

If You Lived Here, You'd Be Cool by Now

Ever get the feeling that the New York of your dreams is happening elsewhere? These days, the half-life of a hot neighborhood can be measured in mere weeks. To find the optimal balance of commodious bistros, tasteful urban decline, and cheap(ish) rent before it disappears, run like hell to...Jersey City?

- By [Adam Sternbergh](#)



**Sorry to get you all out of breath. You're already too late.*

Perhaps you are happy in your neighborhood. Perhaps you are ensconced right where you are. Perhaps you never indulge the stray notion that maybe it's time to pull up stakes and move to Brooklyn or, if you live in Brooklyn, maybe you should check out Astoria or Jackson Heights. Perhaps your interest is not roused by each new story of the underground loft parties in Bushwick, or that very reasonably priced warehouse conversion in the South Bronx (sorry—SoBro), or that awesome and as-yet-undiscovered pocket of Red Hook with that one really great new restaurant. In which case, good wishes to you, and move along. There's nothing for you to read here.

See, once upon a time, it was easy: If you'd always dreamed of living in New York City, all you had to do was *move to New York City*. Your decision of where to live once you got here was primarily a function of economics (what you could afford) and community (who you were, who

you wanted to become, and who you wanted to hang around with). Beatniks? Please make your way to the West Village. Fancy pants? They're holding a space for you on the Upper East Side. Immigrants? You'll find a familiar and populous neighborhood already established. Artists? Take your pick of cheap, available space. Manhattan is only twenty square miles, but there was room enough for everyone.

Then not that long ago, maybe fifteen years back, something happened. As New York became more prosperous and more glamorous and less dirty and less scary—morphing from the bankrupt city of *The Warriors* and *Escape From New York* in the seventies and eighties to the glittering city of *Sex and the City* and *Friends* in the nineties—more and more people came to pursue the dream of New York, and so the dream itself became more and more elusive. Manhattan became overcolonized, then overpriced. Its internal boundaries bulged, then burst. Old neighborhoods became financially inaccessible, so new ones were carved out. Now the Upper West Side is swallowing Harlem. The flow from Brooklyn to Manhattan has reversed course. The meatpacking district, once synonymous with “the district in which meat is packed,” became synonymous instead with cool, then not cool—and it all happened in about three weeks. “Downtown” has gotten so skittish that it's hopped from the East Village to Soho to Tribeca to the Lower East Side, before eventually packing up and marching right across the bridge to Williamsburg.

Phrases like “Brooklyn is the new Manhattan” and “125th Street is the new Soho” have become a regular part of the conversation, creating a double-ended sense of disorientation: Not only is one place now cooler than you assumed, but the other one's no longer as cool as you thought. In his quasi memoir *Nobrow*, John Seabrook sounded a familiar lament: “By the time I was ready to buy an apartment, Soho was too gross, too ruined by commercialism,” he wrote. “I ended up buying in Tribeca, where in my own way, I try to make the present feel like the past. To me, Tribeca is like Soho before the money took over.” And he wrote this six years ago, not twenty. Now Tribeca's the most expensive Zip Code in the city—the money's taken over—and somewhere else, someone's out there looking for the new Tribeca (Dumbo?) and trying to make that present feel like the past as well.

As a result, even dug-in New Yorkers suffer from a kind of neighborhood ADD, perpetually suspecting that their dream of New York, whatever that might be, is happening elsewhere—not in another city, but in another borough, another neighborhood, another block. This is driven in part, of course, by money—priced out of Manhattan, you turn to Brooklyn; priced out of Brooklyn, you turn to Queens—but also in part by that anxious feeling you get when you're attending a great party, but you can't help hearing that there's a louder, more raucous party going on down the hall. The reason many people come to New York, after all, is to marvel at its glories and revel in its parade of daily wonders. But to live here now is to endure a gnawing suspicion that somebody, somewhere, is marveling and reveling a little more successfully than you are. That they're paying less money for a bigger apartment with more-authentic details on a nicer block closer to cuter restaurants and still-uncrowded bars and hipper galleries that host better parties with cooler bands than yours does, in an area that's simultaneously a portal to the future (tomorrow's hot neighborhood today!) and a throwback to an untainted past (today's hot neighborhood yesterday!). And you know what? Someone is. And you know what else?

Hot Neighborhood Entropy

Red Hook? Already over. Lower East Side? It's hot—no, wait, it's not. No, wait, it is again! The life span of a trendy neighborhood used to be measured in decades. Now it might not last long enough for you to make the subway ride out there.

Scroll the timeline below (&darr)

Right now, that person just might be living in Jersey City.

“Shake off the old perspectives and move into a new way of perceiving the world around you,” reads the introduction to the first issue of *New*, a palm-size booklet full of glossy Jersey City attractions. And sure enough—its pages promise an undiscovered land so packed with bistros and wine bars and galleries and day spas that you'd think you were wandering lost in Paris.

You'll find one such bistro, a cute and cozy four-year-old place called Madame Claude Café, nestled at the corner of Newark Avenue and 4th Street, tucked in among a Texaco station, a Gulf station, a funeral home, and a building marked demolition and concrete local 325. This is the first difference you notice between the Jersey City of the booklet and the Jersey City of walking-around-downtown Jersey City. The spas and boutiques are there, all right, but you'll need the booklet to find them, scattered as they are amid a blighted landscape of dollar stores and empty lots.

For the record, downtown Jersey City is not Eden. It's not even nice. Downtown Jersey City is pretty much what you think it is, if you ever stop to think about Jersey City: an industrial hub from which the economic lifeline, the railroad, was pulled a long time ago, leaving a hole that was filled by poverty and crime and, in some areas, a nasty toxic legacy in the soil. The entirety of Jersey City is huge and sprawling, the second-most-populous city in the state (next to Newark), but the current revival is centered in the long-neglected area anchored by the Grove Street path station, only a couple of stops from Manhattan. Beyond a kind of hardscrabble grittiness, there's little here to romanticize, even for the locals. While Manhattan has ghosts of all persuasions to lure you to its canyons—Dorothy Parker, Lou Reed, Carrie Bradshaw—Jersey City is haunted by Nathan Lane, Martha Stewart, and Malcolm-Jamal Warner from *The Cosby Show*. The city's better known for its string of ethically flexible mayors who eventually wound up in jail. A photograph of the current mayor, naked and passed out on his front porch, wound up in a story in the *New York Times*. And that was *before* he got elected.

Even its name, Jersey City, is a double-barreled insult, “worse than the punch line ‘Jersey’ alone, with the image of urban squalor added on, like insult to injury,” wrote Helene Stapinski in *Five-Finger Discount*, her memoir of growing up on the wrong, rancid side of the Hudson. People like her great-grandparents “did not settle in Jersey City. They settled *for* Jersey City. They were settlers of a different kind, the kind who always feel cheated, because they settled for less.” For a hundred years, Manhattan has been the backdrop for dreams. Jersey City, if you're looking west, has been the backdrop for Manhattan.

But then, isn't that exactly the kind of flowers-in-the-concrete place that's ripe to be discovered?

Aren't there pockets of Brooklyn—hell, pockets of Manhattan—that once seemed burned out and blighted until, all of a sudden, they weren't?

I set out from the WTC path station—traveling directly through the ghostly ground-zero pit, as though riding a monorail through a brightly lit attraction at a macabre amusement park—to Grove Street. I'm headed to Madame Claude to meet with Ingrid Dahl, a 26-year-old bass player with hair shaped like a candle flame, and her bandmates, Stephen Hindman and Penelope Trappes, who together form the local glitch-pop band Lismore. The three of them are, by local standards, graybeards of the renaissance: Stephen's lived here for nine years, Penelope seven, and Ingrid four. And they are the perfect Jersey City evangelists, exactly the kind of people you imagine living on the vanguard of the coolest scene in the city. Penelope's from Australia and wears her blonde hair in eye-skirting bangs. Stephen, who grew up near Pittsburgh, has a dyed-black asymmetrical haircut that recalls Robert Smith of the Cure. They each have an excellent "How I wound up in Jersey City" story, none of which starts, "Well, I'd always dreamed of moving to Jersey City..."



Penelope was living in Bahrain and working as a flight attendant for Gulf Air when she took a vacation to New York and met a guy—from Jersey City. "I ended up crashing on this guy's couch. Then I ended up marrying this guy. Then I ended up divorcing this guy," she says. Ingrid, who grew up between New Brunswick and Taiwan, settled here after graduating from Rutgers. On the day she moved in, her bike was stolen. Later that month, someone broke into her car, took it for a joyride, then smashed it into a tree in front of her house. Meanwhile, someone kept breaking into her apartment—it turned out to be her next-door neighbor, who had just been released from prison and was under house arrest. Stephen arrived in Manhattan to work as a drum-and-bass D.J. and spent a few months couch-surfing while he looked for a cheap place. On the day before his self-imposed deadline, when he was supposed to fly back to Columbus, Ohio, he found a two-bedroom in Jersey City for

\$650. "I'd stayed in Queens for a couple of weeks and hated it," he says. "I'd spent some time on a couch on Christopher Street—that was awesome. Jersey City seemed like somewhere between Christopher Street and the last stop in Queens."

Jersey City, they say, is affordable, friendly, and still in the first flush of an artistic explosion. They're excited about what's happening and are eager to get the word out—as though they've stuck the message of the Jersey City revival in a bottle, tossed it in the Hudson, and are waiting for it to wash up on the other side. "I've had lots of opportunities to move to Williamsburg, the East Village, West Village, the Lower East Side," says Ingrid. "But something keeps me here."

There are, however, a few amenities they're missing. "An all-ages music venue," says Ingrid. "We definitely need that."

"Any kind of music venue for local bands," says Penelope.

“And a couple more bars,” says Ingrid.

“And a couple more cafés,” says Stephen.

“More post offices,” says Penelope.

“And a 24-hour diner,” says Ingrid. “There’s nowhere to eat late.”

After dinner, they take me to LITM, which stands for Love Is the Message, a cool lounge with brick walls and warm lighting on downtown’s main drag, Newark Avenue. This stretch has been designated “Restaurant Row” by the city, which is odd because currently there’s only one restaurant. When LITM’s owner, Jelynne Jardiniano, who grew up in Jersey City, opened three years ago, she had to fight a local ordinance that forced restaurants on Newark to close by midnight because of concerns about noise and drunks. “Growing up here, we were scared of downtown,” Jelynne tells me. “But now people come in here and say, ‘We weren’t sure about buying here, but then we saw your place.’”

“Newark Avenue is going to explode,” says Robert, Jelynne’s husband. “We want people who’d go to Soho to come here. It’s a new frontier. Ten years ago, who went to Tribeca?”

During drinks with the Lismore bandmates, the conversation turns to another former frontier, Williamsburg. “Williamsburg got all weird,” says Stephen. “But at least they already had their scene. All those bands like Interpol and Yeah Yeah Yeahs, they got big and got signed. If Jersey City got weird before anyone got signed—man, that would suck.” Penelope mentions that she heard that Interpol just bought a house in downtown Jersey City.

Later, Ingrid says, “I wish I was older, so I could have lived in Williamsburg ten years ago.”

While I was writing this story, people kept asking me three questions, often in anxious succession.

One: Where’s Jersey City? (It’s right next to Hoboken, across the Hudson from Battery Park City, where you see the Goldman Sachs building and the big Colgate clock, a remnant of a torn-down soap factory.)

Two: Are you going to move there? (I’ll admit, the thought’s crossed my mind. I am certainly now no more hesitant to go to Jersey City for dinner or an art opening than I would expect my whiny Manhattanite friends to be about coming across the bridge to Brooklyn.)

Three: Is it too late to buy? (Probably. The pretty brownstones along historic Van Vorst Park City—buildings that, in the eighties, the city would have essentially *given to you for free*—now list at more than \$1 million each.)

When I moved to New York two years ago, I settled in Brooklyn for all the usual reasons: a combination of the practical (cost restraints, proximity to the subway) and the intangible (brownstones, the Brooklyn Bridge, I kind of liked the movie *Smoke*). My block, as it turns out,

features exactly no brownstones and exactly one recent murder. Still, I like it: It's Brooklyn, in New York, a place I've mythologized all my life.



Toronto, where I came from, is a metropolitan, multicultural, dynamic city in which people are notorious for talking wistfully of living somewhere else. I assumed that by moving to New York I'd escape that wistful longing, and I did, sort of. But what I found is that in New York, people don't fantasize so much about other cities—London, Montreal, San Francisco, Berlin—as they do about other eras. A friend of mine recently moved to Bushwick, the next frontier in gentrified Brooklyn, and he always sells it by saying, “It's like Soho in the eighties or Williamsburg in the nineties.” You need only to flip through *On the Street*, Amy Arbus's new book of photos taken in the East Village in the early eighties, or read reviews of *Up Is Up But So Is Down*, an anthology of writing from the same era, to be reminded of a time when, as one reviewer put it, the city was “infused with the energy and violence of a city where blackouts and social protests were routine, the East Village was still filled with tenements, and the subway was covered with graffiti”—and then, oddly, to feel nostalgic for that time. And yet we regard this nostalgia with a self-mocking irony. Gawker, for a time, reported gruesome murders under the snarky catchall heading “NYC Is EDGY!”—the joke being that we're glad it really isn't while simultaneously kind of wishing it still was.

This perpetual churn of nostalgia is what drives us to seek out a present that feels like the past, to find the next neighborhood that will remind us of the neighborhood that's already gone. It's what spurs Ingrid to talk fondly of the Williamsburg of ten years ago, or prompts Amy Dubin, the cheerful, spiky-haired proprietor of a downtown Jersey City tea shop called Janam, to remark, “I love New York. But compared to the New York of the seventies, it's not so...colorful, in terms of

music and fashion and art. It feels kind of muted.” In Jersey City, by contrast, “there is an excitement here. People feel like this is a movement that could have historical significance, like Williamsburg has.”

It’s understandable to want to recapture—or, I guess, capture—the feel of that bygone New York that lured you here in the first place. This desire, as it happens, also makes for a great sales pitch. All across America, developers are pitching new loft conversions or luxury condos as having “a Soho feel” or “a Williamsburg vibe,” or, magically, both. “We want it to be a cross between Williamsburg and Soho,” said a Philadelphia developer of his \$100 million development to the *New York Times* last year.

As I drive around downtown Jersey City with Steven Fulop, the area’s recently elected 29-year-old city councilman, he offers me a tour of Waldo, which is Jersey City’s own version of Brooklyn’s Dumbo, complete with derelict warehouses, an overarching development plan, and a marketing-friendly acronym (it stands for Work and Live District Ordinance). “It will have a Soho-Village kind of vibe,” he says. “It’s like the Village was 40 years ago. Not that it’s going to take us 40 years to get there.”

In fact, downtown Jersey City, with its mishmash of brownstones and warehouses and condos and Williamsburgian industrial blocks, is like a tabula rasa for gentrifiers. There’s a burgeoning art scene side by side with a blooming skyline of luxury waterfront towers. (And, as one satisfied owner said to me, “When I look out, I’ve got a view of the sun rising over the Manhattan skyline, while over there you’re looking at the sun setting over New Jersey.”) On the picturesque streets around Van Vorst Park, if you squint, you could almost be in Park Slope. Then again, if you turn around and walk in the other direction, you could almost be in downtown Toledo, stranded on a windy office block near a Chili’s or a coffee shop inexplicably named Hawaii Cup-O.

Whatever your dream of New York life is, downtown Jersey City is ready to fulfill it, or at least some reasonable facsimile. “When we opened this store, people were like, ‘Wow, this is amazing. This feels just like the West Village,’ ” says Cliff Rulow, an Englishman who owns Life, a high-end men’s boutique.

“We’ve been called the sixth borough, but everything here is better than Brooklyn. I like to call us the *second* borough,” says Fulop, the young councilman.

“At Marco + Pepe, you could convince yourself that you are in Chelsea,” writes a reviewer of the charming restaurant right across from City Hall—on the same corner, in fact, where Helene Stapinski grew up.

“When she said we were going to Jersey City, my first reaction was ‘Ugh,’ ” says John, a Brooklynite, of his companion Betsy, a Manhattanite, while returning from a house party on the 12:15 a.m. path train to New York. “But it’s really gentrified well. They should make it a borough.”



There are roughly four types of people who push the frontier of gentrification: creative types in search of cheap rents; gays and lesbians drawn to affordable, like-minded communities (and Jersey City, just a few path stops from the West Village, has a strong gay community—on the first day I visited, the City Hall was flying a rainbow flag); young couples and new families who've been priced out of the neighborhoods in which they'd hoped to buy; and speculators driven by those tantalizing stories of the \$150,000 Boerum Hill brownstone or the just-before-the-neighborhood-exploded Tribeca loft.

Typically, the gentrification process is linear and unfolds over time. First the artists seek out a neighborhood (usually an abandoned industrial zone or vibrant ethnic enclave) that's cheap and relatively accessible. Then come the scenesters, who have more money but who still want an authentic urban lifestyle because, seriously, no one moves to the suburbs anymore. All they want is an affordable place on a non-eyesore-ish block within walking distance of a few cute restaurants, and a couple of good bars, and a halfway decent bookstore, and a yoga studio, and a wine store that isn't just full of cheap swill for rummies, and maybe a children's boutique with adorable \$80 hand-sewn frocks hanging off a wooden tricycle in the window, and a Starbucks, and a Whole Foods. And they're willing to bet that, if just a few of those things are in place already, the others will come along soon enough—so that eventually their new neighborhood will look pretty much identical to the ones they couldn't previously afford. At which point the developers arrive to throw up new condo buildings named after the neighborhood, and the hipper chains start to sniff out a new lucrative demographic pocket—and the artists have long since moved on, along with a good chunk of the neighborhood's previous residents.

This neighborhood ADD is a luxury, of course, afforded to a certain kind of urban nomad, those

who aren't obliged to choose their home based on necessity, community, or need. So instead, they—all right, we—have become settlers, in both senses of the word: constantly seeking out virgin territory where we can enact the dream that brought us here, or at least the closest version we're willing to accept. And the more we hear about these neighborhoods happening elsewhere, the more fidgety we become. Which means the gentrification cycle speeds up. In Williamsburg, the transformation from artist colony to condo glut took about ten years. In Dumbo, maybe five. In Jersey City, it's not a cycle at all. It's happening all at once.

No neighborhood better illustrates this than Waldo, or, as Councilman Fulop prefers to call it, the Powerhouse Arts District. For years, an abandoned warehouse at 111 First Street served as an unofficial squat for Jersey City artists. Two years ago, the city seized the building and evicted the occupants, and the warehouse is now waiting to be torn down to make way for a Rem Koolhaas–designed condo tower—which will contain subsidized housing, somewhat ironically, for local artists.

This kind of urban-biosphere approach is springing up in cities all over the continent as a way to resurrect underused—and suddenly fashionable—industrial properties. The goal is to artificially accelerate gentrification, sort of like digging up an untended garden of wildflowers and building a greenhouse instead. A block away from 111 First, the massive Hudson and Manhattan Railroad Powerhouse sits gutted, awaiting some presumed influx of galleries and performance spaces and, possibly, a Barnes & Noble and, if they have trouble filling it, a couple of big family restaurants. The project's been granted by the city to the Cordish Company, a Baltimore-based developer that renovated similar powerhouses in Baltimore and Richmond, Virginia; Baltimore's Power Plant now houses a Barnes & Noble, a Hard Rock Café, and an ESPN Sportszone. And, on a nearby corner, the skeleton of a luxe Donald Trump development, Trump Plaza Jersey City, with top prices at \$1.24 million, and which, at 55 and 50 stories, will become the two tallest residential towers in the skyline, is already starting to rise, scheduled to be open in 2007.

I didn't move to New York to live in Jersey City," says Amanda Assadi-Rulow, publisher of the *New* booklet.

"I didn't move from England to end up in Jersey City," says Cliff Rulow, her husband and owner of Life.

They're explaining to me how they wound up in Jersey City. Like many pioneers, their story involves a series of fortuitous accidents (my favorite of these is the guy who says, "I was looking in Hoboken and got lost") and at least a little bit of arm-twisting. Cliff and Amanda were living in Brooklyn, near Prospect Park, when they got priced out of the neighborhood. So they started looking for a better deal. A friend who lived in Liberty Towers, a well-appointed high-rise on Jersey City's waterfront, convinced them to come across the river for a visit. Cliff says, "We walked in and our jaws dropped. Then we went up to his apartment and our jaws dropped further. After that, it was an absolute no-brainer."

Listening to them, it's easy to see the upside: great views, short ferry ride to the city, better value for the money. But it's also easy to see the downside: It's not New York. It's not even New York State. *It's Jersey City.*

“Look, not everyone is prepared to make that move,” Cliff says. “If you’ve moved from the West Coast or from another country, you want to be in Manhattan. That’s part of your dream. For us, I think we’d gone past that. And there’s so much potential here.”

His store is a glimmering white box stocked with Seven jeans and Y-3 sneakers and Paul Smith Crombie coats, located in the tree-lined downtown neighborhood of Paulus Hook. Some Jersey City lifers still call the area by its old nickname, Gammontown, from the Dutch word *gemeen*, which means “abandoned” or “vile,” as the neighborhood was once known for its persistent infestation of rats. Now the brownstones are filled with prosperous transplants from Manhattan’s financial and fashion industries—the kinds of people Cliff would spot carrying bags from shops in Soho and wearing \$200 jeans, which convinced him a store like his could succeed. “The stigma is slowly but surely changing,” says Cliff. “Now we have what the West Village has. The meatpacking district has a guide. Now we have our own guide.”

Rob Finn, a 29-year-old who grew up in Jersey City and recently bought a house, explains it like this: “My whole life, I’d say I grew up in Jersey City, and people would give me that look. Now when I say it, they don’t give me that look anymore. The look they give me is more like, ‘Oh, I hear there’s a really cool wine bar there.’ ”

For Amanda and Cliff, their bet on the city has paid off—so much so that, recently, they were priced out of Liberty Towers. They’ve since bought a chic home on a pretty block in Greenville, which is known as one of rougher areas in Jersey City. Only three years ago, crossing the Hudson on the ferry, they felt like pioneers. “But we got pushed out already,” says Amanda. “It’s already working against us.”

So there you have it: Downtown Jersey City is already over. Forget I said anything. Or, rather, Jersey City finds itself both dawning and in its twilight, both undiscovered and overdeveloped. It’s the beneficiary and victim of our restless devouring search for the next “next”—the promise of an idealized future in some reminder of the romanticized past.

As it turns out, this isn’t a “Jersey City is the new blank” story; it’s “Blank is the new Jersey City.” People priced out of downtown are moving on to nearby Journal Square or Jersey City Heights or Greenville. Heck, a couple of months ago, the New York *Sun* declared Newark the sixth borough—why not, it’s only a few more path stops down the line. The *Times*, a year ago, went one better, proclaiming Philadelphia the next great neighborhood for New Yorkers. Artist friendly! With a Soho feel! And the commute’s not as bad as you think! And I will admit, I remember thinking, just for a moment, *Hmmm, maybe Philadelphia ...* Like most people, I’m willing to chase my dream of New York almost anywhere.
