

## **NOT LIKE IT USED TO BE: TEENS RALLY FOR 'HOOD**

A Brooklyn youth group protests gentrification in Bushwick - and offers ideas for slowing down the changes. > *By Adam F. Hutton*

More than 100 young people marched up Grove Street in Bushwick last week to protest the transformation they feel is pushing them out of their neighborhood. They rallied outside what they view as a worrisome symbol of gentrification: A 14-story condo tower at 358 Grove, standing more than twice as tall as any building in sight and containing apartments many of the young people consider out of reach for themselves and their families.

The protesters didn't mince words about the new development encroaching on their 'hood: "Expensive housing sucks!" they chanted from the street last Thursday, looking up toward the tower's rooftop cabanas. The rally was organized by the Youth Power Project at Make the Road by Walking, a local community organizing and leadership group.

"This is our neighborhood, and we deserve to make sure our families have a future here," said Giovanni Matos, 19, a member of the Youth Power Project who helped to organize the event.

Halstead Properties received a city tax break on the building in exchange for providing affordable housing, such as the one-bedroom units in the building going for \$270,000. The market-rate portion includes a 983 square-foot, three-bedroom penthouse with a 173 square-foot terrace that costs around \$682,000.

Matos is afraid of what might happen next, now that a new mode of housing has started popping up in the neighborhood. Some Bushwick residents are worried that landlords will try to get rid of poorer tenants so they can sell properties in the up-and-coming area at a premium, or charge higher rents to new tenants who can afford it. They're afraid that local businesses will be replaced by more trendy shops catering to affluent newcomers.

"Where we used to have bodegas and rice and beans restaurants, we're now seeing wine bars and luxury condos," said Jose Lopez, 21, an organizer with the Youth Power Project. "We need the city to support a plan now, that helps current residents of our community be able to continue to live and work here."

Recent trends in Bushwick's real estate market – new construction, rising rents and burgeoning numbers of home purchase loans – all indicate that the demographics of the neighborhood are changing. But that doesn't definitively mean that Bushwick is gentrifying, according to Jenny Schuetz, an economist at New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, which publishes an annual **report** on property trends in the city.

"In terms of housing prices, Bushwick has seen rapid increases over the last three years. They do have a lot of new construction going in and there has been a substantial increase in the number of new home loans," Schuetz said. "So there are some signs in the real estate market consistent with gentrification, but with our data it would be difficult to draw that conclusion definitively."

Jannelly La Hoz doesn't have any doubts that gentrification is sweeping through Bushwick. La Hoz, 17, was born and raised in the neighborhood, but her family moved to Queens a year ago to find relief from rising rents. La Hoz said she got involved with Bushwick Research and Action on Gentrification (BRAG) after she and some other teens from the Youth Power Project went to one of Bushwick's old factory buildings that was being converted to lofts.

"We found out that one of those lofts was going to cost \$400,000," she said. "That kind of scared us into action, because our families can't afford that, our neighbors can't afford that. If we don't have Bushwick, what do we have, where do we go?"

Brian Cohen, the real estate broker for 358 Grove Street, says he sympathizes with long-time Bushwick residents who are worried about the changes happening in their neighborhood. Cohen says the condo tower didn't actually displace anyone, however.

"One of the reasons it's easy for them to single us out as the evil real estate juggernaut is that we're the biggest building in the neighborhood, we're a 14-story tower surrounded by four-story walkups," he said. "They're afraid

of losing their neighborhood and I understand that. I grew up in Ditmas Park in a time when nobody wanted to live there. I look at how that neighborhood has changed and I'm amazed, it's a really nice neighborhood now.

"But the bottom line is that neighborhoods do change, and we didn't kick anybody out of Bushwick, we replaced an empty shirt factory which was nothing but an eyesore," Cohen said.

But the young activists at Make the Road by Walking are worried that new construction will displace current residents indirectly, rather than directly. Lopez, who also spearheads BRAG for the Youth Power Project, says it's not as simple as new residents forcing old residents out of the neighborhood.

"There are a lot of landlords in the community who have noticed the change and realized that they can get a lot more for what they own and they're illegally evicting their tenants," Lopez said. "It's not like a new family moves in and forces someone else out, it's landlords that are causing displacement."

So BRAG and the Youth Power Project are focusing their efforts on landlords who "evict" tenants by allowing buildings to deteriorate: Eventually the tenants leave in frustration because landlords refuse to fix broken locks, leaky ceilings or rotten floors, Lopez said. This problem is particularly severe in Bushwick, which ranks first in hazardous building code violations among all the neighborhoods evaluated by the Furman Center's most recent report. Lopez said BRAG plans to lobby City Council to triple the fines landlords receive when they fail to repair serious code violations and to provide more inspectors to catch violations that slip through the cracks.

Lopez also pointed out that there are good landlords in Bushwick who want to keep their existing tenants and keep their buildings up to code, but can't afford to do both. With rising property values come increasing taxes and other costs to these landlords, Lopez said – but if they raise the rent, they may lose existing tenants. So BRAG is also developing a good landlord incentive program that would help those property owners get money from the city and state to keep their buildings in good shape.

- Adam F. Hutton