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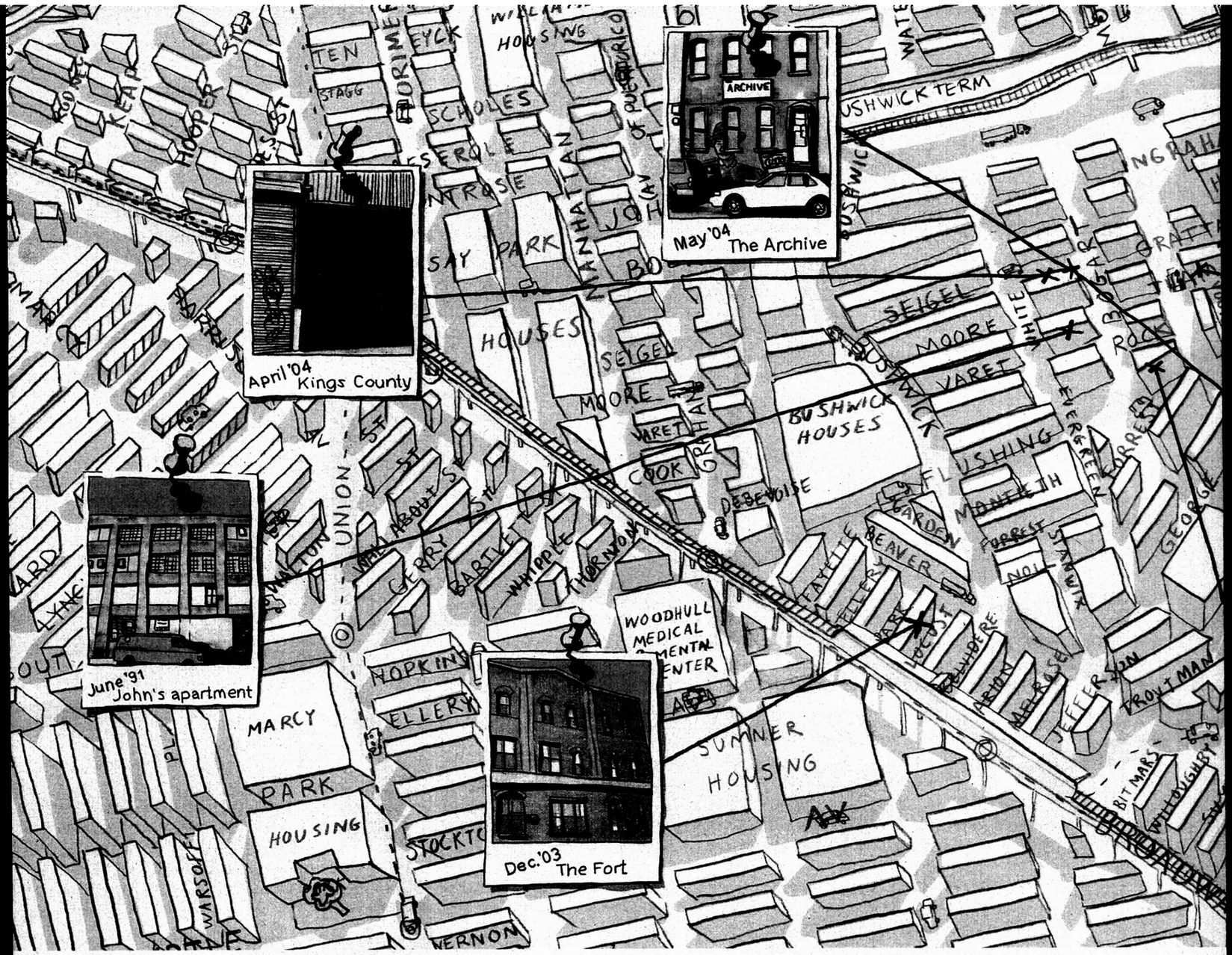

The Next Neighborhood

HOW AN UNDESIRABLE NEIGHBORHOOD BECOMES THE NEXT HOT SPOT.

PSST... HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT BUSHWICK?

BY ROBERT SULLIVAN

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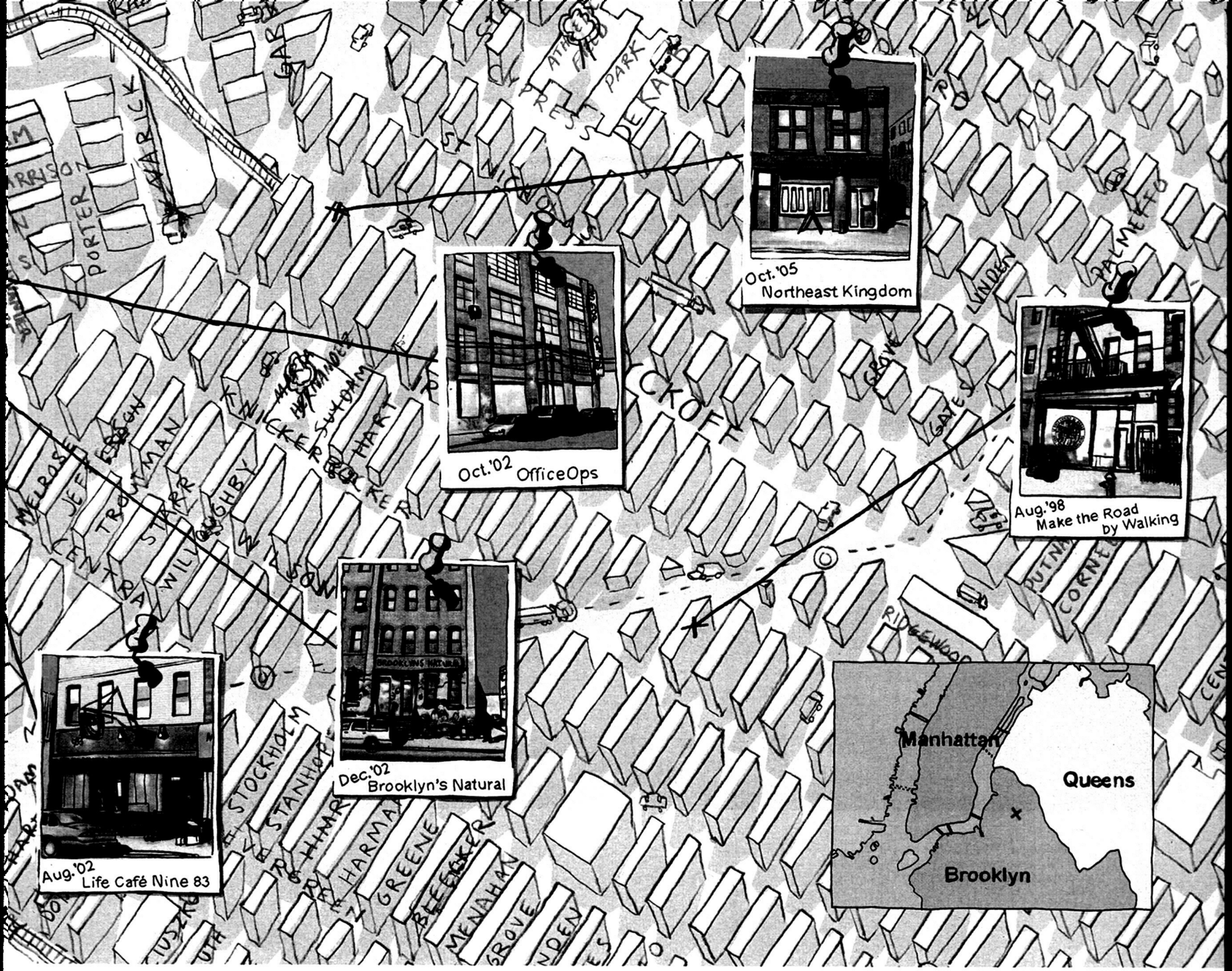

Illustration by Leif Parsons

ON A RAINY WINTER AFTERNOON, just a few minutes after running over a stray hubcap, just after having to pull his beat-up Toyota sedan off a beat-up section of the beat-up Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and having to run the little white car back and forth until at last the hubcap broke free, Tom Le, choreographer-turned-real-estate-agent, re-enters the mad rush of the highway and a mile or so later exits as planned, ending up on a detour, Park Avenue. "I'm running a little late," he says, semicalmly, into his cellphone.

This Park Avenue, by the way, is no Park Avenue. This Park Avenue runs through the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, passing soot-covered stores, forgotten (for the moment, anyway) tenements, forlorn housing projects, factories that may or may not be empty, auto-repair shops and Hasidic women pushing strollers. This is the Park Avenue that — as the sky now begins to pour, as the broken-up streets flood with oil-slicked water — lands Tom Le, a Corcoran Group Real-

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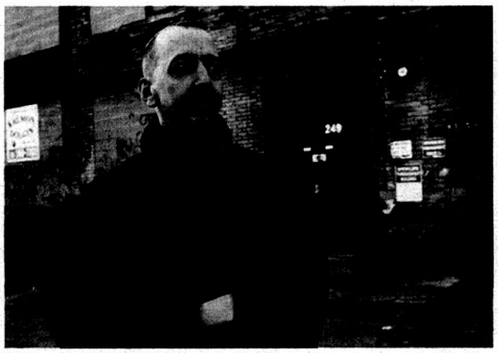

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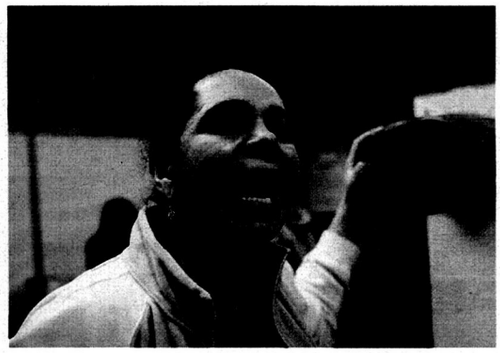

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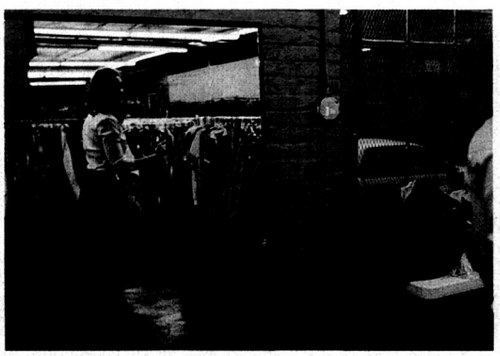

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1 John Jasperse
2 Make the Road by Walking **3** Life Café
4 OfficeOps **5** Brooklyn's Natural
6 The Fort

tor, at the intersection of Central and Evergreen, in a vista of plumbing-supply stores and fenced-in yards that is neither central nor green.

Then he parks, locks, dashes into an old storefront, so that he is suddenly the tiniest bit overdressed, a tinge too businesslike for the all-of-the-sudden hip environs. Brushing off his navy blue blazer and straightening his rain-soaked red tie, he orders a carrot-ginger soup, and a high-energy smile breaks across his face like a banner unfurling. With an accent that is part Californian, part Vietnamese, part top-selling real-estate agent, he asks rhetorically, "Isn't this great?"

By *this* he means Bushwick, the next new neighborhood or, more precisely, a neighborhood that is now in the sights of New York City real-estate agents and developers as the next new neighborhood. *This* is Bushwick as seen from the banquette at Life Café Nine 83, a cool place with mostly comfort food (meatloaf, fried chicken) and a few vegan options. There is also a new late-night menu, now that people in the neighborhood have started staying in the neighborhood on Saturday nights.

Before the late-night menu, they went to the Lower East Side, for instance, where the first Life Café opened, back when *that* was the next neighborhood, in the 80's. Or they went to Williamsburg (the next neighborhood of the mid-90's), which, of course, they still do, Williamsburg only being a couple of stops away on the L train. The point is that an early stage of next-neighborhood development happens when the people who have most recently moved in begin to recreate there the place that they either wanted to be in originally or that rent increases moved them out of. It's sometimes tough to distinguish, especially now when the next-neighborhood cycles seem to be picking up speed, when people are beginning to be kicked out of neighborhoods their demographic equals haven't even heard about yet.

Though people are now hearing about Bushwick. "The neighborhood's definitely, as they call it, up and coming," says Roody Hyacinthe, an agent with Fillmore Real Estate who sells in Brooklyn. "I remember two or three years ago, when houses were coming on the market, we were giving them away." They're not giving them away anymore.

"You will see," says Le.

NATURALLY FOR TOM LE, as for real-estate agents and real-estate buyers and renters everywhere, Bushwick's hotness is, first of all, about location. And in New York, location starts out as having to do with subway lines — in this case the L train. The L train is connected to Manhattan, the island from which even next neighborhoods still ultimately derive their nextness, but in the case of Bushwick, the L train is the train that connects it to past next neighborhoods — i.e., the Lower East Side and Williamsburg. (Until very, very recently, parts of Bushwick were referred to in real-estate listings as "East Williamsburg," sometimes when it is East

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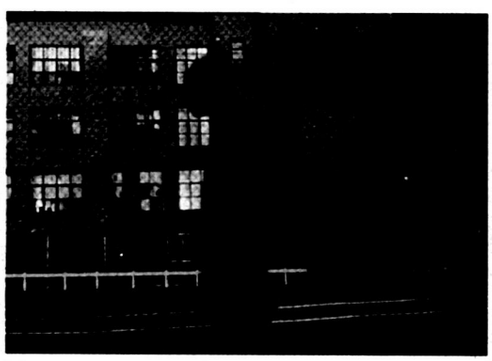

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7 Kings County **8** Tom Le
9 Chez Bushwick **10** The Morgan Avenue L stop at Bogart Street **11** Local talent
12 Ruth Garon

Williamsburg, sometimes when it isn't really because it's really Bushwick.)

Bushwick is roughly the shape of Vermont. Williamsburg is its neighbor to the north. On its west is Bed-Stuy, a neighborhood that, given the rising prices in Clinton Hill, the adjacent neighborhood heading farther west, toward Manhattan, is also something of a next neighborhood. (See also the Port Morris and Mott Haven neighborhoods in the Bronx.) On Bushwick's eastern border is Ridgewood, in Queens — Ridgewood, in turn, being bordered by vast plots of parklike green that, at the moment, are zoned only for the dead.

After location in the real-estate hotness calculus comes price, and in Bushwick the price is right — i.e., low, or pretty low, as far as New York goes. Rents, which are rising, are around $1,400 for 1,200 square feet, at the moment — about half what they are in Dumbo, which was a next neighborhood six or seven years ago, and perhaps at a third of what they are on the Lower East Side. Likewise, a half-million dollars won't get your phone call returned by real-estate agents in Manhattan, where the average apartment now sells for more than a million. But in Bushwick, half a million dollars can still get you a small single-family home (or could have before this article appeared). As Le says, continuing his lunch-table neighborhood tour, "This hasn't yet been discovered." And by *this* he still means Bushwick.

IN NEW YORK, IT IS THE ARTISTS WHO ARRIVE FIRST IN A NEIGHBORHOOD THAT IS ABOUT TO CHANGE. THEY STARTED ARRIVING IN BUSHWICK IN THE 90'S.

As with exploration in the Renaissance, *discovered* in New York real estate is a problematic concept. The old building directly across the street from Life Café is owned by the Baierlein family, whose ancestors have been there since around the time Mayor McClellan was elected mayor in 1903, since the first subways opened, since the Williamsburg Bridge was built and since O. Henry wrote his New York stories. The Baierleins are a remnant of the German population that came to the little village of Bushwick in the mid-1800's, the immigrant group that built the breweries of Brooklyn. In the 1920's, after the Germans discovered Bushwick, it was discovered by Italians. After World War II, when the Italians moved to the suburbs, Bushwick was discovered by Puerto Ricans. During the city's fiscal crisis, the last German breweries closed, and then riots during the blackout of 1977 nearly destroyed the neighborhood completely; by then, the Baierleins had boarded up their apartments to protect them from the fires that were raging through what was becoming a neighborhood of abandoned lots. Bushwick was discovered yet again in the 1980's by new New Yorkers from the Dominican Republic, as well as Guyana, Ecuador, Jamaica, India and China, new immigrants who moved to Bushwick not for cool restaurants but to survive in what was a civic wasteland. Most re-

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cently, in the 10 years before the opening of the Life Café in 2002, Bushwick was discovered by people moving to New York from Mexico. Bushwick is a Dutch word sometimes translated as "refuge."

Le's discovery of Bushwick started when his own friends — dancers and artists — moved into lofts in the area in the 90's, lofts with no heat or water or plumbing; they used charcoal barbecues to keep warm. It was then that Le was making the transition from dance to real estate, the business of his family in California. He started with Fillmore Real Estate and became a "top producer," to use the industry term. "I told them to open an office in Williamsburg," he goes on. "So when we did, people started coming into the office looking for places. They'd say my budget, for example, is $500,000. Sadly, with half a million they can't afford Williamsburg or East Williamsburg." And there, by East Williamsburg, he means East Williamsburg. That's when he mentions the discovery: Bushwick. Real estate is so often the business of readjusting dreams.

Take the couple that showed up not long ago at his office. "We were looking for Williamsburg," Le says, speaking real-estate-ese, a first-person plural. "We had $700,000 to spend. One is a sculptor; the other one is also an artist, does installation. And they said, 'We'd love something we could have our studio in,' and I said: 'Well, 700 is a lot of money. We can get you a two-family. But for a studio, if you want bigger space, you may have to go farther out.' And they said: 'Fine. What do you think you have?' At that time, I had a four-family and a store, plus a warehouse in the back. This is just about a year ago. In the back is a huge warehouse with a 20-foot ceiling. They went there, and their mouths — they just went like: 'Oh, my God! This is great!' And they got it for $650,000! It's off of Central."

THE FINAL FACTOR in next-neighborhood hotness has to do with the presence of what might be broadly categorized as artists. In forest succession, leafy hardwoods like alder precede the towering softwoods like pine, and in real estate in New York, it is the artists who arrive first in a neighborhood that is about to change, especially in industrial sites, especially in large old spaces abandoned and left for dead. "This is the story of real estate," Le says, "that the artists are always pioneering." It is the story of SoHo, West Chelsea, Williamsburg. In this case, the first artists arrived in Bushwick in the 90's, when Bushwick's factory areas were still burning.

"When I moved in 1991, there was a crack-for-sex trade on my landing," says John Jasperse. Now Jasperse is a nationally recognized choreographer who until recently kept his studio for his dance company in Bushwick; then, he was a not yet nationally recognized young choreographer who, with three other artists, persuaded a landlord to let them renovate an abandoned loft building. "Basically the reason we were there was because nobody wanted to be there," he says.

"It was a war zone," says Rob Herschenfeld, a furniture designer, who in 1996 was feeling pushed out of a rented space in Williamsburg. He bought a loft building on Boerum Street, a place that real-estate agents called East Williamsburg a few months ago (and may even *be* East Williamsburg) but is now called Bushwick. He did not seek out cafes at the time, not that there were any. "We were too busy emptying out the crack addicts," he says.

Torben Giehler, a painter, showed up at the end of the 90's, renting a space in Herschenfeld's building; Herschenfeld's mother and building manager, Phyllis, approved a lease when few other people would. "I couldn't get any credit, and Phyllis, she just liked my work and gave me the place," he says. He had a view of feral dogs, prostitutes and a guy who shot up heroin while driving and, as a result, ran into a couple of cars.

Giehler's friend Jeffrey Reed, a sculptor and photographer, was there a year or two later in 2,000 square feet of raw space on the side of a construction yard, which he got for $1,200 a month. He found the streets nerve-racking. "If you saw someone, you would start walking the other way," he says. "You just assumed there wasn't any reason that anyone would be there." When Reed visited Giehler's space at the end of the day, they would look out the window at the view of burning cars. Once, as a long stream of gasoline made its way down the street, they suddenly realized that Reed's car was about to catch fire, but they managed to run down and move it in time.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COOL PLACES KICKED OFF IN 2002, AFTER KATHY KIRKPATRICK, WHO FOUNDED THE ORIGINAL LIFE CAFÉ IN THE EAST VILLAGE, MOVED TO BUSHWICK.

After artists came students, also as per the next-neighborhood cycle — students like Cynthia Rojas, who moved in 2001, arriving from California, with her husband, Brian Lease, a classically trained vibraphone player who plays in a band called Fisherman's Xylophonic Burlesque Orchestra. For recreation, they went to the Laundromat on Flushing Avenue. "That was it," she says. "It was like camping."

The development of cool places kicked off in 2002, after Kathy Kirkpatrick, who founded the original Life Café in the 80's, moved to Bushwick, taking the first apartment she saw for rent. "Then I looked out my window," she says, "and I kept seeing hipsters. And then I thought, This looks just like the people who were living in the East Village." In August 2002, she opened up a restaurant, small, with just a steam table, as well as newspapers and essentials, like onions and toilet paper. "I didn't realize the desperate desire of the community here to have a place — the musicians and artists and the writers who needed to get out and hang," she says.

A few months later, Kevin Lindamood, who had come to Bushwick a few years earlier from western Virginia, renovated an industrial building and opened a nonprofit arts-oriented space called OfficeOps. There's a movie screening room and a big kitchen for parties, as well as a new thrift shop. Sometimes Lindamood rents out the roof for weddings and other events. Sometimes those events are even attended by Williamsburgers.

At the end of 2002, Herschenfeld built a small grocery store, Brooklyn's Natural, right near the Morgan Avenue L stop exit on Bogart Street, and one of the people working with him opened a bar around the corner, called Kings County. (Today, a rock-climbing wall decorates the spire of Herschenfeld's remodeled warehouse.)

Since Life Café and Brooklyn's Natural opened, all kinds of artists and performers have come to make Bushwick home. In 2003, Jonah Bokaer, a dancer with Merce Cunningham, started Chez Bushwick, a salon for artists and performers in Herschenfeld's loft building on Boerum. "It's a very catalytic place," Bokaer says.

For his part, L. D. Beghtol says a kind of artistic critical mass may have been reached that year. Beghtol had been living in the Baierlein family's apartments since 2000, moving there after five years in downtown Manhattan. A Village Voice art director, he is also a member of several bands and band collectives, like L. D. & the New Criticism, and sang on the Magnetic Fields' three-CD song cycle, "69 Love Songs." One night in 2002, Beghtol was in Life Café, having a drink, when a D.J. played the song "Lions" by Tones on Tail, what might be called a next-next-neighborhood band. "I thought, I can't believe I'm hearing this in my neighborhood bar," Beghtol said. The D.J. turned out to be the girlfriend of Jim Bentley, who had just moved to Bushwick from Chicago (seeing a likeness to the Ukranian Village in Chicago, where all the musicians hang out). Bentley runs the Fort, a neighborhood recording studio, and now labels the projects he produces with Beghtol and others with the stamp "Made in Bushwick." "There's a lot going on here that hasn't hit the airwaves, but it will," Beghtol says.

Next-neighborhood development has now reached a pivotal juncture in

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Robert Sullivan is the author of "Rats: Observations on the History and Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants" and "How Not to Get Rich: Why Being Bad Off Isn't So Bad."

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Bushwick. The area still won't be mistaken for the Upper West Side or even Williamsburg. There is no giant luxury supermarket; there are no dry cleaners in the warehouse district, and not many anyplace else. Crime is still bad, or really bad (the rates of violent crime are still among the highest in the city) — last year, the local precinct reported 15 murders, 40 rapes, 467 robberies and 399 felonious assaults. And while there may not be as many cars burning in the warehouse district as there used to be, the streets still feel desolate.

But Bushwick is now definitely in the next stage. In May 2004, the neighborhood got its first video store-cafe, the Archive. Northeast Kingdom, the latest artist-affiliated restaurant, opened in October 2005, started by two Vermont natives currently living in Williamsburg proper. In the past year, luxury condos started showing up for $400,000. And there is even a festival — a festival that uses an acronym, acronyms seeming to be the linchpin of the real-estate business. Late last summer, Ruth Garon, who coordinates arts events, arrived in Bushwick for the very first time, after moving from Tel Aviv to Manhattan. "I was having a crisis with New York," she says. "And it was the first time I felt a sort of community." Four months later, she was inspired to organize the Bushwick Art Project, or BAP, a neighborhood happening of video V.J.'s and D.J.'s and film and dance and live music. Each time Garon held a meeting in her Cook Street loft, she noticed that more and more artists came. She also noticed that local residents began to resist an art festival. "Some people were suspicious, and they said the people from Manhattan will come and everything will be expensive," she recalls. "But after a while, they saw that we were working from a pure place."

PERHAPS THOSE MOST affected by a neighborhood's nextness are the people who are already living there, the people who have been living there for years and are not necessarily looking for a place to install a video-dance piece but are trying to live, maybe even raise children. In this case, these are the people living in what a real-estate agent might at this moment be calling Deep Bushwick, that place with tired but well-swept row houses along Knickerbocker Avenue or in and around Wyckoff Avenue, another old commercial strip. If you follow Tom Le as he tours around Bushwick in his car, he will stop you on a street of two-family row houses and get out and point around and say how great they are, as investment opportunities. "One of the most wonderful things about Bushwick is that it is a wonderful established family neighborhood," he says. "You can drive up and down the streets in Bushwick and you see families out there."

APPROXIMATE MONTHLY RENT FOR A 1,200-SQUARE-FOOT APARTMENT:

$1,400

This neighborhood of families survives on some of the lowest incomes in the city; Bushwick's median household income is about $22,000. One-fifth of the neighborhood is on public assistance. Bushwick also has foreclosure rates four times higher than the city average. Meanwhile, almost 40 percent of the neighborhood pay more than 60 percent of their incomes on housing, according to a report by the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University. A neighborhood survey found that 69 percent live with cockroaches, 47 percent with rats or mice, 30 percent with mold; the rate of hospital visits for asthma is four times the city average. Sometimes — for people who are not on public assistance and live in a city where the highest-earning families have nine times the income of the lowest — the rising rents are pushing tenants to buy homes they can't afford.

Angel Vera has lived in Bushwick for 14 years. Originally from Ecuador, he is an organizer with a community group called Make the Road by Walking, on Grove Street, near the intersection of Myrtle and Broadway — an area that was nearly destroyed during the rioting and looting of the citywide blackout in 1977. Last year, Make the Road organized the workers at discount-sneaker and apparel stores to get them the minimum wage and benefits. Still, the neighborhood feels on the verge: a little Latin American music store is closed, and the local credit union almost got priced out of an affordable office. Construction workers carry new Sheetrock into recently emptied apartments. "There are a lot of landlords who are evicting whole buildings lately," Vera says. "People move here because somewhere else is more expensive. That's the system. This automatically puts low-income people in danger."

But it's not just the low-income people. Maybe it's because the next-neighborhood cycle turns so quickly now or maybe it was always the case, but in the Bushwick that is about to happen, artists are *already* being kicked out, before more than even a handful of new home buyers get to live alongside them. "It begs the question, Is New York just going to consume itself?" says John Jasperse, who was kicked out of his loft space last year when his landlord began to convert his studio space into condos. "Because the identity of it as a place of cultural expression seems less and less possible. I've really seen the ecology of the place change. And, yes, it's safer and it's cleaner, and, yeah, there are some individual artists who are really fighting the fight. But they're also getting slammed, and you can't expect that the fight is going to constantly repeat itself. It's going to take some kind of responsible developer or some action by the government, because we can't just be making money, money, money. If it's just left to market economics, then everywhere is just going to be brokers on Wall Street."

BACK AT LUNCH, Tom Le works to keep things positive. "There's that horrible word, gentrification, but it's not all bad," he says. And he talks about his own plan to assuage the harshness of the market, which is mostly a plan for assuaging the hardships on artists. He dreams of helping artists invest in real estate, of opening an artists' studio in Bushwick himself, with an upstate affiliate perhaps. He speaks of the trends in terms of unstoppable natural forces. "The machine keeps going," he says, "and it's not the developers, it's not the Realtors. It's the demand that keeps the machine going, and you have to invest so that you are ready when the next transformation occurs. We can ride the wave or get kicked out."

But mostly Le talks about how things are really happening in the neighborhood, pricewise. On the weekend, he will run an ad: "Vacant 6-family in Bushwick, brownstone 26 x 70, 1 block from train and shopping in the next hot neighborhood, ideal development or condo conversion. $849K."

"Three or six people can come in there, renovate it and have a wonderful community there," he says. "It's on Bushwick, right off Broadway, which is great."

Even in the past few weeks, housing prices in the neighborhood have increased. Buildings are even flipping. Le sold a building on Chauncey Street, off beat-up Bushwick Avenue, for $500,000, which the owner bought for just over $300,000 a year or so ago. And then there are the condo conversions — a 16-unit condo conversion off Central Avenue, a few subway stops from Williamsburg and just a few minutes from Manhattan, with private parking and outdoor space at $400 a square foot — a real deal, even if prospective buyers might be a little nervous when they first see it, at least until they see the video store and the place to buy organic yogurt.

After he finished his soup, Le set off to see a client. But he e-mailed later to check in, because since he left dance, real estate is, as he says, "my life seven days a week."

"As you can see, Bushwick is very dynamic," he wrote. "Should you need any more assistance or you are ever in need to chat about exciting new neighborhoods or to discuss new places to hang out, please don't hesitate to give me a shout." ■

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