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# The Aging Ingenue of Neighborhoods: Long Island City Has Been on the Cusp for 30 Years

LONG
ISLAND

*Long Island City is having an identity crisis. (Amanda Lea Perez, New York Observer.)*

All neighborhoods are somewhat in thrall to Manhattan, but Long Island City is haunted by it. By day, it's noisy with the squeal and clatter of elevated trains, the rumble of delivery trucks on the 59th Street Bridge and the hum of subways beneath the sidewalks—a cacophony of people and paraphernalia, all shuttling across the East River. In the evening, the neighborhood is illuminated by the pale glow of Midtown skyscrapers and the streets hue yellow with the tide of returning taxis.

That Long Island City should be the next up-and-coming neighborhood has seemed obvious for decades; *New York* magazine christened it the next hot neighborhood in 1980, an imprimatur it would not give to Williamsburg for 12 more years. "Plainly, *something* is happening in Long Island City," the magazine wrote and plainly, something was. Condos and chic restaurants were in the works, giddy developers were throwing around phrases like “Soho-plus” and “oil field,” and Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman were zipping over to play afternoon games at Tennisport. Its vast stretches of sparsely populated land were so obviously ripe for redevelopment that its ascendance seemed all but inevitable—*a fait accompli* that for reasons no one ever quite seems able to account for has always fallen just short of *accompli*.

In the decades since, it has been called the next Williamsburg, the next Dumbo, the next Bushwick, Astoria-lite and, most inelegantly, “Fort Greene 10 years ago”—its arrival just as inevitable and just as elusive as it has always been, a thing that must be and yet is not.

To walk Long Island City’s wide sidewalks is to find evidence that the neighborhood has, at long last, arrived. There are haute comfort-food purveyors and classic cocktails cooled by hand-cut ice, a climbing gym and a weekend flea market, coffee shops, gourmet groceries, wine bars, breweries, art galleries, waterfront parks and an ever-multiplying number of luxury towers. Murakami has a studio there; so does David Byrne. M. Wells, the adventurous Quebecois steakhouse, recently reopened in an old garage by Court Square. There’s even a rooftop farm and a pop-up ramen bar. On a Saturday afternoon this fall, hordes of canvas-bag-toting twenty-somethings emerged from the G train, setting off for either P.S. 1 or 5Pointz.

And yet, while it would be easy to fashion so many pieces into an argument for the place’s vitality, the truth is that they do not cohere. The spaces between the wine bars and art galleries are desolate, darkened expanses of low-lying warehouses, parked waste-oil trucks, taxi lots and auto body repair shops.

It is a neighborhood at odds with itself, a place that can neither shake its potential Manhattanness nor its pervasive otherness, the vague loneliness that comes with being on the edge of a great metropolis, beyond the crowds and the busy cheer and the all-night cafés. It has the kind of unsettled quality that makes some people a little uneasy, like the late-middle-aged couple I passed on the street one night not long ago. They were standing, watching a young man fumble with the front-door lock of a begrimed apartment building on Jackson Avenue. The couple wore the apprehensive expression of parents seeing the grim New York apartment their adult child now calls home. Sensing their discomfort, the man turned, gesturing Manhattanward with his chin. “Look,” he said. “You can see the Empire State Building.”

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*TF Cornerstone's residential towers rise behind the Pepsi-Cola sign. (Amanda Lea Perez, New York Observer.)*

When asked to describe the character of Long Island City, the people who live there talk about how friendly it is or how fast they can be in Manhattan or how every time they catch a glimpse of the Manhattan skyline, they feel giddy. Others talk about how nice it is not to live in the New York of hour-and-a-half brunch waits, cramped studio apartments and the "get out of my way you stupid breeding motherfucker" looks they used to get when pushing a stroller through the grocery store.

"It's perfect for people with 1.5 kids. The last stop before the suburbs," said Rikki Frenkel, in a tone that made it clear she did not consider this to be among the neighborhood's charms. An architect who moved to the neighborhood several years ago from Greenpoint, Ms. Frenkel explained that a friend lured her in with the kind of offer no New Yorker can resist: a well-priced, conveniently located, recently remodeled apartment with a washer and dryer.

"The neighborhood leaves a lot to be desired; there are no places to have your keys copied or your shoes fixed. It went from being super industrial to super expensive residential in a short time," Ms. Frenkel reflected. "All the stigmas—it's for yuppies, people with kids—they're largely true. If I had a choice right now, I'd probably rather be somewhere else—Soho or the West Village."

Ms. Frenkel's experience is not atypical—people who move to Long Island City seem to end up there more by accident than by design. The thing is that Long Island City doesn't really have a vibe—it lacks the bucolic charm of brownstone Brooklyn or the gritty allure that once characterized Soho and the Meatpacking District. It can't even settle on its name. Last year, the Queens Local Development Corp. even pushed to officially change the neighborhood's name to LIC, to stop people from thinking it was a dreary suburb on Long Island. "It puts us out on Long Island, and that's inaccurate—we are urban and hip," Rob MacKay, the head of the Queens Local Development Corp. griped to the *New York Post*.

Jeff Blath, the owner of Alobar, a restaurant that by description would seem to be the very definition of hipster—locally-sourced seasonal foods, homemade charcuterie and pickles, craft beer and whiskey, served amid reclaimed wood from an old farmhouse—doesn't think that Long Island City is or ever will be the next Williamsburg. "It has become more about young professionals and families," he said. (Which Williamsburg, incidentally, for all its tattoos, has also become a lot more about in the last five years.) Moreover, Long Island City gets compared to the suburbs with a regularity worrisome for any neighborhood trying to come off as cool.

While the neighborhood's mixed-use residential, office and industrial character is enough to make any urban planner swoon—it may have a Superfund site, but it also has a kayaking club, world-class museums and metal scrap yards—it never quite seems to embody any of its many identities fully. And yet, that's what a lot of people find most endearing.

"Long Island City is a pluralistic community, as opposed to a singular L-line community," said Gary Kesner, the executive vice president of Silvercup Studios said when I spoke with him and CEO Alan Suna on the phone recently. Silvercup, which has been in the neighborhood since 1983, has not only presided over the changing landscape; it has developed several residential projects of its own.

"We're not trying to be the next Williamsburg; we're trying to be a much more interesting and diverse place," Mr. Suna said. "Two of the many institutions of higher learning I attended, one was Harvard, one was MIT. The Harvard people were always walking around impressed that they were at Harvard. The MIT people didn't care how smart they were; they just did their thing. Long Island City just does its thing."

Which is not dissimilar to Queens itself. Unlike Brooklyn—burnisher of cult status that it is—Queens seems untroubled by its outerboroughness, too vast and diverse to bother with trying to sculpt its many ethnicities, classes, age group, affinities and uses into some kind of cohesive brand. It may lack a vibe, but when you think about it, vibe is often just a way of saying that a neighborhood is dominated by one particular group or lifestyle or purpose, pre-determined in some way or another, which can feel as exclusionary to some as it does enticing to others. Like Long Island City, it is not one thing but many, and isn't that what New York, at its best, is all about anyway?

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*LIC apartments, once a hard sell, are now snapped up swiftly.(Amanda Lea Perez, New York Observer.)*

Though it has been populated since the late 17th century, the neighborhood does not offer much in the way of a residential template, having been given over to industrial use for much of the 20th. Until quite recently, there have simply been very few people and very few places to live.

The neighborhood's existing housing stock is so meager that many of the storefronts along Vernon Boulevard, the neighborhood's quaintest commercial strip, were bricked over in years past to accommodate tenants. There are a handful of older apartment buildings and some shabby row houses, as well as several blocks of picturesque brownstones, but they are in such short supply that buying one makes even the most fervid Park Slope bidding war seem tame. One man described cold-calling 45 homeowners before a longtime resident connected him with an owner willing to sell, albeit not for a year and a half, after she retired. Even the artists who have flocked to its studio space over the years have mostly made their homes elsewhere.

A 2001 rezoning—primarily a bid to keep companies from following the cheaper rents across the Hudson to New Jersey—sought to preserve the industrial character of the neighborhood while allowing for higher-rise commercial and residential development in 37 centrally located blocks.

The residential boom that followed was unanticipated. "The amount of housing that's been constructed has been a great surprise; we've had close to 8,000 apartments built and nowhere near an equivalent amount of office space," said Penny Lee, the planner of Queens Community Board 2. "We did not foresee that happening. However, these new residents are setting the stage for a 24/7 neighborhood and are already starting to attract new businesses." In the next few years, another 8,000 units are expected to be built, according to the Long Island City Partnership.

Unlike other neighborhoods, which have been by and large remodeled into some version of their former selves, Long Island City's new housing developments have not so much added to the existing landscape as created one from whole cloth. The neighborhood's former factories and low-slung warehouses, interspersed with squat repair shops, storage sheds, parking lots and taxi depots, offer no real context with which to work, and so the new construction must create its own context, but the new towers feel strange all the same—ill at ease and disembodied from the landscape, uncanny in the way that all planned communities are uncanny, vaguely ersatz.

"You put up a glass building on the waterfront, and people say, 'Oh, Miami,' because that's where people are used to seeing new buildings on the waterfront," said Jon McMillan, the director of planning for TF Cornerstone. Mr. McMillan oversaw the development of the seven towers at the Pepsi-Cola site at Hunter's Point, at the forefront of Long Island City's first wave of new residential development. (In the late 1980s, he also worked as the director of planning at Battery Park City.) "It's hard to figure out how to do these things in a New Yorky kind of way. When development is new, people feel that it's soulless, which is just a different way of saying 'new.' New isn't something that's automatically appealing to New Yorkers; things need to age and develop a patina."

And TF Cornerstone has endeavored to make the neighborhood happen in a larger sense, selecting local, independent restaurants for the bases of its towers. Not insensitive to Jane Jacobs' prescriptions, Scott Walsh, who heads up market research and sales for TF Cornerstone, told me that they added more retail than was prescribed by the state and shunned banks, because they didn't want the area to be dead at night.

To an extent, those efforts have panned out. On a recent Saturday night, Center Boulevard, the main street that runs through the towers, was peppered with dog walkers, spandex-clad runners and couples returning from dinner, but they moved and spoke quietly, a low murmur of voices rustling through the night. The loudest sound was the hum of the building mechanicals.

"Five years, I think it will take five years before it stops feeling that way. In my opinion, the main problem with the design of our project is that the main street is too wide; it tends to have a kind of deserted feel to it," said Mr. McMillan. "What it really needs is a traffic jam—cars and trucks all honking."

And if Hunter's Point streets feel long and empty, it is not only because of their emptiness—the blocks between the area and Court Square are oriented with the long, 600-foot residential blocks running east-west, while the short, 200-foot retail blocks run north-south.

"It feels like a long way to walk from Hunter's Point to Court Square, because it is—there isn't the same retail continuity you find on typical active streets," said Ms. Lee.

Density, everyone seems to agree, is what the neighborhood needs. More than just-so bars and trendy restaurants, people are the defining characteristic of a happening neighborhood, the critical mass that marks a place as the place to be.

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*The neighborhood's industrial component remains substantial. (Amanda Lea Perez, New York Observer.)*

Long Island City provides many of the things renters are looking for: a relatively safe, conveniently-located neighborhood with enough basic amenities to live comfortably and apartments that, if not affordable, are at least 25 percent less expensive than those in Manhattan and considerably bigger. The question of whether Long Island City would ever be a viable residential neighborhood has been answered, overwhelmingly, in the affirmative.

"It used to be very, very hard to sell LIC. Now, there's not enough product compared to the demand," CORE broker Doron Zwickel, who recently brokered the sale of a Long Island City townhouse that set a new Queens record, told *The Observer*.

But despite of the thousands of new apartments in the neighborhood, a number of existing residents are hanging onto places "that they can barely afford, waiting for the apartments at Hunter's Point South and hoping they'll get in," said Sheila Lewandowski, a local community board member who also runs the performance space Chocolate Factory Theater.

Sarah Lohman, a culinary historian who writes for the blog Four Pounds Flour and lived in Long Island City for six years, ended up moving to Sunnyside, because she and her then-boyfriend, now husband, couldn't find a new place in their price range.

“When I moved into Long Island City, I was talking to someone about where I lived, and he said, ‘Oh, that’s hookerville. In six years, the neighborhood that I lived in went from being hookerville to being a neighborhood that I couldn’t afford.”

Hunter’s Point South, an under-construction, mixed-income development on the waterfront that numbers among Bloomberg’s flagship affordable housing initiatives—poised to add some 3,000 affordable units to the neighborhood, it will be the largest affordable housing complex to have been constructed in the city since the 1970s—will help. But it’s unlikely that the units will do enough to preserve the flux and flow of new residents, the mix of classes, people and uses that make a place vibrant and exciting rather than just an upper-middle-class bedroom community.

Rising studio rents have also pushed out many working artists, according to Carol Crawford, the president of Long Island City Artists, suffocating the creative community that has existed there for decades and barring any lingering possibility that the neighborhood will blossom into a full-fledged artists’ enclave à la Soho or Williamsburg; prices are even climbing too high for design and tech companies to afford.

“The gritty, artsier industrial space that attracts art galleries? That hasn’t and won’t happen here because people are ready to develop their properties,” said Erik Tietz, a co-founder of Tietz Baccon, a design and digital fabrication company based in Long Island City. “There are a million cool warehouses here that could be converted to something, but you can’t get more than a two-year lease because they’re going to sell and tear it down.”

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*Gantry State Park. (Courtesy LIC Partnership.)*

When it opened in 2010, M. Wells seemed proof of the neighborhood’s promise: husband-and-wife team Hugue Dufour and Sarah Obraitis served edgy mash-ups of French Canadian cuisine like snail-stuffed bone marrow, pickled pig’s tongue, foie gras poutine and what many claimed was the perfect egg sandwich. M. Wells was irreverent, decadent, delicious and, most of all, fun, which set it apart from the masses of precocious, precious and self-serious restaurants in Brooklyn and Manhattan. *The New York Times* deemed it worth a plane ride to Queens. *New York* magazine declared: “The looseness at the root of M. Well’s greatness is barely possible anymore elsewhere. Only here can a restaurant afford to survive its first half a year serving only breakfast while the liquor license is in the works or stay shuttered on the week’s two most profitable nights.”

A year later, the landlord reportedly demanded “astronomically high rent, a short length of lease and a strict buy-out clause” to renew; the restaurant closed. To Long Island City’s credit, M. Wells did not perish. Last winter, P.S.1 hosted a pop-up café, and this fall, the restaurant reopened in full, serving stacks of pork chops and $90 bone-in chateaubriand out of an old garage in Court Square owned by Rockrose Development, one of the neighborhood’s largest developers that has a recently opened rental building, Linc LIC, nearby. (Rockrose chief Justin Elghanayan has gone to even greater lengths in the past to augment the nascent neighborhood’s appeal. In the summer of 2011, he brought three giant dumpster pools, beer, food trucks, ping-pong, badminton and dancing to the parking lot of a defunct Bank of America branch in Court Square where Rockrose plans to build residential towers. The Palms, a pool party homage to Miami’s ’50s nightclub scene, thrived for a summer.)

The outcome for M. Wells was a happy one, but not entirely. M. Wells seemed to have slipped under the wire, to have established itself and won allies before the neighborhood became too expensive for such experimentation. There is a reason the most desirable neighborhoods are glutted with uninspired gastropubs and a reason, too, that the Palms lasted only a summer—the space was, after all, slated for development.

The neighborhood’s transformation from industrial to residential neighborhood, bringing new people and money and investment, has given rise to things like M. Wells and the Palms, but at the same time, luxury residential development is also likely to be the neighborhood’s undoing. In November, graffiti mecca 5Pointz, the neighborhood’s de facto icon, was whitewashed over. The Wolkoff family, who had owned the warehouse and allowed graffitists to use it for decades, was eager to finally make good on its investment, an act of destruction that illustrated the neighborhood’s success from a development standpoint could mean its failure in much larger sense.

“The neighborhood was aborted before it even got the chance to start up. You remove 5Pointz, you’re removing the biggest incentive for anyone to come,” said Marie Flaguel, a resident and 5Pointz spokesperson told me when we spoke a few days before the whitewashing. “If you put up those glass rental towers, you’re turning it into Battery Park City, then you know what, after 5 p.m., nobody’s there. And Jackson—you ruin 5Pointz, I don’t think you’d even want to walk your dog there.”

Long Island City has the lovely weirdness that comes with being between stages, a mélange of people and uses and things that collide into happy coincidence and chance encounters. It has, in other words, a sense of possibility, an openness that is increasingly hard to find on the streets of Manhattan and Brooklyn, frozen as they are beneath the hard shimmer of affluence.

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*5Pointz, post its paint job. (Amanda Lea Perez, New York Observer.)*

All neighborhoods have that golden hour, a moment in time when they are poised between one incarnation and the next, a wild kind of adolescence when the possibilities are many and nothing is decided. This moment, of course, passes. The rents rise, and residents hunker down in their apartments, knowing they will never find such a good deal again; restaurants and shops stop experimenting. Caution prevails. People start to talk about how the neighborhood isn't what it used to be, and change becomes an enemy.

Long Island City has never quite been able to achieve this moment—it has that sense of fleeting possibility, the last mad rush before the music stops, but it has remained forever on the cusp. Quite simply, it has never had the density, the busy sidewalks and cluttered cafés that make a neighborhood feel like it is the place to be at a particular moment. The party always seems to be happening somewhere else, where the people are.

Nor is it likely that Long Island City ever truly will, for the only means of achieving that density, building more high-end residential towers, is likely to wipe out that very wildness and sense of possibility. This may well be inevitable—a fate that was written by the neighborhood's physical characteristics, the realities of the housing market and the larger economic forces that have pummeled the city. But it is, nonetheless, a loss.

One evening this fall, I was roaming through the neighborhood, when I turned off Jackson Avenue, onto the small side street where Sculpture Center is located. It was only a little after six and a Saturday, and I had thought the gallery might be open, but it wasn't. I was still lingering outside when I saw a woman emerge from the gleaming glass residential tower next door, pulling a Yorkshire terrier behind her. The woman stopped directly in front of the building and waited while the dog gave the sidewalk a cursory sniff and squatted to pee. Then they turned and walked back into the building.