

# How to spread Brooklyn’s ‘Innovation Economy’

Industry big-wigs think on how to keep the momentum.

June 24, 2019 Mary Frost



Andrew Kimball, CEO of Industry City (left) speaks about expanding opportunity in Brooklyn’s booming “innovation economy” at a symposium presented by Center for an Urban Future and other organizations on June 21 in Downtown Brooklyn. Shown: Members of Panel 2. Eagle photo by May Frost

Real estate and floor space, infrastructure, diversity and creative “collisions” are some of the reasons Brooklyn is so attractive to start-ups — but if the city doesn’t fix some nagging problems, that growth could slow, according to experts at a symposium on Friday sponsored by the Center for an Urban Future.

Two panels packed with luminaries from Brooklyn’s technology and creativity scene drew more than 250 heavy hitters to BRIC in Downtown Brooklyn for Center for an Urban Future’s conference on Brooklyn’s growing “innovation economy.”

Though Brooklyn lags behind Manhattan in the sheer number of tech and creative start-ups, the growth of innovative companies here — a whopping 155 percent over the last decade — outpaces their growth in Manhattan and most other cities. Maintaining that growth was the topic of the first panel, moderated by Jonathan Bowles, executive director of Center for an Urban Future.

Feeding the start-up flames is the fact that Brooklyn is “diverse, dense, dynamic and has direct access to Manhattan,” said James Patchett, president of the NYC Economic Development Corporation. More than 200 languages are spoken in Brooklyn, and it’s the second densest city in the country.



How to keep the growth happening was the topic of the first panel, moderated by Jonathan Bowles, executive director of Center for an Urban Future, shown left. Eagle photo by Mary Frost

For many, it was about real estate.

“Real estate and floor plates [leasable space on an individual floor] are available here,” Jessie Lazarus, head of Mobility Business Development for CARMERA told the crowd. (CARMERA creates real-time maps and navigation data for autonomous vehicles.)

“DUMBO, the Navy Yard, Industry City have the type of space that technology wants,” EDC’s Patchett said.

The sheer number of people and their density, enabling a large number of creative collisions, was cited by Thomas Rush, head of platform and labs at ConsenSys, a blockchain technology company.

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“The talent is here — directors, producers,” said Pete Abel, CEO of AbelCine, which rents professional filmmaking equipment for TV shows, films, commercials and other productions.

## The stumbling blocks

Higher real estate prices could drive out creative types, and that’s a problem, panel members said. Before the technology wave, areas like DUMBO were settled by artists, manufacturers and recording companies.

“If we don’t think of how important creativity is ... then the jobs leave the area,” Abel said. “We take it for granted how magical Brooklyn is. Creativity is key. Creators will move to an area they can afford.”

And Brooklyn gets harder as you get older, said Blue State Digital’s head of Tech Consulting, Mike Conlow.

Conlow, who has two children, says too many public schools are still struggling in Brooklyn. While some individual schools are outstanding, “The city needs to raise the quality of all public schools.”

Another stumbling block is transportation. While numerous subway lines comes to Downtown Brooklyn, the transit system is “designed to funnel people into Manhattan. The transportation system is not set up to bring you from Bay Ridge to Crown Heights,” Patchett said.

CARMERA’s Lazarus said the “last-mile connection challenge” was an issue, and the city should help build a “multi-modal” last-mile solution.

Able added that his company, based in Sunset Park, also wrestled with the “infrastructure of the commute.”

“Not everyone can hop on the D train. They have gear,” he said.

## **Talent, talent, talent**

One of the biggest drawbacks mentioned by participants was finding enough trained talent.

“We can’t get enough computer engineers,” Lazarus emphasized. While CARMERA had to look elsewhere, she feels there’s “untapped potential” in Brooklyn. The city needs to “invest in K-12, STEM and workforce development,” she said.

ConsenSys’ Rush said the company had to look to Berlin and San Francisco to find enough developers with expertise in Solidity (a computer language for smart contracts).

EDC’s Patchett, however, said that often employers “are not looking at the talent base from Brooklyn” because they’re focusing on people “who look like them.” Descriptive words like “smart and thoughtful” in want ads often signal “Ivy League school,” he said.

“You have to be intentional about where you’re recruiting,” Lazarus said. Of CARMERA’s 20 employees in the city, five are CUNY grads, and they are “some of our best computer vision engineers,” she said. “Some of the problem is employers get lazy. Hiring is hard. It’s a long pipeline and it starts in pre-K and goes to CUNY. “

The Center’s partners in the symposium — Downtown Brooklyn Partnership, DUMBO Improvement District, Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation and Industry City — recently commissioned a study on Brooklyn’s innovation economy.

“We asked the Center for an Urban Future to put together some of the statistics around the growth and highlight some of the success stories, and also convene a discussion about how do we make it more accessible,” Andrew Kimball, CEO of Industry City told the *Brooklyn Eagle*.

## **Spreading the benefits**

Kimball said that people attending the symposium want to know, “How do we make it equitable, and as widespread as possible? Make sure that folks who have lived in Brooklyn for many decades, through the good and the bad, are benefiting as much as possible?”

That question was the focus of the second panel, moderated by Eli Dvorkin, editorial and policy director at Center for an Urban Future.

Adetoro Adegbola, program manager of Diversity and Inclusion at Etsy, said there are entry points at the company that don't require advanced degrees, especially among vendors and contractors, as well as in the marketing and workplace facilities departments.

Jack Simon, resale manager at Revivn, an electronics recycling company, praised the employment center at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, calling it a "personalized Monster.com."

Faith Corbett, assistant vice president of Public Affairs and Partnerships at CUNY's City Tech, said that City Tech has been giving students the skill sets employers want, and partnering with outside companies.

"We can't undo what happened in K-12. What we can do is stack our programs. To our two-year degree, we added a four-year degree." Students can take a fifth year while they're working, she said. CUNY has also partnered with Microsoft and other companies on six-week to four-month training in specific skill sets. But CUNY runs a lean program, she lamented.

Quardean Lewis-Allen, founder of Made in Brooklyn, said kids in neighborhoods like Brownsville, where he is located, have extra barriers to success.

"They lack a network, have a poor educational system, lack mentorship that looks like [them]. They come to us discouraged," he said.

Participants recommended investment in workforce development, vocational training, apprenticeships and embedding schools right inside companies. They also said the city had to deal with the literacy crisis.

"Be intentional," was frequently mentioned.

"I wish people would recruit from these neighborhoods like they do for the NBA," said Darryle Hawes, machine operations manager at M Factory.