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Why Is TED Helping Livestream Build Its New Bushwick?

Robin Gearson · Friday, March 20th, 2015

“Translating Transformation” is a TEDx Bushwick event scheduled to take place Saturday, March 21. Why? I don’t know. That’s just one of the questions I would ask TED and TEDx Bushwick organizers. Here are a few more.

First: Whose idea was this? The organizer who initiated planning for TEDx Bushwick, [Minda Aguhob](#), is “based in New York City and San Francisco” and “leading a wearable tech venture.” (But, according to Minda’s LinkedIn profile, she and the venture are based in San Francisco.)

Second: Why produce a media event in Bushwick featuring what appears to be [a majority of non-residents](#)?

Third: Why is “[non-partisan](#)” TED licensing an event that heavily promotes the corporate agenda and interests of one of its own business partners, [Livestream](#)?

And finally: The rules for a TEDx license [prohibit inflammatory programming and prohibit programming with a commercial agenda](#). But how can anyone who’s been paying attention as [Bushwick gets trampled by developers and thieves](#) consider an event produced at Livestream by TED anything but disingenuous?

Follow along while I think out loud about this “non-inflammatory, nonpartisan, noncommercial” event.

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The event’s design is genius—if you are trying to gentrify your neighborhood.

Complying with TED’s rules will, by default, silence part of the conversation—the voices of those who are not happy that their neighborhood is becoming a media circus. In this way, TEDx’s partnership with Livestream and its prohibition against conflict creates an inherently political, pro-Livestream event that is pretending it is not. For other events, TEDx may aspire to spark conversations, but here, it is effectively disappearing them.

Livestream is helping to accelerate gentrification in the neighborhood by trying to fill empty warehouses (read: attract developers) and turn it into a tech hub, an agenda that Livestream CEO/Bushwick landlord Max Haot described in a not-very-subtle *Brooklyn Magazine* article called “[How Livestream Hopes To Make Bushwick a New Technology Hub in Brooklyn](#).” In addition to

its status as tenant of the now cavernous 30,000 square-foot space at 195 Morgan Avenue (rough math based on estimated employment at the Brooklyn location puts square-footage-per-employee at around 300), Livestream is also landlord to businesses at 200 Morgan Avenue—including investor-backed art gallery Sugarlift, which TEDx organizers are touting as an “[entertainment partner](#)” for a \$25-per-ticket TEDx viewing party...of an event taking place across the street.

The [TEDx Bushwick description](#) reads, in part, “We elevate conversations to empower our community to be huge in the world, now.” I don’t know about anyone else, but when I talk to people I know in Bushwick these days, the conversations usually start with, “Do you want any of my furniture?” and end with, “So when is your going-away party?”



For instance, in *just the last six weeks*, I’ve learned about six (more) friends who are leaving Bushwick. Three longtime Bushwick residents were evicted from two different apartments in the same building. A couple I know who moved into a new-construction apartment about a year ago says the landlord is already going condo; another friend moved to Detroit to, she says, help create the type of DIY community she used to find in Brooklyn. Each of these musicians, writers, and artists worked hard to make creative lives work. Not that others don’t work just as hard. This is not an essay decrying New York’s creative climate. [It is about making visible some of the influences behind cultural shifts.](#)

All over Brooklyn, but particularly in Bushwick, real estate is so overheated that longtime residents are being pushed out building by building, [legally or illegally](#), to make room for the “Transformation” that TEDx is restating as “the opportunity to rediscover each other in a new, inspiring way.”

I was told that TEDx Bushwick organizers solicited (but seem to have declined) presentations from three different organizers of Arts in Bushwick. No one from DIY star Silent Barn is named on the list of presenters, either. These are certainly not the only cultural organizations in the area, but when it comes to elevating conversations, these are significant and important cultural voices, and they will not be heard. So, who exactly is doing the empowering, and who is being empowered here, and *whose conversation is this?*

It is clear from the speakers’ bios that a majority of the presenters seem to have no connection to Bushwick whatsoever. The TEDx audience will hear from a Washington, DC, TV reporter, and also from [Minerva Tantoco](#), New York City’s chief technology officer. According to Crain’s, Tantoco “theoretically” stepped into a role vacated by Rachel Haot, NYC’s former chief digital officer.

Haot moved on to her current role, chief digital officer and deputy technology secretary for New York State. She is also married to the co-founder and CEO of Livestream, Max Haot. Is Livestream working with TEDx on the roster of speakers?



Livestream’s determination to build a tech hub in the East Williamsburg Industrial Park has increased pressures on the arts community that attracted Livestream to Bushwick in the first place.

Livestream earns revenue in part by placing ads on video feeds of everything from DIY events to news breaking around the world to major network broadcasts like awards shows. Needless to say, Livestream has much to gain from capitalizing on its neighborhood's cool factor. The company is so eager to look cool by association with Bushwick that even on TEDx's events page, the company [notes](#) its location as "the former home of the 3rd Ward – a legendary Brooklyn artist collective."

Is this detail intended to suggest that Livestream is somehow enriched by maker-ghosts who left their creative energies behind? More like their paychecks. For the record, [3rd Ward \[no "the"\] was never an art collective, and investor-owners stiffed the teachers and members for nearly \\$75,000.](#) The community resources and jobs and paychecks that were lost when 3rd Ward closed did not return with Livestream's arrival. What part of this legacy is cool?

"Translating Transformation" will not just elevate public awareness of the community, but shape the identity of the neighborhood to the public outside of Bushwick. And this identity is unsurprisingly closely aligned with Max Haot's aspirations for Livestream and for Bushwick. TEDx's carefully cultivated Bushwick close-up is not just obviously political, but blatantly so. Anytime you are "elevating conversations to empower the community," but selecting and filtering those conversations privately, you are inhibiting and disempowering the conversations you do *not* want to have and communities whose problems you *don't* want to talk about. Which sounds rather inflammatory.

So, to summarize. Nonpartisan TED has given a San Francisco tech-leader its blessing to organize an event in Bushwick, hosted at the venue of [its longtime business partner, Livestream](#). And the TEDx license for hosting an event stipulates that the event must remain noncommercial.

What is essential to any balanced, noncommercial presentation of Bushwick's current "transformation" are *residents*, and certainly those who are fighting evictions and/or being slowly priced out/pushed out. Bushwick landlords have destroyed their own apartments and are accused of bribing city officials. Is it possible to sidestep these events and still produce an event called "Translating Transformation here in Bushwick?" Maybe not for a live audience.

But Livestream can leverage millions of online viewers to reinvent Bushwick by presenting it as a *fait accompli*. What better strategy for creating the future than pretending it's already arrived?

Gentrification brings hardship to some, prosperity to others, but instead of discussing this, "Translating Transformation" feels like a very long Livestream-is-the-new-Bushwick commercial. The closest the TEDx audience will get to a discussion of gentrification is from gallerist Ethan Pettit. According to *Bushwick Daily*, Pettit "will address the elephant in the room and talk about [art and its effects on gentrification](#)."

Did you catch that? Pettit's talk will illustrate the ways that *art causes gentrification*.

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Last year, Bushwick's annual open studios event featured more than 600 artists, all living or working in the area. Yet the speaker representing the vast diversity of artists in practice, experience and perspective does not work in Bushwick, is not facing landlord pressures in Bushwick, and does not blame landlords for gentrification. [Ethan Pettit](#) is not even a confirmed speaker, only an alternate!

Funny that *Bushwick Daily* described Pettit's talk with an "elephant-in-the-room" reference to gentrification—as in, *the thing not being discussed*. Because it was called the elephant in 2012. (And the G-word). And [it has been discussed](#), in Bushwick, for years. But despite the community-building efforts of Paddy Johnson, Jules de Balincourt, William Powhida and many, many others [to turn the tide and hold the community together](#), the elephant is not just in the room, it has already bought the building, and eaten half of it. Not that you will hear about it at Livestream Public.

I understand that in the future, Bushwick The Tech Hub With All the Street Art Tours will seem like the way things always were—once new locals have moved into their new apartments. But that will be *after* the "transformation" that is occurring now, "transformation" as a euphemism for: *a lot of people are losing their fucking homes!*

Livestream has been working to fuse its image to Bushwick's since [relocating from Manhattan last year](#), although to be honest, I don't know anyone who thinks of Livestream as "Bushwick." They may be the first employer in Bushwick offering [catered breakfasts and car service](#). Livestream likely wanted to get cozy with Bushwick because of the (massive) doses of Bushwick in pop culture, but that doesn't mean it's a perfect fit. To many locals, it is still unusual to have millionaires and media companies next door.

It's not that they haven't tried to be neighbors. When the multinational tech company moved in, it offered locals the opportunity to host events on its large, camera-ready stage. But few have taken them up on the offer. People often prefer to create art events and lit readings at smaller spaces like Bat Haus, Mellow Pages, locally owned bars like Pine Box Rock Shop, so that income flows within the neighborhood's small-business ecosystem and people help keep each other afloat.

It was my understanding that after the first cutoff date for presenter applications, organizers lacked their desired number of interesting proposals and began soliciting potential presenters. But in a neighborhood with an extraordinarily high concentration of artists and writers and musicians, this absence of participation expresses something important. When a community is silent, that is a response and it is part of the context. So there is not only cultural under-representation of Bushwick in TEDx Bushwick. This silence from artists is also being left out of the conversation—even though both indifference and resistance are essential to any honest conversation about community transformations.

Does one event really matter? Yes, considering the audience for TEDx Bushwick dwarfs Bushwick's own population and affords a unique pathway for TED partner Livestream to shape the public's perception of "Bushwick"—minus the dissenting voices of locals. Livestream is a landlord with strong financial interests in the neighborhood and they are also an international media company that wants to be considered cultural influencers.

While people are still trying to live in Bushwick, it is becoming a theme park ([movie](#), video game, whatever), and this is a problem for people who do not own businesses or property. Consumers of Livestream's and TEDx's "Bushwick" will not have an opportunity to understand that a far more nuanced, multifaceted cultural conversation is occurring in the neighborhood, or that entire segments of the community are effectively invisible in this sanitized version.

Bushwick's ability to continue to grow as a culture that has room for working-class artists and families is not looking good. Organizations like [Artist Studio Affordability Project](#), North West Bushwick community group and others are working to preserve the communities that landlords and

developers and others are quickly dispersing. Given that the definition of politics is “the practice and theory of influencing other people,” TEDx Bushwick, which includes the Mayor’s Chief Technology Officer and excludes groups like these, seems pretty solidly grounded in politics.

I do not believe it is TED’s responsibility to resolve Bushwick’s gentrification problems. However, elevating the profile of a community in conflict while sidestepping the same conflict in the name of being “inspirational,” and enlisting speakers who simply aren’t familiar with the transformation that is occurring? That is not neutral, it is not conflict-free, it is simply dishonest.

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