1% of adults over 16 years are in the labor force. Incomes are under US\$10 000 for 25.3% of the population, and 47.7% of families with children live in poverty. This number increases to 56.3% for families with a female head of household.

For the working population, manufacturing remains an important sector, with 17.6% of residents in Williamsburg still involved in manufacturing and wholesale trade, compared with just 10% for the rest of New York City. These jobs are at risk, with the 11211 zip code (which includes most, but not all, of Williamsburg) losing 1337 jobs between 1992 and 1999, at a rate of 22%, compared with a 15% rate for the city as a whole (PICCED, 2001). Although Williamsburg has experienced some growth in retail, FIRE, and services, these jobs often employ a different population from that which is displaced from manufacturing. Table 1 shows the continued decline of manufacturing employment and the dwindling number of firms between 1999 and 2002, though manufacturing is still an employer of large numbers of people, with only services [as defined by Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes 70–89] providing more jobs. The growth of these service jobs is uneven. Although the number of people employed in the 11211 area has increased, the number has not increased at the rate of population increase.

**Table 1.** (a) Employment and (b) number of firms in zip code 11211, 1999–2002 (source: New York State Department of Labor).

	Year (3rd quarter)			
	1999	2000	2001	2002
(a)				
Manufacturing and wholesale trade	7 751	7 013	6 172	5,661
Retail	2 914	3 045	3 011	3 048
Finance, insurance, and real estate	682	714	712	746
Services	9 471	11 033	10 320	12 905
Total employment in 11211	24 250	25 434	26 125	26 221
(b)				
Manufacturing and wholesale trade	576	519	506	458
Retail	432	449	454	431
Finance, insurance, and real estate	187	200	206	206
Services	358	377	403	402
Total number of firms in 11211	1 821	1 858	1 922	1 961

### Methodology

Measuring the extent of manufacturing and manufacturing displacement is extraordinarily difficult. As the authors of *Making it in New York: The Manufacturing Land Use and Zoning Initiative* (PICCED, 2001) recognize, part of the difficulty in making a case for manufacturing in New York is the paucity of accurate data at the appropriate scale. The smallest scale at which employment data from the Department of Labor are available is the zip code. Williamsburg covers one zip code and is in part of two other zip codes, so accurate data are not available. Census data provide a measure of the industries in which residents work, but not where they work.

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The bulk of the data I provide in this paper are the result of qualitative research conducted between January 2002 and March 2003. Interviews were conducted with current and displaced manufacturers and their workers. I also conducted interviews with city planners, community activists, labor leaders, religious leaders, representatives of elected officials, community board members, and long-term residents of the neighborhood. In using a largely qualitative approach, I am interested in exploring the meaning and experience of displacement, for business owners, workers, the community, and the city. The experience of displacement is varied and complicated. Here, I present three vignettes drawn from some of the most compelling stories told to me over the course of this research. They illustrate the multiple and varied ways in which the landscape of work has changed in this traditionally industrial neighborhood.

### *Displacement*

Between them, Art and Sid, as I will call them, have been in the garment industry for over a hundred years. They have been competitors, and Art worked for Sid before they decided to go into business together. They have been in business in Williamsburg for almost ten years. They employ 100 people in union jobs, 70% of whom are women. Theirs is the only business left in the building in which they rent their loft. The current owner bought the building with the explicit aim of converting it to either residential or office use.

Art and Sid would love to stay in the city. “We want to stay”, Sid says, “but we’re not sure the city wants us to stay.” There is simply no appropriate manufacturing space available for them to move to in Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, or in the city as a whole. They have been looking for space for over a year. At one site in which they expressed interest, the landlord tripled the buying price. Art and Sid suspect that this is part of a common landlord strategy to ask for exorbitant prices with the intention of keeping the building vacant, so that landlords can then apply for a zoning variance by insisting that they cannot find industrial tenants. They will only consider locations available for purchase so as not to run the risk of being displaced again. Art and Sid are planning for the long term. Sid’s son will take over the business when Sid retires. Their floor manager is another younger man who is planning to stay with the business.

Art and Sid are urban people with an appreciation of the amenities the city has to offer and a love of the city. Williamsburg has been not only a good place to do business but also a good neighborhood for them socially. Art and Sid and their managers have lunch in the same neighborhood restaurant almost every day. They know all the waiters as well as the other regular customers and keep up with the goings on in the neighborhood through the conversations they have there. This quality of life is another essential aspect of business location for them. Art and Sid were courted by Ashland, NC, but could not imagine “eating barbeque for lunch every day.”

An urban location is particularly important to Art and Sid’s business. Their workers come from all over the city, commuting via the three subway lines that serve the area. Their suppliers and customers have easy access over the Williamsburg Bridge. Asked what will happen to their workers if they move to New Jersey (the most likely alternative), they say, “We’ll lose some of them, there’s no doubt of that. For many of these women [who work for us], this is their second income. They’re not going to commute long distances.”

Though many of their employees are local, there are workers who already commute from all five boroughs, with commuting times of over an hour. More than this would not be feasible. Of the workers interviewed, all said they would like to move with the business, but only if it relocated within the five boroughs of New York City. A move to New Jersey would mean a commute of close to two hours. One employee who lives in

Williamsburg reported that, if he had to commute to New Jersey, his life would consist of nothing but commuting and working. Yet he feels he has few other options. He has worked for Art and Sid since graduating from high school. He is lucky enough to live in a rent-stabilized apartment with his wife and three children, but he sees quite clearly how this could all ‘fall apart’. Given the decline of manufacturing in Brooklyn and New York, his prospects for finding another job that pays as well are slim. With no job, he says, homelessness becomes a real possibility. The chances of finding an apartment cheaper than the one he now rents would be impossible in the current market.

Workers at Art and Sid’s factory can already see the effects of the closure of other Williamsburg manufacturers. The man in charge of hiring says he can always find four workers for every two that leave. The number of people walking in off the street and applying for jobs has increased tremendously in recent years because, even with displacement, Williamsburg is one of the few areas in New York City where manufacturing work may still be available. It is also still an area with a large immigrant population, the typical workforce for manufacturing.

New York City does not seem concerned with the prospect of the loss of businesses such as Art and Sid’s. Upscale housing is a bigger priority than blue-collar jobs. The same is not true for Patterson, NJ, which is actively wooing Art and Sid with incentives, from tax breaks to readying the site. Moving to New Jersey would also allow them to move outside the reach of the union and will give them access to a large pool of cheap labor. Both Art and Sid agree that these enticements would mean nothing if they could find appropriate space in New York. Although no decision has been made, they need to move within the year.

### *Degradation*

Domino Sugar (see figure 3) is the largest manufacturing employer in Williamsburg, with 300 workers, though this is a far cry from the 3000 employed at the beginning of the 20th century. It is a union plant, represented by the International Longshoremen Association. For twenty months, from 1999 to 2001, these workers were on strike to protect seniority, preserve sick days, prevent the layoff of 100 workers, and prevent the subcontracting of work. As one union leader put it, “They are looking to break the union and we are not looking to be broken” (quoted in Liff, 1999).



**Figure 3.** The Domino Sugar factors (source: author’s photograph).

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The strike started with an amazing degree of solidarity. The *Village Voice* (Robbins 2000) described the strikers this way:

“They were a polyglot crew, proud of their diversity: whites with Italian, Russian and Irish last names; Hispanics and native-born and Caribbean blacks. Many were women. They called themselves the United Nations. Their average age was late forties. Most had spent their entire working lives inside the hulking red brick plant with the huge smokestack dominating the Brooklyn shore by the Williamsburg Bridge.”

For the first nine months, not one person crossed the picket line. One worker was lost, however. A 62-year-old Russian survivor of a Nazi labor camp slit his wrists after another long day on the picket line.

Despite the tenaciousness of the strikers, in the end the union agreed to a contract just like the one whose provisions had started the strike. What used to be a ‘neighborhood plant’ (McShane, 2001) is now, according to *The New York Times*, a “bastion of the industrial past” (Greenhouse, 2000) whose employees are referred to by the *Daily News* as “relics from a bygone era” (Lowry, 1996). In response to a 1992 strike, labor analysts saw the union’s chances as good because “Replacement workers in [New York] are not so easy to do” (Abrams, 1993). In this more recent strike, the plant was able to reach almost full capacity with replacement workers, some of them college students working summer jobs. One labor analyst commented,

“It’s a shame that a strike of this size in NYC is going on with barely a ripple. For a group of workers to be on strike this long without becoming a cause célèbre in NY, the stronghold of the nation’s labor movement, that’s a problem” (Greenhouse, 2000).

The representation of the strike, the plant, and its workers in the press reinforced the narrative of obsolescence. The popular view, reinforced and encouraged by public policy, is that manufacturing in New York City is dead. Even some residents of Williamsburg I interviewed who live near the Domino Sugar plant thought that it was closed, despite the smoke emanating from the chimneys and the steady flow of truck traffic. Although some were vaguely aware of the strike, and even sympathized with the workers, they saw any attempt to preserve manufacturing jobs as one doomed to failure. In addition, there are those who live near the plant who are actively against the plant, complaining of the noise and smell and about the potential health affects of emissions from the factory. These complaints are from residents of lofts that have been illegally converted to residential use.

In the end, it is this shifting use of land in gentrifying industrial areas that may be the biggest problem for workers on the waterfront. Soon after the end of the strike, Tate & Lyle, the British conglomerate that had owned Domino Sugar, sold the plant to Florida Crystal. The new owners promised not to lay off workers, and affirmed their commitment to keep the plant open. However, a new rezoning plan by the City Planning Commission would bring legal residential uses to within a block of the factory. A spokesperson at the plant told me that the company was concerned about the increased complaints and inspections that this land-use change would facilitate and could foresee such issues becoming enough of a problem that it would make the company reassess its location there. An additional concern raised by workers and some community members is that rezoning would make the land the plant is on so much more valuable for residential use that it would encourage the company to sell out. Their fear has proved warranted. Before Tate & Lyle sold Domino Sugar, it sold two plots of land surrounding the plant, plots on which developers have since sought zoning variances to allow for residential development. The final blow to the Domino Sugar workers came in August 2003. A month after the release of the city rezoning proposal, Domino Sugar announced that the refinery part of the plant would be closed

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in January 2004 and that the packaging operation would close soon thereafter. Although the city insists that it wants to keep the site industrial, residents and workers alike foresee a future of luxury apartments on the site that once provided 3000 jobs.

### *Informalization*

On 30 April 2001 a laborer working on the conversion of a meat packing plant to housing on the Southside of Williamsburg was killed by a tumbling stack of unsecured metal beams. The accident occurred after two previous orders to stop work at the site because of safety problems were ignored. When fellow workers tried to help after the accident, they were told by supervisors not to call the 'cops' because they, the workers, were not supposed to be there (Blair, 2001, page B1). For this risk, workers at the site were reportedly paid US\$8 an hour, though wages for day laborers picked up at 'shape-ups' (meeting areas where hiring bosses find laborers for day work) can be as low as US\$5 per hour.

The man killed, Rogelio Daze Villanueva, was an undocumented immigrant from Mexico who had been picked up off the streets that morning to work as a day laborer. His was not the first death associated with residential conversion in Williamsburg. Another illegal immigrant, Eduardo Gutiérrez, was killed in a "torrential slide of wet concrete" (Feuer, 2001, page B3) eighteen months beforehand in a building just blocks away. Building to low standards with the labor of undocumented immigrants allowed the developer to cut his costs from US\$15 000 a week, which is what it would have cost to carry out the renovation legally, to a payroll of under US\$5000 a week (Breslin, 2002).

Although the rise of the informal economy is hardly exclusive to gentrifying neighborhoods, the renovation and rehabilitation necessary to gentrify a neighborhood often rely on informalized labor practices such as these to keep costs low and profits high. Immigrant labor is a central part of this equation, and those who wait for work at Williamsburg's shape-ups are largely immigrants from Latin America. They come from all over the city because of the volume of informal work available in Williamsburg, especially in construction, because of the large number of conversions of industrial space. These conversions tend to be illegal. However, informal work is not restricted to these workers or to only one sector of the economy.

Workers interviewed recount a hazy boundary between formal and informal work. Formal jobs may require hours put in off the books. Even some union members I spoke with reported doing side jobs in construction on upgraded buildings after work and on weekends. Union members in manufacturing with whom I spoke felt that they were not that far from work in sweatshops and other factories where immigrant workers are poorly paid. As one worker told me,

"We all do good work here. Those guys work hard. The difference is some of these guys are making \$4 an hour and scared."

When his union held a rally, other business owners forbade their workers from leaving the building, and one owner even sent out men to threaten the picketers. As blue-collar jobs become more scarce, the distinction between formal and informal work disappears, and rising housing costs and other living expenses requires that low-income residents take whatever jobs they can. One worker described the situation to me in this way:

"More people are coming along with their college degrees and computers, taking offices and other space. But we load and unload trucks. That's all we can do. We got to keep at it; we have children to feed."

## Conclusions

These stories of the relationship between gentrification and work illustrate that the displacement effects of gentrification are much broader and more far reaching than traditional understandings of gentrification-related displacement would allow. In Williamsburg, manufacturing is being displaced because of real-estate pressures and urban policies. Were it not for their landlord's refusal to renew their lease, Art and Sid would never have thought of moving their business. Theirs is a viable and successful business. Though they compete with businesses that operate overseas, they have managed to thrive and grow and see a positive future for the business, if only they could find a place in which to operate. Owners of multiple businesses reported that their businesses were growing and had long-term potential. Their only problem was the unstable business environment created by rising real-estate costs. Yet, city planners such as one I interviewed continue to operate under the assumption that any attempt to save manufacturing in the city is "sentimental", an "exercise in nostalgia". Those with decisionmaking power, such as this planner, consider deindustrialization complete and do not see manufacturing as an important sector of the economy in the 'postindustrial' city. The city was, in his words, "looking in a different direction for economic development."

The absence of public and political support for industrial uses in the city allows for the degradation of blue-collar work, as the Domino Sugar case study shows. Because the discourse on the inevitability of deindustrialization in the global city has been so predominant, the Domino Sugar workers were presented in the press as 'relics' fighting against the 'tides of progress'. The example of Domino Sugar acts as a powerful deterrent to other workers who would consider organizing and fighting for improved working conditions or pay.

This degradation of labor encourages the growth of informal work, which can threaten not only workers' livelihoods but also their very lives. The informal sector is a growth sector, creating a demand that is filled not only by the unemployed from within the neighborhood but also by a community of immigrants throughout the city, largely from Latin America, who put up with long hours, low pay, and poor working conditions in order to support families back home. Gentrification is facilitated by the low-cost labor of the informal sector to rehabilitate and build housing.

Gentrification is one of the ways in which urban space is reshaped to make it more attractive to the upper classes. This vision of the city has no room for manufacturers and their workers, despite the fact that these can survive and thrive in the city, if allowed. As researchers, we need to do more to explore the effects of gentrification as it becomes a more generalized urban strategy, and we cannot adequately do this without an understanding of the effects of gentrification on work.

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