

# Queens neighborhood wary of Amazon coming to town

November 11 2018, by Thomas Urbain

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A view of Long Island City in the Queens borough of New York—it could be the new home of a satellite headquarters for Amazon

New York's Long Island City, where Amazon is tipped to set up a new home, is a neighborhood in flux—a construction site of warehouses and

skyscrapers where some fear the online retail giant will only make everything worse.

While nothing has been announced officially, The New York Times has reported that Amazon, which is outgrowing its headquarters in Seattle, has finally found the answer to its year-long search for a second base.

The plan appears to be to split the difference on the East Coast with two new sites—one in Virginia just outside Washington and the other in Long Island City, the westernmost part of Queens just across the East River from Manhattan.

For those who don't venture across the water, Long Island City is synonymous with the giant neon red "Pepsi-Cola" sign visible from Manhattan, a relic from the beverage company's factory that shut down in 1999.

It's a hallmark of what Long Island City was for most of the 20th century—an industrial zone close to the river and the rail network.

But de-industrialization has forced the neighborhood to reinvent itself since the dawn of the 21st century.

In the last 10 years, dozens of new towers have sprung up, injecting a new, more affluent breed of resident into the area along with companies such as Ralph Lauren and Uber, seduced by the proximity to Manhattan and New York's airports.



A view of the waterfront of Long Island City—which is just across the East River from Manhattan

The bank of the East River has been transformed into a landscaped park, invaded by designer strollers and joggers.

"They have built, built, built," says Pascal Escriout, who owns French bistro Tournesol in Long Island City. "Amazon coming or not doesn't make a difference. If it's not them, it'll be someone else."

## **'Priced out'**

"The place changed so much in the last 10 years, it's just going to be



some part of the neighborhood," says Mike Barratt, a store manager at Spokesman Cycles in southwest Long Island City.

The exact "campus" space that Amazon could inhabit has not yet been made revealed, but there are plenty of options in a neighborhood where uber-modern skyscrapers rub shoulders with disused factory chimneys.

Some compare Long Island City to Williamsburg, perhaps the most chic Brooklyn neighborhood—and certainly the most fashionable and most striking example of gentrification over the last 20 years.

There is an uneasy balance between young families who move in and buy at elevated prices—albeit still lower than in Manhattan—and long-term residents of the neighborhood.



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"A lot of people don't own but they've been living here renting for 15, 20 years, and they're getting priced out," said Barratt. "They're upset."

Long Island City has turned into a commuter town, complains Escriout. "People stay home. And when they go out, they go to Manhattan."

Dozens of luxury high-rise buildings, eminently suitable for senior Amazon executives, had been in the planning well before the company came on the scene, says Jonathan Miller, CEO of the real-estate firm Miller Samuel.

Amazon's arrival could end up "essentially bailing out developers that went ahead despite the excess supply... most of the product that's being built is skewed to luxury rental projects," he said.

## **'Congested transit'**

Many also worry about the impact 25,000 new employees will have on the already crisis-ridden public transport system.

"This isn't a done deal," said Jimmy Van Bramer, Long Island City's elected representative on the New York City Council.



Many in Long Island City are worried about how an influx of thousands of Amazon employees could affect public transportation

"Before anything is confirmed with Amazon, we've got to make sure that we could handle this and that sustainable infrastructure would be put in place to prevent our communities from being overwhelmed.

"We cannot allow longtime residents to be driven out by rising rents and congested transit," he added.

He complained about a lack of transparency, with New York's newly re-elected Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo talking about all the benefits without actually spelling out what they might be.

"I will do whatever I need to do to make it a reality," Cuomo said last

Monday, promising Amazon would be "a great economic boost" for the state.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, who traditionally has a terse relationship with the governor, is also on board.

"There will be hassles, there will be challenges, but I think we can accommodate them," he said on Wednesday.

"We will have to invest in infrastructure. I think it will be worth it."

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