

***Left Bank of the Hudson: Jersey City and the Artists of 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street*****David J. Goodwin****New York: Fordham University Press, 2018****176 pages****ISBN: 0823278034****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v5i1.164>**

In *Left Bank of the Hudson*, the transformation of a 19<sup>th</sup> century tobacco factory into a dynamic artists' community—and its eventual destruction—reveals the ironies of cultural capital at work in the fragile, contingent stages of gentrification. Municipal officials carved out an arts district as they sought to revive Jersey City's economy. Yet David J. Goodwin, a former chairman of the Jersey City Historic Preservation Commission, argues that when pressured by powerful developers, they were ill-prepared to equitably negotiate the city's transformation from an industrial backwater “frequented by tumbleweeds, the occasional rabbit, and feral dogs,” into a gleaming waterfront of financial firms and residential high-rises. (29)

The 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street warehouse, occupied for nearly a century by the P. Lorillard Tobacco Co., represented Jersey City's 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial achievements and Lorillard's model of welfare capitalism, with its well-appointed employee libraries and free daycare. (19-20) After Lorillard's departure, small manufacturers rented the sprawling building, joined in the 1980s by artists, priced out of Soho and Hoboken by earlier gentrification. Throughout the nineties, an artists' community flourished despite the high incidence of crime in the area, some of which was committed by the very security forces hired by the building's management.

The presence of artists' studios and performance spaces in the intermediary phase of gentrification may be familiar, but Goodwin delves more substantively into artists' role as a “straddler” class. Possessing high levels of education as well as cultural and social capital, artists are assumed to have the capacity to maintain middle-class lives, should they so choose. A bold subset of the “creative class,” Goodwin argues, they flaunted respectable expectations, embraced

risk, and perceived the dangers and inconveniences of warehouse life as proof of its authenticity. At the same time, he notes, many lived on the margins, juggling multiple jobs. They faced some of the same uncertainties as their poor neighbors, but without access to some of the legal protections and nonprofit advocacy of those living in subsidized housing.

Goodwin argues that it wasn't artists' mere presence in the space, but their work to make 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street into a hub of the regional arts scene that makes this story significant. At first, they enjoyed a productive and amicable relationship with city officials. Officials and artists supported the passage of the Work and Live District Overlay (WALDO), a revision of the zoning laws that passed enthusiastically in 1996. This established a distinctive arts district around 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street to encourage the arts, even as city officials hoped to attract more lucrative sectors. Though it was a useful achievement, WALDO, like many official policies, was mostly symbolic. Artists had already given the "work and live" slogan tangible meaning by routinely flouting NO LIVING rules, installing washing machines, showers, kitchen appliances, and other anchors of domestic life.

The building's owner, New Gold Equities Corporation, promised "affordable working environments for all artists," but its owner, the formidable New York real estate investor Lloyd Goldman, appeared to tolerate artists' occupancy as a "short-term strategy" to profit from the building until a more lucrative market emerged. By the late 1990s, however, relations between artists and building management soured, throwing the future of 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street into question. Management refused to renew leases, increased rent, and introduced curfews.

Organized crime contributed to lawlessness and violence in the building and surrounding streets. Successive mayors provided little beyond rhetorical support for the artists. Behind the scenes, larger developers were increasingly drawn to Jersey City. New Gold Equities sought to

cash in on the area's newfound desirability, even if it meant evicting tenants and demolishing the building. A final attempt to have the storied factory declared an historic landmark was denied because its owners had already removed its signature smokestack: "A past resident attested to the durability and quality of the smokestack's nineteenth century craftsmanship," Goodwin writes, "by recounting that the contractors failed to destroy it with tools and resorted to painstakingly pulling it apart, brick by brick." (88)

Why, Goodwin asks, did Jersey City's gentrification unfold as it did? While some officials proved exceptions to Jersey City's particular political culture, many combined local boosterism and parochial cynicism toward outsiders with a contradictory deference to well-financed developers that made the city's own zoning laws seem merely provisional. Jersey City's municipal government seemed mostly unaware of other cities—even in their own region—that were undergoing similar transformations and could have provided alternative models. (97, 105) A related dynamic, he argues, was the absence of a cultural elite that would have brought resources, connections, and momentum to the establishment of an arts district and the preservation of distinctive markers of Jersey City's industrial past. (114)

Built upon archival research and interviews, Goodwin's study recovers a brief, but crucial chapter in the life of 111 1<sup>st</sup> Street. While he conveys admiration for Jersey City's resourceful artists, Goodwin also offers a critical assessment of their choices. Leaders were often the most vocal and willing to take confrontational action, but they also made ill-informed and politically naïve choices that repelled the very people whose support they needed. (81) Goodwin argues that had they entered into coalitions with other groups, they might have fared better because their position as "straddlers" worked against them. City officials found it convenient to dismiss artists as "a narrow band of people" whose concerns were not representative of others struggling to

maintain a foothold in a rapidly changing city. (117) Goodwin's engaging prose and compelling, well-reasoned arguments make this book both critical—and enjoyable—reading for urban studies scholars, tenant activists, and those who anticipate the gentrification of their own neighborhoods.

**Julia Rabig**  
**Dartmouth College**