Growing Apart(ment); A Social and Cultural History of the Apartment on the Upper West Side

by

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“…the City especially reveals the *moral qualities* of our nature. Where men are crowded together, the good and evil that are in them are more intensely excited and thrown to the surface.”

-Rev. E.H. Chapin, 1853
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Introduction

New York City is enigmatic in many ways. It can be studied endlessly, but it is still impossible to define. For every person living in the city, New York has a different meaning. Beneath the famous markers of its skyline stand buildings that have unique histories. Within each building are the apartments, sitting box after box, one on top of another, each holding tenants who use their personal spaces differently. Though they have become critical to, and emblematic of, New York City life, these apartments have been treated with scorn and suspicion at different times since their inception more than a century ago. They have been both demonized and glamorized. Apartments have a relatively short but immensely complicated history. They come in all shapes and sizes, each type of apartment reflecting the time in which it was built. In short, by studying the apartment, we are given a glimpse of the annals of New York.

This thesis will look at three historical periods in which there were booms in New York housing construction. Focusing mainly on the Upper West Side, each chapter will examine the influences that shaped the construction of apartments, how the apartment impacted the city, and how it was received by the public.

Chapter 1 will look at the birth of New York City’s apartments in the period that spans roughly 60 years, by and large between 1870 and 1930. This was a time when the city, to accommodate its growing upper-class, needed to provide a new kind of urban dwelling. Large, elegant apartment buildings sprang up all over the Upper West Side. Chapter 2 will examine how the post World War II period gave rise to massive apartment complexes intended for middle- and working-class families. These
complexes, while providing housing for many, displaced poor people who were left to scramble for a new place to live. These projects later also became places of concentrated poverty. Chapter 3 will address the struggles over the apartment today, and what the apartment’s new role, as a desperately sought after commodity, means for the city.

The apartment on the Upper West Side housed the extremely wealthy at its inception, housed the extremely poor in the mid-twentieth century, and is now again beginning to house the extremely wealthy. The middle-class has remained a presence throughout these fluctuations. The apartment offers many different living arrangements, and families, singles, couples, and groups of singles have all made homes in this flexible space. This has meant that at different times, depending on who lived in the apartment and how it was used, the apartment has been viewed as either threatening or liberating. These chapters also explore the media’s portrayal of the apartment as a way to understand the public’s perception of the apartment at different historical moments.

My interpretation of the history of the apartment is based on information that I have gathered from a wide range of sources: personal experience, archival research, tenant interviews, secondary research, and both fictional and factual accounts of New York in popular media.

My interest in this topic began with my own experience living in an apartment in New York. My life has been shaped by the fact that I lived in an apartment. Even installing our air conditioner was more nerve-racking because it took place ten stories above the ground. My sense of community derived from conversations with people I
may have only spoken to in the elevator. The apartment building lends itself to creating everything from danger to camaraderie. Though my own experiences influence how I perceive current and past transformations in my building and my neighborhood, I have aimed to avoid indulging in that age-old problem of New York self-righteousness.

To enhance the relationship between the past and present I have inserted personal stories that reflect how my life interacts with the past. In the first two chapters these stories will appear in italics. In the final chapter, a larger part of the information is drawn from my own experience, so nothing is italicized or differentiated.

New York is a city in constant flux, and New Yorkers, whatever their appreciation for the city, must, yes, complain—but also adjust. Looking at the transformations occurring today on the Upper West Side in an historical context better allows me to understand what I have observed recently. The New York I know at 22 is already different from that of my childhood. And even the New York of my childhood was one already changed from an earlier period into what many call a “suburbanized” city. It is hard to discern how much adjusting is necessary to survive in New York, a place renowned for its unending transformations, and what kinds of changes actually threaten New York’s diverse and vibrant culture.

Apartments have come to define neighborhoods and give them distinct reputations, but the debates over who the apartment is meant to house will never end. While we explore the changing landscape of the Upper West Side in the following
chapters, from 1860 to 2008, please be sure, as my mom would say, to look both ways before crossing the street.
Chapter 1- Welcome to the Apartment, Welcome to the Upper West Side

The Formation of the Upper West Side and the Creation of Socially Acceptable Apartments

It is early one morning and I have some extra time so instead of going down Broadway to get to the subway, I decide to walk from my apartment on West 101st Street through Riverside Park. If I walk a mile and a half I can catch the express train from 72nd street. I’ll exit the park at the Eleanor Roosevelt monument, pass a synagogue and a kosher deli and enter the subway at the recently renovated, but still seemingly old-fashioned, enclosed station. On my way, I stop to sit on a bench and look at the river (my eyes skip over the West Side Highway). I watch kids running around in front of me, dog walkers chatting, and an old man feeding breadcrumbs to a group of impatient pigeons. Behind me stand the large apartment buildings of Riverside Drive. I smile. The park is being used just as it was intended—I think.

One of the defining characteristics of the Upper West Side of Manhattan is that it is bounded on both sides by beautiful parks. This is ideal for the kind of neighborhood that the Upper West Side was “destined” and designed to be. An article from the New York Times, written in 1870, ascribed much of the West Side’s potential for development to its relation to the parks. “The area between the Central Park and the Riverside Park, from its natural advantages and its relative position on the island, will become, eventually, equal to any other portion of the City as a desirable place of residence and for the high value of its property.”

In this chapter, I will investigate the historical circumstances that gave rise to the Upper West Side and how its

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development was crucially linked to a new kind of 19th century domestic environment: the apartment. Despite an initial reluctance among the upper-class to accept the apartment as a home, this new type of dwelling came to dominate New York’s skyline and transform people’s conceptions of property and privacy by the twentieth century.

Elizabeth Cromley describes in her history of Riverside Park that the West Side was once notorious for the railway tracks that lined it. But today “[t]he Park and Drive lie along the bluffs and shore of the Hudson River,”2 covering the area from 72nd to 158th Street. When the park was designed in the 1840s, the neighborhood around it was not yet distinctive or cohesive. In fact, at that point it was “a rural landscape. At intervals, 18th-century houses stood among lawns and trees on the tableland that rose above the banks of the Hudson River.”3 Indeed, one article from the turn of the century describes how “as late as 1856 there was scarcely a house on the west side above Twenty-third Street.”4 Yet the park’s planners had a clear intention of attracting a certain elite class of people to establish the area as urban space. The design for the park mirrored styles that were popular among the wealthy at the time and, as one article from 1895 points out, “[living] in a section bountifully blessed with parks is a delightful combination of city and country life, a gratifying combination of the suburban and the urban, and no city can boast of a section of the kind better than New-York on the west side, above Fifty-ninth Street.”5

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3 Ibid, 238.
1. Above, a photo of 111th Street and Riverside Drive in 1879.

2. Below is a picture of Riverside Drive and 122nd Street in 1879. There are no tall buildings, and it is unrecognizable as part of Manhattan.

Architects and engineers thought that the Upper West Side could be a kind of haven from hectic city life, housing a population with higher incomes and more

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“refined tastes.” Although it would later be home to a large immigrant population, the neighborhood was not originally intended to house low income populations looking to move uptown from the tenements of the Lower East Side. Rather, in the late 19th and early 20th century, “[t]he city needed to expand northward into the less settled territories of Manhattan Island to provide residential opportunities for a middle-class population that might otherwise leave for the railroad suburbs beyond the city limits.”

By designing the park before the neighborhood around it had formed, real estate developers and city officials, among others, were trying to create a controlled social space that could guide the area’s future. The formation of the West Side was unique, as another article from the New York Times proclaims, hailing the West Side as almost its own city, one that is the most pleasurable and comfortable spot in Manhattan: “It seldom happens that a city is built up from the first as the later dwellers within its environment would have had it if they could have superintended its foundation—the laying out of its streets, the location of its parks, and the establishment of its water and drainage systems.”

The clean air and open space that the parks provided also conveyed to people that the neighborhood was healthy.

The park’s rural and elegant components presumed a certain population would frequent it for leisure. Frederick Law Olmsted, who is most famous for designing New York’s Central Park, was the architect for Riverside Park as well and, “agreed that the Riverside territory was most useful as a ‘pleasure resort’ and a place that

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8 Cromley, 240.
commanded views ‘of great interest’ over the Hudson.” Olmsted was not looking to build a practical, function-oriented, working-class park that would serve as a space where rowdy families could escape from the grind of city life. Rather, he wanted the park to be a serene vista that would benefit those who could afford to be driven around the park in carriages. “[The] planners foresaw a string of picturesque villas along the drive, establishing the well-to-do character of Manhattan’s West Side.”

The parks did help to insure a wealthy neighborhood in many ways: one article from 1895 relates that “[t]his marvelous West End is inhabited by the most refined and cultured people in the city.”

While today soccer fields, playgrounds, basketball courts, and baseball diamonds are a main attraction for people of all classes to the park, it was originally built with the hopes of establishing the burgeoning neighborhood as a peaceful and distinguished place. Whether the area would live up to the standards set by the park’s designers could only be determined with time. The goal of establishing a wealthy neighborhood was clear, and speculators bought land up before any massive movement uptown began. In 1872 an article on real estate transactions wrote that speculators “left orders with their brokers to buy up during the period of inactivity all the bargains that they can secure, lots on the Boulevard having the first preference, those fronting on the Riverside park and on the avenues and streets in the immediate vicinity thereof ranking next.” The article explains that “a general movement in west-side property is anticipated, there is no doubt.”

10 Cromley, 241.
11 Ibid, 240.
12 “West Side is Itself a Great City” New York Times, March 10, 1895, 20.
However “[r]eal estate sales did not take off immediately, hindered by the economic slump of 1873, but during the 1880s,” Cromley notes, “sales rose and developers began erecting single-family houses and some early apartment buildings along the sidestreets near the park.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Upper West Side has a convoluted history that did not always follow investor’s hopes. In a trend that would continue to the present, “the wealthy chose, for the most part, to remain on Manhattan’s East Side.” But the Upper West Side would eventually come to be a fairly rich area as well, and even in the early twentieth century, Cromley explains, “a few sizable mansions found their places on Riverside.”\textsuperscript{15} The neighborhood, however, would be dramatically affected by economic depressions, immigrant influxes, and housing crises. To date, the area has acquired a distinct and diverse atmosphere that in many ways contradicts the original objective of its planners – to be a neighborhood exclusively for the city’s wealthy. The park would also undergo a series of changes as the Upper West Side responded to the larger history of urban change in New York.

In the post-World War II era, under the direction of Robert Moses, who was head of the Parks Department, Riverside Park underwent its most massive renovations. It was then that it began to resemble a present day park, incorporating automobiles and a more public family culture. “By the 1930s the public expectation of the park’s use had undergone changes … emphasizing active recreation,” Cromley writes. New plans sought to satisfy these demands as well as those of the “automobile

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 241.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 242.
drivers of a new generation.”16 The park was still being designed according to the anticipations of planners and engineers who held certain expectations about the population living in the neighborhood. Although the park became more child and family friendly, its design still catered to a new, though less restricted, upper-class – those with automobiles.

In 1980 the park became a “New York City Scenic Landmark.” The Committee that gave the park its new title said that, “The designation of Riverside Park and Drive as a New York City Scenic Landmark will help ensure that it remains the kind of open space its designers intended.”17 Today the title “Scenic Landmark,” is ironic and largely ignores the truly urban ways in which the park has come to be used. This designation limits what can be changed on the land in order to protect its more historic qualities. But because parks and recreational spaces are critical parts of city life, the values of the original designers have not succeeded in dictating the modern use of the park and neighborhood. If the park is being preserved, for whom is it being protected? Quite frankly, if New Yorkers today employed it as the original designers intended, the park would go largely unused.

My building sits on Riverside Drive with the park just steps from the entrance to my lobby. I read my mail as I take the elevator up to the tenth floor. My apartment is one long hallway that passes through a row of six rooms that all sit on one side. The windows look out on to one of two views; the side windows look south across 101st Street into the windows of another, even larger apartment building. Three windows on the west side of the building overlook Riverside Park, the Hudson River

16 Ibid, 246.
17 Ibid, 240.
and the ever-beautiful New Jersey skyline. Even though I have had few human interactions all day, only when I close the door to my apartment do I feel alone. It is neither entirely bad nor good to find myself face to face with thousands of strangers and a few acquaintances every day. The random interactions that arise from these circumstances are what make a city interesting. Still, I find it a relief to be hundreds of feet above the sidewalk, in my home that separates me from the intensity of the public eye.

High-rise buildings and shared living spaces were not always associated with New York life. Elizabeth Hawes explains in her book New York, New York that when the first apartment buildings designed for middle and upper-class people began to appear in the 1860s, “the idea of sharing a roof, a front door, or a staircase with other families was both exotic and shocking,”18 although thousands had been sharing roofs for years in tenements.

It took a conscious effort on the behalf of architects and realtors to make the apartment an acceptable living space for the wealthy. Apartments were marketed with a clearly intended clientele. The architecture on the West Side was important for maintaining a calm, domestic and comfortable reputation, “more important than anything else is the homelike air which pervades nearly all the houses and apartments [on the West Side],”19 one article points out. Once the stigma of apartment living was reduced enough for white collar workers and merchants to begin moving in, the transformation in housing was swift and vast. Hawes relates, “[i]n 1869, all

respectable New Yorkers lived in private houses; in 1929, 98 percent of that same population had been stacked up in multiple dwellings.” 20

New York underwent major physical transformations during the industrial revolution, a period in which new modes of construction and transportation became available. As Hawes describes it, “[t]he physical transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century was one of the most vivid in New York history.” 21 This was particularly impressive in neighborhoods that were developing simultaneously. Construction on the Upper West Side, “was like a great geological event—the collision of continents or the birth of mountain ranges. The territory literally erupted. Dynamite blasts rocked the neighborhood, shaking houses and scaring horses in the street. Broadway opened up like a fault.” 22

3. By around 1930 this is what Riverside Drive at 96th Street looked like. Large apartment buildings lined the avenue going north. Cars can be seen traveling even farther north. People can be seen crossing the street going to and from the park.

20 Ibid, xiii.
21 Ibid, 155.
22 Ibid, 155.
23 Ewing Galloway, 96th Street and Riverside Drive. New York Public Library Digital Gallery.
Technological advances like steel frames and elevators allowed buildings to rise higher and comfortably house more families. Early advertisements emphasized the modern amenities like telephones, electricity, elevator service and garbage chutes that came with an apartment. Architectural innovations like indoor plumbing and running water actually allowed the apartments to be more lavish, modern and sanitary. Because the Upper West Side took form at this time it ended up as a neighborhood dominated by apartment buildings and their conveniences rather than by individual houses or tenements. This, in turn, implied a certain set of cultural expectations for tenants. The neighborhood was forming as one for the upper-class.

In addition to architectural advances, transportation also helped new neighborhoods blossom. By the end of the nineteenth century horse drawn trolleys, cable cars, the electric streetcar, and the elevated train were all in place and running throughout various parts of the city. This allowed for people to live farther from their places of work. As a New York Times article explained, “nobody will pretend that the city does not to-day owe several hundred thousand of its population to the elevated roads. They have made it possible for these additional hundreds of thousands to live and do business in New York.”24 The elevated train moved at 12 miles per hour25 which was a vast improvement over horse pulled transportation and allowed commuters to avoid the clogged, dangerous streets below. Still, the elevated was dangerous in itself. It was susceptible to weather conditions and could actually fall off the tracks. In 1907 one of the train’s cars derailed and “with a roar that was heard for

24 “A New Era For This City,” New York Times, Jan 18, 1900, 6.
blocks, they tumbled to the street carrying with them a great mass of wreckage.”

Just after the turn of the century, however, the subway system caused a major shift in transportation and enabled the crowded city to expand in a way that was formerly impossible. In little more than two decades a city of four million people, that was largely concentrated in lower Manhattan and just across the East River in Brooklyn, grew to have a population more dispersed than ever before. It was at this point, with real estate values skyrocketing due to new underground subway lines, that the Upper West Side truly took form.

No neighborhood is completely homogenous, but many form distinct reputations. The Upper West Side varies from avenue to avenue, each street’s fate guided by different circumstances. This kind of heterogeneity would span its entire history. Hawes points out, “The Upper West Side had begun the century with a patchwork character. It was a series of scattered neighborhoods with distinct physical and social personalities, not unlike the many dispersed villages that described the area in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” Not only was the neighborhood disjointed, it was barely urban; “[t]here were working railroad tracks below Riverside, from which the smell of the cattle en route to market would rise with the eastern wind.”

There was a lot of land on the Upper West Side that became desirable as transportation increased and people began to move uptown. Suddenly, institutions that had previously been able to spread over large amounts of unwanted space found that they were being compelled to vacate the area and make way for residential

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27 Parts of this paragraph was taken from a paper I wrote for Professor Patricia Hill my sophomore year, entitled “Transportation Transformations.”
28 Hawes, 155.
development. For example, in the late 19th century, the Society of New York Hospital held approximately “thirty-five acres of land between 110th Street and 120th Street on the West Side of the city.”29 Real estate developers at this time wanted “to gain control over this land, on which sat the hospital’s Bloomingdale Insane Asylum.”30 The governors of the hospital came under intense political pressure to leave the land, but they made sure to control who could come to the area. Historian David Rosner explains that “they relinquished the land in ways which guaranteed that the neighborhood would be maintained largely as a bastion of middle- and upper-class Protestant respectability within a city that was being inundated by Catholic and Jewish working-class groups.”31 Some land went to Columbia and Barnard College and some was sold with the “proviso that only residences for the wealthy would be built.”32 Land on the West Side was set to “be a major focus for development in the 1880s. But the social and class characteristics of the West Side were still undetermined.” Rosner clarifies that “the avenues along the Hudson River and Central Park, most agreed, would be residences for the wealthy. Riverside Drive and Central Park West were to be lined with mansions or fancy apartment buildings like the Dakota.”33 It was only a matter of attracting and planning the neighborhood for the “right” group of people—that is, the rich.

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31 Ibid, 165.
32 Ibid, 165.
33 Ibid, 167.
The Stigma of City and Apartment Living at the Turn of the Century

In New York during the late 1800s, speculators were looking to maximize their profit from each piece of land. For apartment buildings to be profitable, however, they had to both persuade upper- and middle-class people to let themselves be stacked on top of one another and at the same time convince them that this lifestyle was healthy and safe. The Department of Sanitation was not yet an organized and thoroughly effective department, and many were apprehensive about living in close quarters at a time when epidemics like tuberculosis and cholera could ravage a population. Changing people’s minds about apartments was a daunting task for a number of reasons. First, people were wary of investing money in a space that was shared and controlled by other tenants and a landlord. Second, to people who had long lived with two feet planted on the ground, it could very well be disconcerting to live in a space that is both underneath one person’s floor and above another person’s ceiling. Third, in a culture that values private property and privacy in general, the apartment seemed to concede a failure to achieve the dream of individual wealth.

The city too, was stigmatized. For Americans living in the nineteenth century it was the pastoral countryside – and not the city – that evoked images of purity, both religious and moral. The chaotic crowds and the dirt associated with urban life gave some the impression that the city encouraged people to throw strict, chaste lifestyles out the window along with the refuse from chamber pots that were being emptied onto the sidewalk. It was widely believed that in the city man loses sight of God and His natural creations and instead worships material wealth. In 1853 Reverend E. H.
Chapin compiled a series of lectures into a book called *Moral Aspects of City Life*. His sermon *Moral Significance of the City* argues that, "'God made the country’ and all around it keeps the original stamp of the Maker. But ‘man makes the town’- the fabrics of brick and stone that shall crumble away, the uproar and the pretension, the fickle customs, and the atmosphere of guilt."\(^{34}\) For Chapin, the city was temporal and wicked, while the country was timeless and innocent.

Those who were promoting apartments in the late 19\(^{th}\) century proposed that they were, in fact, an escape from the grime of city life. Critics, however, often dismissed them as part of the problem. Strangers lived on top of each other, ignorant of the activities surrounding them. There were simply too many people to keep track of in an urban setting. Quoting Luke X.290, Rev. Chapin asks “who is my neighbor?” He claims,

> There is no place where [this question] has so much significance as in the great city. For … the most apathetic would be startled to discover who, literally, their neighbors are – to see what awful contrasts of humanity are separated by a few brick walls… There they are, close together-impinging one upon the other-magnificence and wretchedness, feasting and starvation, filth and diamonds, fluttering rags and chariot-wheels.\(^{35}\)

To succeed, the new apartment had to stand out against the ‘unhealthy’ conditions of the tenement communities of downtown immigrant Manhattan. Writings and photographs by the 19\(^{th}\) century reformer Jacob Riis were highly influential in informing the public of the degrading quality of tenement life. Riis emphasized that a lack of proper living accommodations bred crime and disease. In “the tenements,” he wrote, “all the influences make for evil; because they are the hot-beds of the epidemics that carry death to rich and poor alike; the nurseries of

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 13.  
\(^{35}\) Ibid, 143.
pauperism and crime that fill our jails and police courts[.]” The overcrowding in tenements caused much of the city’s social, crime, and health problems. Because of the high demand for tenements, landlords had the power to evict tenants who asked for better housing maintenance or missed a rent payment. It was also a false notion, Riis explained, that only the poorest in New York lived in tenements: “New York’s wage-earners have no other place to live… They are truly poor for having no better homes; waxing poorer in purse as the exorbitant rents to which they are tied, as ever was serf to soil, keep rising.” The tenements would be remembered for their poor ventilation, unsanitary conditions, lack of plumbing, and cluttered space all of which caused misery and illness among much of the city’s population.

This grim legacy that tenement housing left behind led the wealthy to dismiss any possibility of living in multiunit housing for decades, except as a last resort. Apartments could become socially and culturally acceptable to the elite only if they were designed with moral and social requisites, class markers, and the notion of modernity in mind. Unlike the tenement, which today is still associated with the poor, the apartment became a dwelling that could house everyone from the upper-class to the working-class, intellectuals, artists, or Wall Street bankers. However, it was not pure necessity that brought about the building of apartments around the turn of the century: they were deliberately built to appeal to the upper-class and were unaffordable to the majority of New York’s working-class population. Many parts of upper New York, such as Fifth Avenue, were developed with the intention of creating elite parts of the city, and apartments were introduced to upper-class society with

37 Ibid, 22.
careful calculation. “The increasing demand on land made prices rise, and individual houses became too expensive for the majority of the population,”\textsuperscript{38} Elizabeth Cromley explains in her history of apartments, \textit{Alone Together}. However, those who could no longer afford a detached single family home were often still reluctant to start living in apartments. Into the twentieth century single-family dwellings would remain prevalent, but there was a growing need for multiunit housing.

In addition to the notion that the quality of life in city dwellings was poor, immorality and crime were also associated with multiunit housing. In his lecture \textit{The Circle of Amusement} Rev. Chapin writes, “[w]ork, in the country, is blended with many sources of delight. The laborer sows his grain and binds his sheaves in the glorious theatre of Nature… But, in the city, shut up with bales and boxes…evil amusements are more intimately associated with the good, and, perhaps, predominate.”\textsuperscript{39}

There were scandals in the city that embodied many people’s fears about the morality of apartment living and that further slowed the apartment’s acceptance as a proper lifestyle. One such scandal was discovered in 1906 involving Stanford White, who designed the old Madison Square Garden Theater and was a partner in the firm that designed the Washington Square Arch and the mansions of the Vanderbilts and Astors that lined Fifth Avenue.\textsuperscript{40} He also rented and owned a number of apartment houses. After White was murdered by Harry K. Thaw, it was discovered that the architect had rented part of a four-story row house “fitted with a curtained canopy bed

\textsuperscript{38} Elizabeth Cromley, \textit{Alone Together; A History of New York's Early Apartments}, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1.

\textsuperscript{39} Chapin, R. E. H. \textit{Moral Aspects of City Life}, (New York: Henry Lyon, 1853), 80.

and a red velvet swing, the better to seduce Evelyn Nesbit, the 16-year-old showgirl with whom he had a torrid affair after 1901.\(^{41}\) The anonymity of the apartment seemed unsafe for young girls and this proved detrimental to its image. Because a wealthy person could rent space instead of buying it, the apartment could function as a place to indulge in unrespectable behavior away from the watchful eyes of family and neighbors.\(^{42}\)

This Gilded Age scandal has survived more than a century, surfacing even in articles published in 2007. For many it lends weight to claims that city living is immoral, dangerous and full of mystery as well as romance. The story of Evelyn Nesbit and Stanford White has been theatrically reenacted and embellished in articles that mythologize the affair. It has been strongly identified with its urban setting and has become truly and singularly a New York story. The entire affair held all the glamour and ingredients necessary for it to be retold endlessly. Evelyn Nesbit even became a character in E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*. Hers was a tale that gave the apartment a central role in the romance. *AM New York*, a free daily newspaper, wrote an article around Halloween of 2007 listing scandals that had taken place in ‘Gotham.’ Just over 100 years after the murder, it rehashed the affair as one in which “White wooed Nesbit with drugged champagne one night and ‘ruined’ her. A rival suitor, Harry Thaw then enters the story with a [sic] sexual proclivities of his own, including a liking for dog whips. Thaw finally married Nesbit and that fateful night as


\(^{42}\) The apartment made having a secret home easier for the wealthy because it did not require a mortgage that might bind a tenant to their apartment.
White sat watching the chorus girls perform, strode through the audience, drew a pistol and shot White three times in the face at close range.**43

If America can lay claim to any common credos, one might be that individual achievement is commendable and righteous. In contrast, however, a city’s population relies on something other than individual capacities. Rev. Chapin reminded his audience: “With all due consideration of mutual dependence… No friend or guest in the house or the street, is so intimate with you as the tenants that abide in your own spiritual nature.”**44 Interdependence was not something to which the upper-class was necessarily partial.

Moreover, people in apartments were usually renting them, which meant they were living on someone else’s property. Buying a home at the time thus became a more and more powerful marker of wealth. Some turn of the century ads used this to make buying real estate more appealing to those who could afford it. Ads promoted a suburban lifestyle when they said, “STOP PAYING RENT and buy a home for yourself and family.”**45 Clearly this ad seeks to point out that renting was an inadequate way to house a family and ownership was a crucial part of exhibiting middle-class status. Apartments held mystery and danger that seemed inherent to a world in which residents lived under the same roof as strangers. The upper- and middle-class had to be convinced that apartments could provide comfortable and safe housing that would not give way to the slum conditions of tenements. Private homes were becoming less common and stacked dwellings began to shape the city.

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44 Chapin, 189.
Overcoming the Stigma

The stigma of collective housing, such as tenements, persisted even as apartments became more prevalent. Tenements and apartments had to be separated in the minds of consumers, since “any New York building housing three or more families was defined legally as a tenement,” as author Betsy Klimasmith explains. “[I]f apartments were to become culturally acceptable, they needed a distinct spatial and class-inflected identity. Given the looseness of the nomenclature, enthusiasts used the print media to define apartments as distinct from other urban housing forms and to promote them as a new and appealing bourgeois housing option.”\textsuperscript{46} For instance, in 1908 a building on West 65\textsuperscript{th} Street was advertised as “unique ... modern, artistic and high class in every detail.” It also boasted that, “meal service can be had if desired.”\textsuperscript{47} On West End Avenue and 82\textsuperscript{nd} Street, twelve and eleven room apartments were advertised in 1905 as “Exclusive Type of Modern Apartments.” Like many ads, this one claims huge living spaces, many baths, sanitary conditions, ample sunlight and ventilation.\textsuperscript{48}

The West Side was intended to be an area set apart from the rest of the city. It was slightly removed from downtown and it developed late, not in the frenzy of Lower Manhattan, which was struggling to house its rapidly multiplying population after the Civil War. It was a given, when the neighborhood first began to take form, that people would be housed separately. As this became less plausible, it became

\textsuperscript{46} Betsy Klimasmith, \textit{At Home In The City}, (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005), 131.


important that the apartment attract a stable and distinguished population and that it not be associated with either the tenement or the promiscuous and improper wealthy like Stanford White. By embellishing the façade and designing extravagant floor plans architects could distinguish the apartment. “Architectural devices might convey meanings about who lived where,” Cromley explains, “improving the legibility of New York’s urban face to genteel New Yorkers worried about sustaining class distinctions.”

The apartment was unique in many of the modern conveniences that it possessed. Buildings were growing higher, but elevators saved people the annoyance of having to walk up four or five stories, as was necessary in older buildings. In addition to providing practical solutions to tedious tasks such as taking out garbage and bringing up groceries, the elevator also helped tenants forget exactly how far above solid ground they lived.

4. The Dorilton, a building that stands on West 71st Street, is ostentatious, elaborate and imposing. The intricate brick work and decorative façade demand attention from passers by. The Dorilton had small canopies over each window and a front courtyard offset from the street.

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Its bottom floors have now been converted to stores, but the building still exemplifies how apartments built in 1902 were intended for the rich.  

The Chatsworth was built in 1904 and included, along with its view of the Hudson River, a “café, a billiard room, a barber shop, a hair-dressing parlor, and valet and tailoring services.” These amenities have disappeared today and (somewhat ironically) a new kind of housing for the rich – that of Trump Towers, a string of condominium buildings with contemporary services like a fitness center, lounge and widescreen TVs—now blocks the Chatsworth’s once gorgeous view. One *New York Times* article about the new buildings pointed out that “a portion of the 31-story Trump tower will come as close as three inches from 102 windows of the 12-story Chatsworth, blocking all light and air from 82 rooms and rendering them uninhabitable.” Property lines had not been drawn to prevent this because “no one imagined when the Chatsworth was completed in 1904 that a residential development would spring up on the once bustling railyard next door.”

The idea that an apartment was a step down from a private home and might not have room to house servants also made people wary of this new way of living. To

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51 Alpern, 36.

52 The Trump Place website exclaims, “At Trump Place service begins at the front door. Our professional staff greets you with a warm smile and ushers you through the entrance and into the marble-floored lobby of Trump Place. An upbeat manner, can-do attitude and commitment to serve you instantly puts you at ease -- and sets the stage for the impeccable service you'll enjoy from our experienced, highly qualified staff.

Trump Place sets a new standard in luxury high-rise living. You'll love living in one of Manhattan's most prestigious neighborhoods, where you'll enjoy sophisticated Manhattan amenities: Round-the-clock concierge staff waiting to serve you; a fully-equipped state-of-the-art fitness center; a club lounge furnished with deeply-comfortable sofas, wide-screen TV and billiard tables and sophisticated 24-hour security for worry-free living.

When you want to escape from the city, Riverside Park -- Manhattan's most spectacular waterfront park -- is just outside your door, with handball and basketball courts, jogging trails, sylvan lawns and a 750-foot-long pier.”(http://www.trumpplaceapartments.com/buildings.html)

appeal to the upper- and middle-class, apartments had to include space for domestic workers or, alternatively, housekeeping services had to be incorporated into the building’s management itself (as in the hybrid dwelling known as the apartment hotel). Many apartments were laid out so that the working maid’s quarters and the kitchen were separated from the living room and bedrooms. There were also separate entrances for maids and servants as well as separate service elevators.

5. This floor plan shows how rooms that are labeled as servant’s quarters sit far from the living room, library and “chambers.”

54 Apartment Hotels like the Ansonia, provided units that could be “Housekeeping” and “Non-housekeeping.”

55 “820 5th Avenue,” Floor plan taken from Apartments for the Affluent, Alpern, 92.
Until the age of about eight I shared a room and a bunk-bed with my older brother. When it became clear that he and I needed separate spaces I was moved into what was then my dad’s ‘home office.’ On the floor plan this room is called the Maid’s Room and is the smallest room in the house. I slept among piles of papers while my dad sat on the floor outside of my room with the cord of the telephone pulled through my door into the hallway. My room is adjacent to the kitchen and the backdoor and it sits on the opposite end of the house from my parents’ bedroom. Until recently a swinging door separated my room and the kitchen from the rest of the house. As a little girl in this room I would imagine that I was a neglected child shunned from the rest of the family. Then I would take my blankets and go sleep on my parents’ floor. ‘Why was the only space for me so far away?’ I wondered.

Apartments that were designed in the beginning of the 20th century often included rooms for maids and servants. However, general notions about family soon changed and “[h]ousehold manners shifted to exclude servants and apprentices from their places as ‘family’ members.” With the shift to wage labor, fewer apartments included space to house maids and servants, and “apprentice workers had to find room and board outside the master’s home.” Today, domestic workers such as housekeepers and nannies are even more detached from the area in which they work; they travel from distant neighborhoods to work on the Upper West Side. Meanwhile some Upper West Siders work directly out of their homes.

The buzzer rings and I hear my mom run to ask who it is. I do not make any move to answer it because she closes the doors to our entrance, blocking off one room to make her office. Her psychotherapy practice has been operating from our

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56 Cromley, Alone Together, 13.
apartment for 20 years, unbeknownst to the landlord. I stay in the back of our house and wonder whether this patient knows she is in my home, not an office building, and whether she knows I exist. (Some patients do, since they must enter through the backdoor and walk through our entire apartment when the elevator breaks.)

Since their inception, apartment houses have drastically changed in shape, size, and, most notably, function. A large number of New Yorkers use their apartments as work spaces as well as private residences. This is often because it is too expensive to rent an office space in Manhattan. Apartments that were built with the intention of providing the wealthy with enough space to feel like they had a private house, now serve as both a private/domestic space and public/professional space. In the 19th century, however, the home was meant to be a space that provided a respite from work. One division that existed between lower income housing and upper income housing was that many immigrant families did, in fact, work in their homes. Especially during the industrial revolution, working-class homes were often transformed into sweatshops. It was common for entire families to work for their survival at home, making cigars, cutting flowers and sewing clothing.57

The apartment has never fully lost its stigma, but the city has embraced it as a living space. The apartment has come to represent and mark city living as distinct from rural and suburban lifestyles. In fact, even today, many suburban communities—usually in more elite neighborhoods—prohibit apartment buildings through zoning laws. Still, virtually all present-day residential construction in New York is in the form of the apartment building. It is intriguing to investigate which

societal beliefs had to change for this to happen and it illuminates what values were widely held at a given time period.

Middle-class reformers were partly responsible for changing the reputation of apartments. Despite long standing critiques of apartments, some saw it as offering the chance to realign social norms and equalize people via connections and communities. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist who wrote around the turn of the century, saw the apartment as a positive place that could encourage women to interact with the world outside of their homes, rather than “remaining tied to an increasingly meaningless space.”58 Gilman explained that “home life being in our minds inextricably connected with married life, a home being held to imply a family, and a family implying a head, these detached persons are unable to achieve any home life, and are thereby subjected to …the often inhygienic [sic], and sometimes immoral influences, of our makeshift substitutes.”59 Gilman debunks the common assumption that apartments promoted immorality, saying instead that the rupture in traditional societal regulations actually freed women from their roles as mothers and housewives confined to rooms in empty, rural settings. Gilman argues that other articles published when she was writing her book *Women and Economics* in 1898, protested “against the increasing luxury and comfort of bachelor apartments for men, as well as against the pecuniary independence of women, on the ground that these conditions militate against marriage and family life.”60 She goes on to explain how apartments can become new kinds of homes that are not focused on domestic work: “Take the

58 Klimasmith, 136.
60 Ibid, 297.
kitchens out of the houses, and you leave rooms which are open to any form of arrangement and extension; and the occupancy of them does not mean ‘housekeeping.’ Gilman argues not only that apartments should qualify as home, no matter whom they are designed for, including bachelors. Klimasmith points out that for some, like Gilman, “Because [apartments] allow for connective and collective activity among their inhabitants, these buildings radically realign spatial and thus societal relations.” So while many feared that the women who lived in apartments were either sexually deviant or in danger, there were women who found the apartment to be a liberating, feminist space. To those who were intent on preserving the status quo, however, a space conducive to women’s freedom was construed as a threat that could “obliterate traditional domesticity and its attendant values.”

Besides, or perhaps because of, some forward thinkers like Gilman, most people felt that the apartment needed to adapt to social expectations in order to be respectable. Even in 1905, one Bishop was cited in the New York Times as grouping

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61 Ibid, 298.

62 There were other apartment types being advertised at this time, as well, though not as prolifically as the large, upper-class buildings. These were “Bachelor Apartments” which consisted of fewer rooms and often had no kitchen. One ad for apartments separates “Family or bachelor,” implying a set of assumptions about what an apartment’s size signified about its tenants. Bachelor apartment did not only mean that it was small; it also meant that women were not expected to live alone in the city, nor were elderly people, childless partners, or roommates. Naming apartments this way limited who could be expected and accepted as a tenant. Bachelor apartments contained only the ‘bare necessities’ for living because they were not meant to be family homes. Some buildings carefully selected their tenants in order “that a high moral and sanitary condition may characterize the home.” (“Model Homes,” New York Times, June 30, 1908, 6.) In this way these apartments could “enjoy the happy distinction of being in reality ‘model homes.’” (Ibid, 6)

63 Klimasmith, 136.

64 Ibid, 141. Because early apartments on the Upper West Side were so geared towards attracting families, other groups often found themselves lacking comfortable homes. Apartments, however, had the potential to house more alternative kinds of families and to house single people comfortably. In the early twentieth-century, though, society was still only beginning to accept the single working female as a respectable group and there was not yet sufficient housing well-suited to their needs. They often lived in boarding houses or moved into apartment hotels that were designed for two people and “all expenses are accordingly out of proportion,” one article from the time related. (“The Difficult Problem of Housing the Business Women of the City” New York Times, September 29, 1907, SM6)
club life and saloons with “‘flats and family hotels among the things which are gradually effacing in a very large degree the old and better thing, the family and the home.’”65 Still, slowly but surely the apartment became acceptable. The idea of the apartment as a respectable home was still contested and the question of whether sharing space was a good or a bad influence on society remained a lively one. In the early twentieth century, home decorating magazines were “emphasizing that the apartment was, after all, one’s home.”66 A crucial component in the apartment gaining recognition as a home was that a woman could and should live in it with a family. If a woman could make an apartment into a home it appeared that moral righteousness could prevail. In explaining how a robber did not burglarize an apartment when he saw the female occupant was pregnant, Klimasmith aptly assesses that “Ladies’ Home Journal readers would be relieved to know that bourgeois domesticity could reform even the most hardened urban criminal!”67

The apartment’s reputation depended extensively on how it was advertised, written about, and described in mass culture. While apartments were sometimes seen as fostering subversive lifestyles, they were also propagated as enabling an urban, yet private and family-oriented, home. One article boasts that:

The social life of this part of the West End is fashioned by the character of the buildings in which its devotees are housed. So many big family hotels and apartment houses make a neighborhood that is distinctive. None but the wealthy can afford to dwell in the expensive structures erected on the highest-priced land in the residential portion of the city. The suites of rooms in these great family hotels and apartment houses are extensive, and fitted up with a lavishness that is not surpassed in similar buildings anywhere. Their rich

66 Klimasmith, 140.
67 Ibid, 142.
furnishings are selected with the judgment of people who have had all the advantages that wealth gives.\(^{68}\)

As the 20\(^{th}\) century progressed, city life was commonly associated with crowds and images of dirt, filth, disease, and – consequently – immorality. If those who could afford houses in the suburbs were going to stay in the city, they needed to define their own space as separate from urban space as it was commonly perceived. The apartment, or “French flat,” had to earn its place among the wealthy and their tastes. A 1905 ad for The Carlisle Dwellings claimed that its apartments were “[a]s much like private dwellings as apartments can be built. Only 12 families in entire building.”\(^{69}\)

The apartment needed to be spacious, luxurious and protected from the grime of the city. The first buildings constructed to contend with these issues were carefully crafted to give their tenants a sense of individuality, pride and grace. The Ansonia, a 17- story apartment hotel, stands between 73\(^{rd}\) and 74\(^{th}\) street, “crowned with fanciful turrets and carved filigree…” that would open “a new chapter in the annals of luxury housing in New York.”\(^{70}\) This building, erected in 1902, created an atmosphere of grandeur, comfort and opulence.

The city was overcrowded and individual dwelling units were becoming more scarce in Manhattan, but unless all the wealthy were going to leave, the city needed a substitute for individual units. This substitute could certainly be extravagant: “[The

\(^{68}\) “West Side is Itself a Great City” *New York Times*, March 10, 1895, 20.

\(^{69}\) “Display Ad 15,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1905, 14. Many buildings today have had their original floor plans destroyed to accommodate the creation of more apartments in each building. When a perspective tenant tours these apartments they are often given both the old and new floor plans.

\(^{70}\) Hawes, 156.
Ansonia’s] apartments, sized from one room with bath to eighteen rooms with three baths and four toilets, [and] were furnished with Persian carpets, ivy-patterned art-glass windows, domed chandeliers set with mosaics, and a remarkable selection of appliances.71 From its beginnings in the late 1800s, the apartment was not being built on the Upper West Side to relieve the masses that were crammed into tenements. It was being built for the growing upper and middle-classes that would have preferred individual housing.

The appeal of the early 20th century apartment rested not on providing a traditional “home” but on promoting high-class tastes and modern convenience. Above all, elegance was the theme. Advertisements for apartments around the turn of the century often said “An Elegant Corner Apartment”72 or focused on the neighborhood, claiming to be in the, “finest location in the city.”73 The apartments made up for in space what they were perceived to be lacking in privacy and property. The Stanley Court apartments on West End and 106th Street advertised an astonishing 10 rooms and 3 baths, which was not uncommon in 1908. The Claredon offered Housekeeping apartments on Riverside Drive and 86th Street with the “Highest Type of Luxury, Convenience and Safety. 10 extra large, light rooms, with four baths.”74 Today, apartments like this are unimaginable except to the extraordinarily wealthy, and even for those buyers many buildings are not constructed with such expansive private spaces. The advertisements were clearly trying to demonstrate that the preconceptions about standard city living did not apply to these apartments. They

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71 Ibid, 158.
73 Ibid, 15.
74 Ibid, 15.
emphasized that residences had “extensive views… [and] an abundance of sun in Winter and cool breezes in Summer.”

Unlike the construction boom of the mid-twentieth century, which emphasized private dwellings outside of the city as most desirable, the early construction of apartments aimed to house the upper-class within the city. Though many feared that apartments would invite a temporary, unknown population to the neighborhood that would bring property values down, as appeared to happen in the Cold War era multi-unit dwellings that I will examine in the next chapter, these apartments actually invited a very privileged crowd. To even out the playing field, the apartment had to be an exclusive dwelling and people had to change their ideas of private life to remain in the city.

**Adjusting Notions of Privacy for the Apartment and the City**

Definitions of privacy depend heavily on class perspectives. For the wealthy at the end of the 19th century, sharing a roof—or any domestic space—was in itself a violation of privacy. Though a crowd could provide more anonymity than a home, it precluded the creation of private space for the wealthy. But because the majority of New York City’s population was crammed into tight quarters many people could not and did not define privacy in terms of space. Privacy had to be configured among masses of people crowded together. Therefore, *personal* space was not always directly correlated to *private* space. Social life, among the elite, could be intensely public (in that each person’s affairs were subject to intense scrutiny) so for the

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75 Ibid, 15.
wealthy privacy was not characterized by whether or not someone knew your intimate secrets. It was interpreted in terms of space and property. The home was meant to insulate intimate spaces from more public ones.

Just as the public and private life of New York’s elite is so often scrutinized in today’s media, it was also a popular subject in late 19th century and early 20th century literature. Edith Wharton famously wrote about the lives of the social elite in New York and her stories reveal a clear and rigid code of conduct. Mona Domosh, who studies 19th century polite politics, explains that “Edith Wharton’s characters were not free in their behavior on the streets of New York; they were intensely guarded in their displays, aware all the time of how their public behavior communicated their identities.”

Wharton examines the consequences of forcing the city’s wealthy into close contact. Her stories also highlight the difficulties of negotiating life in a world where private and public spheres often overlap or become conflated. Domosh explains that public space “refers to places under public scrutiny, removed from the privacy of the domestic space.” It is interesting, therefore, to look at how Wharton’s stories combine these worlds.

*The Other Two*, originally published in 1904, is a story by Wharton about a newlywed man, Mr. Waythorn, who is frequently forced to encounter and interact with his wife’s first two husbands who also reside in New York City. The story opens with Waythorn sitting in his new home, waiting for his wife, Alice, to come down for dinner: “It was their first night under his own roof, and he was surprised at his thrill

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of boyish agitation.”78 He is immensely proprietary and fond of his personal space, a space now defined as a home because he has brought a wife into it. The story is propelled by the repeated intrusions on this space which he considers private.

Waythorn leaves his house early one morning in order to avoid encountering Alice’s first husband when he comes to visit his sick daughter. Wayworth is extremely uncomfortable with the idea of this man on his property, but his wife’s divorce contract entitles Mr. Haskett to visitation rights. Entering the public realm, Waythorn comes face to face with the crowds of the working-class: “He caught the elevated at the employees’ hour, and found himself crushed between two layers of pendulous humanity.”79 At different times of day, the crowds on the street were distinct and severely segregated by both race and class.80 Laborers went to work at the earliest while merchants would go later on, hence Waythorn truly does become caught in the “employees’ hour” that he is unaccustomed to. Suddenly, Waythorn finds himself pushed up against Mr. Varick, his wife’s second husband and, “[t]he two exchanged a word on the perennial grievance of the congested trains, and when a seat at their side was miraculously left empty the instinct of self-preservation made Waythorn slip into it after Varick.”81 The shared experience of public transport gives them an initial commonality. The crowdedness of the elevated train actually feels threatening to Waythorn in this scene, but since the setting is public he must hide his discomfort.

80 Domosh, 216. She also writes, “New York in the 1860s was a city characterized by extremes in wealth and poverty, by ethnic and racial diversity, by economic elites competing for political power, and by an unstable social-class system. As public spaces, then, the streets provided not only transportation corridors, but also sites for the displays of social class and political power.”(213)
81 Wharton, 109.
When affairs from the city begin to intrude on his home, however, Waythorn has a much harder time concealing his uneasiness. Later the same day, he finds Haskett sitting in his library. “He had not suffered half as much from his two meetings with Varick. It was Haskett’s presence in his own house that made the situation so intolerable.”

Waythorn’s perception of his personal affairs changes once the public realm has entered his home and his consciousness. The home and the wife are linked and the other men are not only intruding on his space, but they have also shared in the experience of being husbands to his wife. He suddenly becomes aware of how his relationship with his wife is perceived in their social circles. He also sees that he sits between Haskett and Varick in terms of class. In the last scene, Alice finds her two ex-husbands standing with Waythorn in her home. She pretends to be at ease and sweeps “aside their embarrassment with a charming gesture of hospitality.” This performance is the only way any of them can maintain a semblance of privacy in a world as intimate as New York. The story seems to say that whether rich or poor, private life in the city inevitably becomes public and that having a home doesn’t guarantee privacy. It also shows that true intimacy is not guaranteed within the confines of a city home.

People’s expectations of privacy are in many ways reliant on the availability of housing. The significance of ‘private’ began to change as individual houses became less prevalent in the city. As Cromley points out, a ‘private’ apartment

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82 Ibid, 115.
83 Ibid, 124.
84 The character of Alice never appears outdoors but instead remains in private domestic space. Domosh explains that “From most accounts of the lives of middle-class New York women in he 1860s, it is indeed true that they rarely ventured out alone to walk after four in the afternoon. (218).
referenced *ownership*, not spatial relations. Private, by 1911 meant co-operative, it meant owning a space rather than renting it from a landlord. 85 This definition was a big change because it meant space could be shared *and* private.

New Yorkers came to realize that the communal aspects of apartment living could be beneficial as well as economical. Apartment living was actually proving to be less expensive than a private home but more comfortable. For example, an apartment building’s plumbing, among other conveniences, provided a more sanitary lifestyle, drastically unlike the communal lifestyle provided by the tenement. It was less expensive to share heating, water and electricity bills. Therefore, even though apartments were originally designed as an alternative for the upper-class, they began to provide a more modern lifestyle for the middle-class as well. 86

As the apartment became a more acceptable way for the middle- and upper-class to live, buildings went up more quickly and the decorative aspects of the building’s exterior became less prominent. The majority of buildings that now characterize the Upper West Side were built just before the Great Depression. These buildings are sturdily constructed and have large apartments (though not as exceedingly large as the buildings that were built to house only the very wealthy).

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86 Ibid, 201.
6. This is photo of 84th Street and West End is typical of many streets on the Upper West Side. Large apartment buildings dominate the avenues.

   These buildings are renowned for their high quality and the illusion of privacy that they convey. Today, a “pre-war” apartment implies thick walls that are effective sound barriers, elegant molding, and high ceilings.

7. In December, I passed a sign on 84th Street that ironically tries to boast these qualities for a building that is under construction on West End Avenue:
Besides the unintentional humor of the sign which implies that a 21st century world war is approaching, the label of ‘residences,’ rather than apartments, speaks to a romanticized time when the word “apartment” was highly stigmatized and the wealthy were being courted to live in multiunit buildings. The *New York Times* picked up on this story in March of 2008 and said that the apartments would range in price from “$8.5 million to more than $25 million.”

Over time, the apartment needed to become a symbol of elegance and tranquility, thoroughly protected from the crowds and hostility of the city surrounding it, to attract the wealthy to the Upper West Side. With the Great Depression, however, this era of elegant construction came to an abrupt end. The ‘pre-war apartment’ would retain its reputation for superior quality and remain distinct from future apartments that would crop up under a new set of circumstances. These buildings that line the avenues of the Upper West Side would remain largely unaltered in their facades, though many would be renovated within. To this day, as a result, these buildings have lent a distinctive feeling to the Upper West Side and have allowed it to retain some of its early elegance.

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Chapter 2- Urban Core, Suburban Bore

“Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky
Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same.
There’s a green one and a pink one and a blue one and a yellow one
And they’re all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses all went to the university
Where they were put in boxes and they came out all the same,
And there’s doctors and there’s lawyers, and business executives
And they’re all made out of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course and drink their martinis dry,
And they all have pretty children and the children go to school
And the children go to summer camp and then to the university
Where they are put in boxes and they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business and marry and raise a family
In boxes made of ticky-tacky and they all look just the same.”

- Malvina Reynolds

In the early twentieth century the Great Depression brought housing construction to a virtual standstill, resulting in a massive housing shortage during the Second World War. The economic boom of the postwar era gave rise to a new form of the apartment. This new apartment, built under vastly different cultural, political and economic circumstances, was intended for a different population than its ancestors had been: a working- and middle-class population. With a new group of expected tenants, the way in which apartments were constructed changed and the space took on a new set of functions. The guiding principle in the construction of these new apartments was to create a more suburban living space in the hopes of retaining the city’s middle-class families. Instead of the detail-oriented craftsmanship of prewar apartments, large, minimalist buildings rapidly appeared. A living space that was originally built to keep the upper-class in the urban core was, in the postwar era, being used to keep the working- and middle-class within city limits.
The years after the Second World War brought tremendous change to all aspects of American life. The War helped put an end to the Great Depression and ushered in an economic boom. Returning war veterans flooded back into New York and were greeted with an unprecedented amount of assistance by the federal government. Under the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill, veterans could enroll in college, receive unemployment compensation and obtain loans to buy houses. During the 1940s and 50s many couples married, the baby boom began and an abundance of new families formed. In winning a war against powerful enemies abroad, America acquired world leader status practically overnight. A democratic nation had triumphed over Fascism. At the same time, however, the threat of communism was taking a new form that would result in a kind of “national defense.”

The postwar period is also known for its ‘Red Scare’ which, under Senator McCarthy’s direction, enflamed people’s fears of communism. It forced many who may or may not have been in any way involved with the Communist Party to testify in front of HUAC (The House Un-American Activities Committee) about who was associated with the party and what they knew about its activities. People were blacklisted – barred from employment – for alleged membership in the Communist Party or for the refusal to comply with investigations. Jim Crow laws mandated separate facilities for blacks and whites and created a frightening and disenfranchised environment for black Americans during this time. Social, racial and political
divisions ran rampant in American society. This was a time when people dealt with the anxiety of nuclear war on a daily basis. It was a period in U.S. history of widespread fear, prejudice and great conformity.

Suddenly, supplying a comfortable suburban home for every American became an issue of safety and national security. An ideology developed that the “American way of life” needed to be protected. The city, which offered a somewhat communal lifestyle and was a more likely target for atomic bombs, appeared threatening at this time and the suburbs appeared to be a perfect alternative. There, Americans could clearly display the value of material wealth and private ownership. This kind of American domesticity emerged as crucial to maintaining a strong country that was ready to fend off foreign threats. With the notion that capitalism needed to be protected, housing came to symbolize much of what modern democracy had to offer.

The city, in the meantime, could not provide enough space to raise the standard ideal family in a modern, national consumer culture. To both citizens and the government, a privately owned home seemed sound protection against a postwar recession, in addition to representing a capitalist alternative to the communist Soviet ideology of government ownership. Planned suburban communities such as Levittown in New York sprung up *en masse*, allowing middle- and working-class people to own homes for the first time. Elaine Tyler May explains in her book *Homeward Bound* that, “[t]he desire for the single-family home as a refuge against a chaotic world was not a postwar creation….But it achieved new vigor in the postwar years, largely because the ideal was now within reach of most middle-class and many
working-class Americans.” These suburban communities began filling fast with veterans who were not looking to return to the city, and New York soon began to see its middle-class population decline. New highway systems also allowed people to commute to and from the city. As many manufacturing jobs moved out of the city, to Connecticut and Long Island, New York’s working class population began to move as well.

Compared to the possibility of owning property, renting apartment space became even less appealing to the American public. Owning a home in the United States increasingly signified a certain amount of success and respectability. Becky Nicolaides explains in her book My Blue Heaven that the “political pitch centered around the idea that suburbia and home-ownership would foster civic participation because citizen-residents would feel a genuine stake in their community.” From the worker’s vantage point home-ownership also came with the promise of “family autonomy and a palpable sense of security in the soil they could call their own.”

However much owning a private home became the ideal, it was difficult to achieve in the city. Renting has long been a staple of urban life, but “[i]n New York, working people were far less likely to own their homes than elsewhere in the country, and far more likely to live in large rental apartment buildings.” Joshua Freeman explains in his book Working Class New York that in 1950, “only 8 percent of the dwelling units in the city were detached, single-family homes, compared to 17 percent in Chicago, 48 percent in Detroit, and 54 percent in Los Angeles. Fewer than

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90 Ibid, 28.
20 percent of New York residential buildings were owner-occupied. Nearly 40 percent had twenty or more units.”91 As buying a family home suddenly became more economically reasonable, the suburbs became more appealing. “The government also financed large suburban tracts, such as those built by William Levitt,” May writes. “With all these incentives for building and purchasing suburban residences, it soon became cheaper to buy than to rent.”92

In many ways New York City failed to meet the criteria that made the suburbs an ‘ideal’ place to live – private space, separate from other families. For instance, during this deeply racist time, the suburbs, with their isolated houses and car-based transportation, allowed for segregation in a way that the congested city, dependent on public transportation, could not. Kenneth Jackson explains in his history of suburban communities Crabgrass Frontier, that many suburban communities, like Levittown, “publicly and officially refused to sell to blacks for two decades after the war.”93 Though practices like redlining94 and other segregating mechanisms also restricted black people from moving to certain areas in the city, its large and crowded nature prevented complete racial separation. The city was also full of unionized liberals (maybe even communists!) and it was a place that necessitated a communal lifestyle, which appeared, to many, un-American.

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92 May, 169.
94 Redlining was a practice that involved the refusal to grant loans to certain “high risk” neighborhoods, and was, in reality, racially discriminatory.
The Need for New Housing

Returning vets were not looking to move back to the cramped housing conditions many of them had left behind before the war. In addition, many women had moved in with relatives or doubled up in their apartments during the war. The suburbs came to look like an attractive option. Now, with the federal government’s assistance, many people had new housing and job opportunities. The pace of suburbanization in the United States quickened as veterans took their chance to buy a home and make a fresh start. “For the first time in modern history more people moved out of New York than moved in, a trend that accelerated during the 1950s,” Freeman explains. “Only natural increase kept the population stable.”95 The city’s housing shortage also helped to accelerate a migration to the suburbs among people who could afford to leave.

In order to maintain a middle-class population, the city government and private builders created housing that could comfortably accommodate new and larger families. However, at the same time, the federal government promoted the idea that the ideal family life demanded a home outside of the city. “Postwar policies fostered the construction of the vast majority of new housing in the suburbs. The cold war made a profound contribution to suburban sprawl.” Elaine Tyler May relates, “In 1951, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists devoted an issue to ‘defense through decentralization’ that argued in favor of depopulating the urban core to avoid a concentration of residences or industries in a potential target area for a nuclear

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95 Freeman, 27.
One 1945 *New York Times* article exemplifies how important housing was not only to individuals but to the country as a whole: “the national Association of Real Estate Boards calls the housing situation in the United States its ‘No. 1 Home Front Problem.’” Housing, and the way people lived their private lives, was now an important part of staving off the communist threat and preserving a strong nation.

During the Cold War, there was a tremendous amount of aid available to build new housing. In 1937 the Wagner-Steagall Act had allocated 800 million dollars in loans to the newly created United States Housing Authority. After World War II, the Housing Act of 1949 “authorized the construction of 810,000 units of public housing.” The city had not constructed a significant amount of new homes since the 1930s and it had a lot of people who needed housing quickly. “Before the war – during the entire Depression – the federal government had financed a total of 200,000 low-income apartments. Within the first four years after the war,” Robert Caro explains, “the federal government authorized the financing of 810,000 low-income apartments.”

Many veterans received priority in finding housing after the war. It was their arrival that spurred new construction and influenced the kind of housing that was built, but they were not alone in their struggle to find a place to live and many were still left without adequate housing. The organization of Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States believed that “housing programs should be planned for all citizen groups but that returning veterans and their families should have preference for all

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96 May, 169.
98 Freeman, 114.
available homes until the present shortage is relieved.”\textsuperscript{100} The higher priority given to veterans caused tension among the city’s residents. As many letters from tenants point out, those who were lower on the waiting list had few options. The housing market was tight, and landlords were renting only to a lucky few. One tenant wrote to Mayor La Guardia in 1944, “I was told I could not have [an apartment] because I have children…” and was forced to move into an apartment with “no gas stove, and no running water at all…”\textsuperscript{101} until she and her family could find another place to live. Other letters addressed the fact that evicted tenants, even those who could afford to pay a reasonable rent, were unable to find a building with a vacancy.\textsuperscript{102} One letter informed the Mayor of a “new sneaky trick, that landlords are using on new leases, they are handing out to their old tennents[sic].”\textsuperscript{103} The trick was a way to raise rents. The author of the letter gave La Guardia permission to read it on the radio. The desperate quality of many of the letters sent to the mayor gives a sense of how difficult the situations were for much of the city’s population.

In 1947 one memorandum to Mayor O’Dwyer regarding the “Placement of Non-Veteran, Low-Income Evictees in ‘Low Income’ Housing Projects” explains the process of designating apartments and its consequences,

The highest priority is given to a ‘Veteran family’ in order of date on which warrant of eviction is to issue. ‘Veteran families’ with children have first priority over those with no or fewer children. These names are put on an emergency list and as vacancies occur in the emergency veteran projects (dwindling day by day), assignments to

\textsuperscript{101} Letter from [illegible first name] Thorne. To Mayor La Guardia, Nov 20, 1944, Bronx, NY. Municipal Archives, Laguardia Subject Files, roll 212, # 764.
\textsuperscript{102} Letter from Paul S. Haman to Mayor La Guardia. October 6, 1944. Brooklyn, NY. Municipal Archives, La Guardia Subject Files, roll 212, #507.
\textsuperscript{103} Letter from E.H. Penderell to Mayor La Guardia. September 11, 1944. Municipal Archives, La Guardia Subject files, roll 212, #384.
vacancies are made. In the case of ‘non-veteran families’ with eviction notices, there is little or nothing that they can do. Necessary information is taken for their files – they do not follow up. The family is asked to call Vacancy Listing from time to time for possible listings. Vacancies in existing “low-income” projects are allocated to those who, in addition to meeting general requirements for eligibility, are:

1. Site occupants (presently living on the site of a housing project to be constructed there)
2. Disable[d] veterans in need of housing
3. Non-disabled veterans
4. Non-veterans

The fourth group above is, for all practical purposes, never reached in assigning the units, because there are so many cases in the preceding groups. This office has had its attention called to a few cases of tenants with children that have received 34-hour notices of eviction from a City Marshal. The income of the family would indicate that as far as the income requirement for eligibility for ‘low-income’ projects is concerned, they are eligible. According to Miss Pope, however, this group hasn’t a chance of getting in to the ‘low-income’ projects because of the existing system of priorities.104

The city’s population was in desperate need of new housing. The city was losing people who could afford to leave, and tenants who stayed in the city were facing all kinds of discrimination.

Robert Moses: Little Boxes Made of Ticky Tacky

The city had a number of options for reinvigorating its housing stock but, in this era of construction, one man came to dominate the decisions made, and his name was Robert Moses. While the decisions he made helped middle-class families, they often created more problems for the poor. In order to address New York’s need for an economically viable type of dwelling to attract middle income families, as well as

new urban communities that could compete with the suburbs, Moses oversaw the
collection of vast complexes of massive, identical buildings that encircled a private,
open space. These apartments came to symbolize the postwar construction era. Later,
it became clear that many of these projects, and the way in which they were built,
damaged the city.

Moses first gained power in 1934, when Mayor La Guardia made him City
Parks Commissioner. Moses was an ambitious, efficient (at whatever cost) and
strong-willed man, and by 1948 he was appointed Chairman of the Committee on
Slum Clearance under Mayor William O’Dwyer. Moses soon came to control
practically all major residential construction projects in the city. His power formed in
the 1930s and 40s, dominated the 1950s and extended into the 1960s, leaving in its
wake a thoroughly transformed city and a new kind of apartment.

In addition to the parks and highways that he built, Moses came to be
associated with massive residential housing projects such as Stuyvesant Town, the
Amsterdam Houses and Park West Village, each of which aimed to house working-
and middle-class families. While other types of housing were built at this time,
Moses’ apartments were the most extensive and influential. They best represent the
main type of construction undertaken during this period.

Fiorello La Guardia took the postwar housing shortage very seriously as well,
understanding that it caused overcrowding and unhealthy conditions in the city.
Believing conditions in tenements had given his first wife tuberculosis that “killed her
and their baby,”105 he “vowed to friends that one thing he was going to do
‘personally’ as mayor was to make sure that the city started at last to give poor people

105 Caro, 611.
in the city a decent, healthy place to live.”\(^{106}\) Although La Guardia consolidated power under Moses as City Parks Commissioner believing that Moses was a “Man Who Could Get Things Done,”\(^{107}\) LaGuardia did not trust Moses with the city’s housing. They were not bitter enemies (Moses would write a short biography of La Guardia entitled “A Salute and A Memoir”), but La Guardia had a particularly forceful personality and, as Thomas Kessner wrote in an extensive biography of the Mayor, that they often butted heads.\(^{108}\) Moses obtained power constructing parks and highways but saw that “[t]he next great frontier for federal funding…would be public housing, and with the single-minded immersion for which he was held in awe, Moses aimed to make housing his new field.”\(^{109}\) Moses proposed to La Guardia that one man control all of the housing production in the city and volunteered himself for the task. However, Moses had enemies in Washington and LaGuardia feared that this could impact the funding New York might receive for new housing. La Guardia “was not about to allow his power-hungry parks commissioner to launch a coup for control over city housing.”\(^{110}\) Robert Caro, who wrote The Power Broker, the most exhaustive biography of Robert Moses written to date, confirms the reasons for LaGuardia’s suspicions: “Prior to passage of the Wagner-Steagall Act, Moses had never had much interest in public housing. ‘Public Housing’ meant, in the terms of the day, housing exclusively for the poor. Moses had never had the slightest interest

\(^{106}\) Ibid, 611.


\(^{108}\) In La Guardia; A Salute and a Memoir Moses writes that La Guardia’s instinct “was to welcome any idea that seemed to promise advantages to the public rather than to himself, an instinct which went far beyond ordinary decency, quick sympathy and the desire to redress wrongs.” (Moses, 28) Moses also wrote that LaGuardia was often mad at him and that his loyalties lay with his principles and not with specific people.

\(^{109}\) Kessner, 452.

\(^{110}\) Ibid, 453.
in building *anything* for the poor.”\(^{111}\) Through a series of complicated, secretive and goal driven actions, Moses did, in the end, successfully infiltrate this sector of the municipal government by the 1940s and began building mass housing for the middle-class.

La Guardia had placed high priority on housing for reasons of public health and personal loss, while Moses aimed for an individually controlled overhaul of housing. Their methods for constructing new housing reflected there differing motives. Before Moses gained such exclusive power over housing, La Guardia achieved a fair amount of success with his own plans. Believing that the renovation of run down buildings could be the most effective method for providing its tenants with a healthy living space, La Guardia built “thirteen separate public housing projects containing a total of more than 17,000 apartments… in New York,” by 1941. This was “far more than in any other city in America,” and, Caro adds, “Moses had had nothing to do with any of them.”\(^{112}\) Soon, however, Moses declared that “LaGuardia’s efforts to rehabilitate old tenements should be scrapped” and “whole blocks of slum tenements [for clearance] should be selected by the Welfare Commissioner.”\(^{113}\) This method of bulldozing old housing to build new housing from scratch is known today as ‘slum clearance’ and it became the widespread practice in cities all over America. It had a tremendous impact on the fabric of New York’s communities.

\(^{111}\) Caro, 610.  
\(^{112}\) Ibid, 613.  
\(^{113}\) Ibid, 611.
The Housing ‘Act’

With money appropriated from the Federal Housing Act of 1949, Robert Moses built a remarkable number of working- and middle-class projects. Sadly, these projects often dislocated huge numbers of lower income people in the city. Today, large scale bulldozing of this type is rarely used as a chief renewal technique. In the postwar era, however, legislation actually promoted this method and provided means for the destruction of large numbers of rundown houses. While these tenements were often in poor condition, they did provide a roof for populations that had established what were often stable communities. Freeman explains that “The 1949 Housing Act…seemed like a rare, postwar liberal victory. In reality, though, public housing served as a veneer for… promoting slum clearance.”¹¹⁴ The clause that would have the most far-reaching impact on New York was Title I of the Housing Act through which federal funding was provided for slum clearance in the name of Urban Renewal. Freeman elaborates, “Under Title I of the law, local authorities could condemn slum areas, purchase the land at market value, clear it, and resell it at a reduced price to redevelopers, with the federal government picking up two-thirds of the cost. Redevelopers were not required to rehouse residents on the same site, nor to build residential structures at all.”¹¹⁵ Tens of thousands of people were made homeless despite – and because of – Moses’ implementation of urban renewal.

The public housing that Moses oversaw had an obvious and lasting impact on the city, and many people today are inspired by the scope of Moses’ vision and the

¹¹⁴ Freeman, 114.
¹¹⁵ Ibid, 114.
efficiency with which it materialized. But Moses’ idea of what bettering the city meant was not the only, nor the most prevalent one. Earnest as his initial dream may have been, Moses used housing construction as a means of gaining political power, and while he believed in improving the city for “the public,” he also seemed to want to improve “the public” for the city. Kessner writes that Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, an admirer of Moses, “understood what had transformed the idealistic reformer into an arrogant power broker. ‘It used to shock me because he was doing all these things for the welfare of the people…. [But] to him they were lousy, dirty people, throwing bottles all over [his] Jones Beach…. He loves the public but not as people. The public is a great amorphous mass to him. It needs to be bathed, it needs to be aired, it needs recreation, but not for personal reasons – just to make it a better public.’”

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As the suburban communities became the new middle-class American dream, Moses sought to adjust the city to this ideal. Though new housing was built on land that had been occupied, it frequently proved too expensive for the population that had been displaced. In 1952 “[m]ost of the objectors [to the Manhattantown project] declared that only a relative handful of the tenants in buildings now on the site could afford to live in the proposed new houses.” 117 Moses promised the relocation of all tenants who had been evicted, but because more housing was being destroyed than built, many people were neglected. There was no place for dislocated families to go, because for a large number of projects, “[t]he same vacancies that were alleged to be available for one project had already been allocated for a previous project – or

perhaps ten previous projects.” A letter addressed to Mayor Impellitteri (1950-1953) from the New York State Committee on Discrimination in Housing, found that no one was doing the math and “[a]fter an intensive attempt to comb city agencies for relevant information, we have come to the conclusion that the city is not facing the situation realistically. No one department has been charged with responsibility to assess the nature of the problem or the [sic] risks involved. City agencies in reviewing projects have paid little attention to the relocation problem and have approved projects on an uncoordinated piecemeal basis.”

For approved projects, estimates from the memorandum included that “150,000 to 180,000 human beings will be uprooted and forced to move.” Urban renewal generally reflected postwar social prejudices and although the apartment was no longer built with the richest citizens in mind, the majority of new housing was still not being designed with the intention of housing immigrants or minorities. “If the number of persons evicted for public works was eye-opening, so were certain of their characteristics. Their color, for example. A remarkably high percentage of them were Negro or Puerto Rican. Remarkably few of them were white.” Caro relates, “[a]lthough the 1950 census had found that only 12 percent of the city’s population was nonwhite, at least 37 percent of the evictees (Moses’ own figures) and probably far more were nonwhite…” This kind of discrimination held true for lower income groups as well. Everyone agreed that the city needed an improvement in the quality and quantity of its housing stock, but the discrimination that seemed to be guiding it

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118 Caro, 963.
120 Caro, 968.
was unacceptable. The Committee on Discrimination in Housing wrote, “The elimination of slums and the creation of healthy neighborhoods are necessary and worthy objectives. In the process, however, the city has certain responsibilities and obligations to the displaced families as well as the city as a whole, to see to it that social benefit for one section of the population does not result in severe hardship for others.”

There was great potential for massive improvements in housing at this time but the institutional design of the apartments and their rash execution and unspecific implementation left the city in poor condition. As Jane Jacobs argued in her influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, “There is a wistful myth that if only we had enough money to spend—the figure is usually put at a hundred billion dollars—we could wipe out all our slums in ten years, reverse decay in the great, dull, gray belts that were yesterday’s and day-before-yesterday’ suburbs, anchor the wandering middle-class and its wandering tax money, and perhaps even solve the traffic problem.” Moses had the money but he failed to use it in a way that helped revive what were deemed ‘slum’ areas. He instead wiped out these neighborhoods and failed to aid the people who most needed better housing situations.

Public housing projects often served to destroy communities, spread slum conditions, and create more dangerous areas. Even today many parts of the city that were cleared under urban renewal have yet to recuperate. What goals were these methods aiming for and what aspects of New York were meant to be maintained? It

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121 Letter from Committee on Discrimination in Housing to Mayor Impelliteri with attached memorandum “What Price Slum Clearance?” New York, February 24, 1953. Municipal Archives. Subject Files Impelliteri.

seems that Moses held suburban and upper/middle-class ideals in higher esteem than those of the communities he destroyed. The Committee on Discrimination in Housing also found in their memo “What Price Slum Clearance?” that “[t]he seven urban redevelopment projects which have already received city approval... will replace 9,604 present dwellings. Forty-five per cent of 4,341 of these units are now occupied by Negroes. At present we do not have exact data concerning the number of Puerto Rican families now living on all the sites. It is known that in the West Park area 34% of the present residents are Puerto Rican and in Manhattanville 16% are Puerto Rican. The total figure is decidedly underestimated since it is stated in terms of dwelling units and does not take into account the overcrowding prevalent in all the areas.”

Racism was not only rampant in this era but was being written into housing policy. This is why it was even more crucial not to let one man, who was racist himself, guide housing. Robert Moses displaced a disproportionately high number of those who had the least power to object: poor people and minorities.

What one person considers a ‘slum’ and another considers ‘home’ depends heavily on perspective. Housing construction was clearly displacing minorities faster than whites and Moses was labeling minority areas ‘slums’ at an astonishing rate. While some of Moses’ renovations have served the city effectively, his indifference towards the well being of so many people and their homes was simply cruel.

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124 Interestingly, there has been a movement to rehabilitate Moses’ legacy. In the summer of 2007, three exhibits went up in museums around New York, each praising Moses’ achievements. Also, Paul Goldberger published an article in The New Yorker arguing that critics have been too hard on Moses, and that he was a product of a racist time and couldn’t be blamed for his prejudices. (Paul Goldberger, “Eminent Dominion, Rethinking the legacy of Robert Moses” The New Yorker, February 5, 2007) It is important to remember that at the same time that Moses was publically denouncing civil rights in the
New York Times article declared, “Spekesmen[sic] for Negro and Puerto Rican residents of the area complained that relocation would force them, because of racial discrimination into residential areas already substandard and overcrowded.” When Moses opted to be in sole control of the money and construction for housing projects and refused to consider other opinions, he made himself vulnerable to this kind of criticism. In a letter to “Tom,” meaning Thomas Dewey, the Governor of New York in 1945, Moses wrote that the opposition he faced was really about “whether we want endless hearings and orders which do not take into account the welfare of neighborhoods, or whether we want action along intelligent, constructive lines…” He continued:

Personally I am just a little tired of the criticism of revolutionary reformers directed at what they are pleased to call piecemeal work. Most of them believe in complete decentralization anyway, and they ask for standards in public and quasi public housing higher than those on Park Avenue…. Suppose we were to hold back and postpone action on our entire postwar program pending the making of definitive, overall long range plans based on the world of tomorrow…Maybe our live will be entirely revolutionized…. In the meantime this school of thought really advocates doing nothing, because whatever we do may be inadequate or wrong. Moses’ ideal city seemed to resemble the suburbs more than a metropolis.

Entire areas that had once contained a variety of dwellings were bulldozed and


126 Letter from Robert Moses to Governor Thomas Dewey. October 26, 1945. Municipal Archives. La Guardia Subject Files.
replaced with massive apartment buildings previously unknown to New York. Often these complexes were disconnected from their surrounding neighborhoods. “In the formative years of the 1950s,” Freeman explains, “Title I slum clearance projects cleared away poor and working poor areas, substituting lower-middle-to-middle-income developments. Brownstones and tenements were replaced with towers, obliterating the traditional streetscape.”127 Many of these projects were designed to give tenants recreational spaces and protection from crime. In doing so, however, they were often cut off from the city and made inaccessible to the greater public. This seclusion often made them become more dangerous.

The impact that big apartment complexes had on neighborhoods began giving the new apartment a poor reputation. The spaces within Moses’ projects were surveyed by policemen and private security guards. Regimented urban renewal projects were slapped on to emptied land, fostering isolated communities not areas that enabled neighbors to look out for one another. Jane Jacobs – author, self-appointed urbanist and city activist – saw this as one of slum clearance’s biggest mistakes.

In terms of city renewal theories, Jacobs and Moses sat on opposite sides of the spectrum. While Moses envisioned renewing the city on a massive scale through large, institutional government projects, Jacobs looked to improve the city through more minute and specific changes. It is unfair to claim either of them is completely in the right or wrong since the ideas that Jacobs described were never implemented on a scale as large as Moses’ were. However, her writing is a passionate and thorough

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piece of evidence of her love for New York and all the people in it. She calls for the appreciation of things that make a city distinctive. Her ideas for reform included housing in low-rise, mixed income communities that could be adjusted according to the needs of the neighborhood’s population.

Jacobs was a bitter enemy of Moses and in 1939 she helped stop his attempt to build a bridge that would have cut across Lower Manhattan and destroyed much of the city’s historic portion both culturally and financially. (This battle necessitated at least one intervention by President Roosevelt).\(^{128}\) An opponent of the entire notion of slum clearance, Jacobs emphasized that “At best, it merely shifts slums from here to there, adding its own tincture of extra hardship and disruption. At worst, it destroys neighborhoods where constructive and improving communities exist and where the situation calls for encouragement rather than destruction.”\(^{129}\) Though she was in some ways an idealist – at times describing a city that seemed to dismiss its dangers and problems– she deeply believed that the diversity of communities was what originally made cities great and had to be maintained for its revitalization. Unlike Moses, Jacobs believed that dense concentrations of people were beneficial for the city and were “one of the necessary conditions for flourishing city diversity.”\(^{130}\)

Moses was in many ways suburbanizing the city by adding auto-friendly features such as highways, housing projects that contained parking lots for residents and decentralized amenities like Jones Beach. In his displacement of racial minority groups, he was also mimicking suburban towns that discriminated on the basis of race. Moses argued for the pragmatism of the “tower in the park” design for city

\(^{128}\) Caro, 676.
\(^{129}\) Jacobs, 270-1.
\(^{130}\) Ibid, 205.
projects.\textsuperscript{131} Stuyvesant Town – a housing project that opened in 1947 and still sits between 14th and 20\textsuperscript{th} street on the East Side – embodies this model. Richard Plunz explains:

\begin{quote}
[T]he site was designed for maximum security against unwanted external intrusion. A combination of brick walls and low commercial and parking structures surrounded the perimeter of the development; pedestrian and vehicular access was limited to eight entry points. The Manhattan grid was completely obliterated within the developments and the internal open spaces heavily landscaped. In the central lawn the roads formed the “Stuyvesant Oval,” which framed a patrol booth for police at its center.\textsuperscript{132}
\end{quote}

Moses, in his plans, created a new kind of exclusivity and security much like the designs for many planned suburban communities springing up at this time. The design of these small “villages inside of the city” isolated the communities within them. The privacy afforded by these projects mimicked that of early upper-class apartments where a certain amount of detachment from the city surrounding it was thought to provide good protection from the ‘dangers’ of the city for tenants.

But open space that is secluded and of low density, is not innately ‘good’ space. Jacobs explains, “One reason why low city densities conventionally have a good name, unjustified by the facts, and why high city densities have a bad name, equally unjustified, is that high densities of dwellings and overcrowding of dwellings are often confused.”\textsuperscript{133} Jacobs points out that many reformers assessed overcrowding with “a raw figure of numbers of persons per acre.” But this data was unhelpful because “[t]hese menacing figures never tell how many dwellings or how many rooms there are to the acre, and if the figure is given for a badly troubled area—as it

\begin{footnotes}
\item[131] Plunz, 322.
\item[132] Ibid, 255
\item[133] Jacobs, 205.
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almost invariable is—the implication is deafening that there is something dreadful, on the face of it, in such heavy concentrations of people.”134

While the city scrambled to keep its middle-class population, many of its actions had the opposite effect. As May explains, “the support for suburban developments such as Levittown, and the placing of public housing in the center of urban ghettos, facilitated the dispersal of the white middle-class into the suburbs and contributed to the decay of inner cities.”135 Without middle income tax payers the city would be unable to support itself. Federal aid would soon dry up and New York would be facing its future as a city made up of the extremely rich and the extremely poor people.

Malvina Reynold’s song “Little Boxes,” popularized by dozens of artists, playfully parodies the identical design of the housing that was being built in the suburbs. But a similar pragmatism and utilitarianism in design was prevalent in city housing projects. One article pointed out that the cost of low rent housing could be “kept down by the elimination of needless luxuries”136 and that is exactly what was done. Unlike the suburbs, however, this utilitarian design gave the New York apartment a less comfortable and domestic feeling. As Larry R. Ford writes in his essay *Multiunit Housing in the American City*, “[t]he image of these new dwellings was usually minimal: a temporary residence until the money could be saved to purchase a house. Amenities were few, and the design was … uninspired.”137 The housing had an isolated and temporary quality to it. The projects also held a more

134 Ibid, 206.
135 May, 170.
homogenous and purposefully confined population than ever before. The apartment is first and foremost a box – an empty space – in which people can live, and yet when it was reduced to only a box it became less appealing. As Moses incorporated apartments into his designs, their use and reputation shifted, and so did the neighborhoods around them. The structures that Moses put in place reflected a common theme in the Cold War nation, that of valuing the suburbs. Many housing acts also favored a specific kind of middle-class family. “The federal programs did more than simply spur a trend toward home ownership in the expanding suburbs,” May explains. “Policies that reflected and encouraged the American domestic ideology fostered and reinforced a particular kind of family life. In effect, these federal programs provided subsidies and incentives for couples to marry and have several children.” Families were being specifically drawn out of the city. Moses sought a way to tie the city and its suburbs together by incorporating cars, affordable (identical) housing and planned open spaces.

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138 May, 171.
139 Cars were becoming a larger and larger part of American life and Moses sought to make this new, modern city ‘auto-friendly.’ Being an old city, New York is, to many people, a city for walkers—a city that can be interminably explored on foot and cannot be thoroughly explored from a car. In contrast, America is an expansive country that, since the postwar period, has placed high priority on a massive highway system. It is a country that functions primarily through private transportation. Where does a city fit into this landscape? Moses’ belief that the city needed to become more accessible to vehicles is a clear example of how he wanted to suburbanize the city. Jacobs explains: “The interval of the automobile’s development as every-day transportation has corresponded precisely with the interval during which the ideal of the suburbanized anti-city was developed architecturally, sociologically, legislatively and financially.”(Jacobs, 343) However, Jacobs did not believe that cars were “inherent destroyers of cities.” She instead thought that the huge volume of cars was detrimental to urban areas. Moses had little regard for preserving the more intricate aspects of city life and focused almost exclusively on the bigger picture.
Manhattan to Manhattantown: A Case Study

Moses built a tremendous amount of housing and he clearly had an impact on neighborhoods all over the city. The Upper West Side was no exception and what happened in this neighborhood was emblematic of what happened all over the city. One article listed seven projects planned just for the area between 59th and 125th Streets.140

The Manhattantown project (now known as Park West Village) located “on six blocks between Amsterdam Avenue, Central Park West, and West 97th and 100th streets…”141 was begun in 1952 and had a very destabilizing effect on the neighborhood. Large areas, once densely populated, were replaced by parking lots, open space, massive apartment complexes and cultural centers. While this in some ways helped improve the area – since overcrowding is unhealthy and unsafe – the new housing did not provide the city’s most neglected with places to live and, in fact, cost many people their homes.

Moses’ plan to completely raze buildings required that the current residents move. One project alone necessitated, “[t]he relocation of the 2,800 families now living on the site…”142 and many were never able to return. Logically, people who were displaced tended to go to the closest available space, so as construction began, buildings nearby filled with new tenants. As a result, conditions on the Upper West Side rapidly declined.

141 Plunz, 282.
The people who were being pushed out of the ‘slum’ crammed into the nearest, and cheapest, spaces available. Unsanitary conditions that the original developers of the Upper West Side had hoped to prevent, were spreading. Brownstones and walk up apartment buildings in the neighborhood filled up with new residents, becoming overcrowded and dilapidated. Caro explains, “In little more than a year, the streets immediately adjacent to the development—always poor and predominantly Negro, but previously, with well-maintained buildings—had become a slum, a teeming, seething hive of humanity—a place of squalid, run-down, dilapidated tenements so overcrowded that children had to sleep in shifts, of doorways filled with drunks and narcotics addicts and gutters filled with garbage.”

During the 1950s the Manhattantown project became embroiled in financial scandal that heavily delayed its completion. Money disappeared into the pockets of the developers who did not pay their real estate taxes and construction was delayed as long as possible so that tenants would continue to pay rent. The entire operation was corrupt. Still, despite the project’s failure to re-house the people who had previously been living in the area under slum conditions, it is trumpeted today for retaining a stable middle-class population and character.

My Uncle Jerry, who lived in the project as a teenager, explains, “I think that when Park West Village was built it was new (your uncle has a knack for stating the obvious!) But what I mean was that it was unusual for being middle-class housing in an area that was overwhelmingly poor with what we considered ‘rich’ folks living on the edges of the neighborhood – like Central Park West and Riverside Drive and West

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143 Caro, 964.
144 Ibid, 964.
145 Ibid, 980-1.
End Ave.”146 A 1955 New York Times article also describes the richest people in the neighborhood living on these avenues while the lower income population lived in overcrowded “nineteenth-century tenements and old brownstone fronts converted into overcrowded, unsanitary rooming houses.”147

My Uncle describes that his experience in Park West Village was that of being in an almost completely white middle-class enclave in the middle of a very poor and almost all black and Hispanic neighborhood. He explains, “It was really the first of the middle income housing that was built on the Upper West Side. Now there are so many other buildings like it that it is not very unusual.”148 In addition to there being little interaction between the neighborhood and Park West Village, there was also little interaction with the public housing project that neighbored it. He wrote, “In answer to your question about the Amsterdam Houses, there was virtually no interaction between it and Park West Village because one was seen as ‘the projects’ and the other as whites taking advantage of urban renewal to engage in urban removal.”

One article from the New York Times writes about this division: “The proximity of the disadvantaged population to those who live in large, privately owned middle-class communities like that of Park West Village, a well-policing...middle-income development, makes the middle-class residents easy targets of crime.”149

146 Gerald Markowitz in email to author. February, 2008
148 Gerald Markowitz e-mail message to author, February 28, 2008.
Supporting this, my Uncle relates that when he lived in the area it “was also a time of increasing crime, so it was a little scary going from the subway at Central Park West or Broadway to the block between Columbus and Amsterdam where I lived.” In addition to tension outside of the complex, there was also little neighborly love within the project. The buildings were huge and all the tenants were new to the area.

Maps of the area where Park West Village now stands, show how drastic the changes that it caused were. These buildings were taller than the ones they replaced, but Park West Village still housed fewer people than had been ousted. Below are three maps from the New York Public Library; the first is from 1934 (before the project) and shows the dense concentration of tenements for the poor; the second is from 1955, when the same area had been cleared for Manhattantown. As a result of the demolition, these blocks stood empty for years; the third map shows the same area in 1967, devoid of tenements and home to Park West Village.
My Uncle, who was a sophomore in high school in 1958 when he moved to Park West Village from the Bronx, remembers his apartment well, and though it sounds small to my ears it was a huge improvement for many middle-class residents. “Let me describe the apartment – You entered the apartment and there was a pretty large living room directly in front of you – sort of like what happens when you walk into your apartment. Then immediately to your left there was a hallway that led to the one bedroom on the right and the one bathroom on your left. Halfway along the living room on your left was the kitchen – pretty small but large enough for a small table for 2 people to sit at. At the far end of the living room was a row of windows that faced Amsterdam Avenue and overlooked the school on 97th Street. To the left at the end of the living room was a small alcove with no door – that was my room – large enough for a single bed and a small desk. At the end of that alcove – my room – was the door to a small balcony – where I would go and smoke – yes I smoked!! Overall my part of the apartment was very light, while the area closer to the door when you came in was less so.” These middle-class apartments sat in the middle of an otherwise poor area. Adjacent housing projects that were not privately owned began to deteriorate around 1958, as the postwar economic boom leveled off and less funding was directed towards public housing.

Despite the departure of many people to the suburbs in the 1950s the population of the Upper West Side remained relatively stable because of the influx of new immigrant groups. Emily Rosenbaum and Samantha Friedman point out that “Puerto Ricans arriving in the postwar period settled in the established communities of El Barrio and the Lower East Side, as well as in Hell’s Kitchen and parts of the
West Side (including West Harlem) in Manhattan, replacing the white ethnics who had resumed their flight from the city."150

In 1961 the Upper West Side’s population was becoming more racially mixed but, as Freeman writes, “[u]nlike earlier immigration, however, the influx of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans did not swell the total population of the city, because of a simultaneous, massive outmigration of whites. Between 1940 and 1970, the non–Puerto Rican white population of New York fell from roughly seven million to five million, largely due to suburbanization."151 In many ways, the Manhattantown project was an attempt to regain control of an area that was no longer occupied by white people.

Though Manhattantown was subsidized with federal funding, it was not (and still isn’t) publicly owned. Originally sponsored by Manhattantown Inc., the project was built by a real estate agency called Webb & Knapp,152 which took over its debts after the financial scandal.153 A New York Times article states that today what is known as Park West Village (originally Manhattantown) “is regarded as an outstanding example of Federall[sic] assisted construction, with relatively large apartments in well-maintained buildings.”154 It has been sold multiple times since its opening and the apartments could, if the owner should so decide, become individually

150 Emily Rosenbaum and Samantha Friedman, The Housing Divide; How Generations of Immigrants Fare in New York’s Housing Market (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 94. Beginning in 1948, Puerto Rico rapidly industrialized, shifting from an agrarian economy to an industrial one. Such a drastic transformation inflated the number of Puerto Rican immigrants to the country.
151 Freeman, 28.
152 “Park West Village Sale By Alcoa to Helmsley Set” New York Times, May 18, 1972, Pg. 17.
153 Caro, 1011.
154 “Park West Village Sale By Alcoa to Helmsley Set,” 17.
owned condominiums. While the privately owned housing that was subsidized by the government helped insure that the project became middle-class housing, it did not prohibit developers from charging higher rents which impacted what population could live in them. A project like Manhattantown was very different from publicly owned projects that tended to house more working-class groups. The land and buildings for public housing were owned and built by local, city or state governments, and were intended to maintain affordable housing.

**Public Housing**

The Upper West Side displays a stark example of the disparity between private and public housing projects. While Park West Village continues to house middle-class people and is perceived as a successful housing project, the neighboring Frederick Douglass Houses, which are public, tell a grimmer story. While today public housing has taken on negative connotations, in the years immediately after the war, inhabitants usually had more in common than a low income (for instance being veterans) and safe, lively communities formed.

For the first 8 years of his life, from 1947 until 1954, my dad lived in a Fort Greene housing project named Navy Walk. This working-class area in Brooklyn was made up almost entirely of Navy Veterans and until the mid-fifties my father recalls a very distinct lifestyle. The apartment – which housed my grandfather, great-grandmother (Bubby), my father and my aunt – was small, but my father only describes it briefly, saying that he shared a room with his sister. He said that most of

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155 Park West Village did convert to condominiums in the 1980s. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.
the time he spent living there was not spent inside of his apartment. Each member of
the family had areas that they made their own and these areas were not necessarily in
the apartment. The street right outside the building was the children’s space. Bubby
would watch my father out of the window, and each day when the ice cream truck
would come she would wrap a coin in a napkin and throw it to my father below.
Everyone slept and ate in the apartment but the rest of the time my dad was at school
or outside playing games like hopscotch, stickball, and the other activities that came
to symbolize that era of child’s play in New York. He says that there were adults
around who arranged a kind of communal guardianship for the kids. Stoops were
usually filled with adults who did not need to be inside their apartments at that
moment and each corner held a bar where men passed time after work.

In this instance, personal space did not necessarily mean domestic or private
space. There was a sense of propriety in the spaces outside of the apartment, which
was heightened by their communal quality. Movies like *West Side Story* would later
highlight this. The rented apartment did not offer much room, and ‘home’ was not
defined by the ownership of private property.

For the working-class, Freeman explains, “[d]ense population, small stuffy
apartments, and shared hallways and stoops meant that life was exposed and often
communal.”

Though many remember this lifestyle fondly today, the 1950s was a
time when the suburbs were promoted as a feasible and fashionable alternative for
many working- and middle-class families. Life in the early days of the projects and
the suburbs did in fact have a fair amount in common. Both of these areas housed
working-class people who formed tightly knit communities. In the novel *Born on the

156 Freeman, 30.
Fourth of July by Ron Kovic, the narrator describes the children going to play stickball where they’d “belt high-bouncing Spalding balls for hours off Kenny’s roof and into little Tommy Law’s hedge.”157

A number of factors caused public housing to deteriorate in the 1950s, however, and the discrepancy between privately and publicly owned housing projects widened. The 35 brick buildings that made up Fort Greene public housing were considered complete failures just a few years after my father moved out. Crime had begun to skyrocket and the city was not maintaining the public projects. The apartments in public housing were a far cry from the city’s apartments from the early twentieth century. Once again, apartments took on a poor reputation as the legacy of public housing became one of drug dealing and crime.

As the city de-industrialized in the postwar era, and there were fewer working-class jobs available, the unions that once pervaded New York lost power. The urban working-class no longer had the stronghold that it once had. The white middle- and working-class fled, leaving a more dominant poor population and a tighter budget for the municipal government. Funds dwindled for the maintenance of public housing and the reputation of apartment buildings was poised for another hit. For people who did not have degrees there was significantly less job opportunity since manufacturing employment opportunities and factories moved out of the city. As the city became a financial center rather than an industrial one, low paying city jobs and domestic work were two of the only job options left for new immigrant groups.

While unions and other government aid had helped many veterans, this new population was less financially secure. Soon, the people moving into public housing were only those who had no other options. Public housing was not being maintained to retain the white working- and middle-class and it showed. In the time immediately after the war, communities in these projects often formed around the camaraderie that an experience in war helped forge. But over time the tenant population had less in common other than financial distress or ethnicity, and it became clear that the layout of many housing developments was not conducive to the formation of communities. After the projects had thoroughly degenerated, a *New York Times* article described how the designs promoted bad conditions, “Their high-rise towers are separated by walkways and lawns that are often unused and sometimes, with poor lighting and low pedestrian traffic flows, actually unsafe.”

The city concentrated and isolated its poorest population in the projects and soon crime rose. By the 1960s the white working- and middle-class were no longer applying to live in the projects and were in fact leaving them. This deterioration would continue and by the 1990s articles about drugs and violence in public projects were common.

Moses profoundly shaped the city by implementing large scale plans quickly. He tore down old structures before figuring out how to re-house old tenants. He

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159 One man declared he was “tired of having to live amid the project’s illegal drug trade, its relentless degradation and violence.” (Michel Marriot, “…While Citizens Risk Lives To Combat Dealers in Streets” *New York Times*, August 14, 1989, A1).

“Over the last 18 months, at least 34 fires have raced through the stairwells of Housing Authority buildings. One fire this month killed two residents of the Frederick Douglass Houses on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.” (Shawn G. Kennedy, “Housing Chief Faulted on use Of Paint Cited in Stair Fires” *New York Times*, November 23, 1995, B3).

“It was one group from Washington Heights against the group from the Amsterdam Houses” (“2 High School Students Injured in Attack” *New York Times*, September 23, 1992, B3.)
displaced people who did not fit into his suburban ideal and his projects served to further segregate people. Ultimately, New York looked nothing like the suburbs, and Moses’ plans for suburbanization resulted in housing projects that came to have new stigmas attached to them.

**Take Your Shoes Off Before Stepping on Domesticity: Moses’ Demise.**

The apartment, because it requires the sharing of both space and utilities, embodies the communal aspects of city living. Families living in urban areas need public spaces and facilities to function. For example, because the private city home does not usually come with a back yard, public parks serve as an important substitute. Ironically, it was Moses’ attempt to deprive an upper-class area of this public, but domestic, space that ultimately spurred Moses’ demise. In 1956, Moses replaced a small playground in Central Park with a parking lot for Tavern on the Green, an upscale restaurant. The media grabbed on to this story, labeling Moses a tyrant who destroyed recreational spaces. This is when people realized that his intentions for the city were, in fact, not always in the best interest of the general public. Only later would the dislocation of thousands of poor and minority groups also taint his reputation.

It was the white upper-class mothers of the Upper West Side who first caught wind of Moses’ plan to intrude on their domestic space, and from them rose cries of injustice. These women took quick and powerful action to protect their children’s playground and stop construction. One article from 1956 describes, “about thirty
young mothers, who took turns last week sitting on camp chairs to prevent bulldozers from excavating, spent yesterday collecting signatures to a petition to Mayor Wagner asking him to halt the project.\textsuperscript{160} They gained a lot of media coverage and though Moses succeeded in bulldozing the park in the middle of the night, he did not escape public scrutiny. The story was covered in practically all New York’s papers and Moses’ heartless offensive shocked the city. For years Moses’ blatant disregard for the poor had gone uninvestigated, but once he stepped on the toes of the middle- and upper-class (and the spaces that were meant for them to use in their private lives) his reputation took a turn for the worst. After taking away a family-oriented recreational facility, Moses now seemed to pose a threat to traditional domesticity.\textsuperscript{161}

The media, too, was reinforcing the glories of owning a private house and emphasizing that renting an apartment was a poor substitute.

**The Media’s Take: Representations of the Apartment**

Despite the city’s attempt to live up to America’s Cold War ideal of suburban life, the popular media drew heavy distinctions between what life in the suburbs – as opposed to life in the city – signified. Movies generally qualified New York as a place full of extremes. Single, promiscuous and slovenly people lived in the city, as *The Out of Towners* and *Rear Window* point out. *The Apartment* and *West Side Story* portray New York as a place bachelors and hooligans run (and ruin). And yet, paradoxically, films like *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* demonstrated the rich and fashionable

\textsuperscript{160} “Moses Plan Opposed; Citizens Union Backs Mothers in Fight for Park Area.” *New York Times*, April 23, 1956, 29.
\textsuperscript{161} Caro, 984-1004.
were best catered to in New York. Movies also reflected and enforced many of the stereotypes about cities and apartments that were already widespread across America.

In the 1970 film *The Out of Towners*, Jack Lemmon and Sandy Dennis star as Mr. and Mrs. Kellerman, a suburban couple who receive the worst that New York City has to offer. The film ends up ascribing their experience to a general ‘way of life’ in big cities. After they barely survive the night, Mr. Kellerman is offered a promotion that will move his family to New York. When Gwen Kellerman’s domestic space is threatened she, like the women of the Upper West Side, staunchly protests. As she speaks of the horrors of the city, her discordant, whiney voice takes on an elegant, demure and refined tone. For the first time in the entire movie this meek character has an opinion that is unwavering as she tells her husband, “I was hoping you’d say you and your wife don’t belong in New York. You wanted to live your life in Ohio. That you never wanted to see another big city. That you don’t want to live here, or in Chicago, or San Francisco, or any other place where people have to live on top of each other.” Her first qualm is the density of the city and the idea of shared personal space that the apartment so epitomizes. This she associates with people who “don’t have enough room to walk, or breath, or smile.” While the tone of the movie has been comedic until this point, the plea for suburban life is serious in every way.

Mrs. Kellerman next generalizes their unlucky experiences into problems with city life. “You don’t want to step on garbage in the streets, or have to give away watches in your sleep to men in black capes.” In reference to the crowds she says that she wants to be “through traveling on trains with no seats or food” and she concludes
that the city is a place she wishes she didn’t know existed. Her only hope for a happy ending is to return to the suburbs of the midwest where her husband can protect her as he was unable to do in the city. “And you wished you never came, and the only thing you really want was to pick up your wife, and carry her to the airport, and fly home and live happily ever after.” The suburbs offer a fairy tale ending, and no amount of money would be worth trading in the happiness of the wife and children for the stresses of a metropolis.\textsuperscript{162}

Other movies take a more specific look at the lives of the people who actually live in apartments, but draw equally dramatic conclusions about city and apartment life. Alfred Hitchcock’s \textit{Rear Window}, starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly, takes the blurred distinction between private and public life that apartment living exemplifies to an extreme height. From his window, an injured photojournalist follows the lives of a dozen or so neighbors who do not realize they are being watched. Significant portions of their lives are, in fact, not visible through the window, but this does not necessarily give them privacy. While all of these people share buildings and courtyards, they are thoroughly disconnected from one another. James Stewart’s character, Jeff, labels the neighbors based on what he infers about their lives because he does not know their actual names.

Specific statements that the characters make reveal how certain assumptions about American life do not transfer to city and apartment living. Jeff’s nurse, Stella,

\textsuperscript{162} \textit{The Out Of Towners} is not the only movie to claim that the city is nowhere for a family. The movie adaptation of John O’Hara’s book \textit{Butterfield 8} reinforces how anonymity and infamy can walk side by side. The city is where businessmen can pursue adulterous relationships away from the social circles in the suburbs. Many people—particularly women—become regulars at speakeasies, living an ‘immoral’—meaning unmarried—life. The rest of the time these loose women board with siblings or mothers who struggle constantly to protect “their girls” from the horrors of city life.
the levelheaded, working-class woman who always has an opinion, says, “We’ve become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change. Yes sir. How’s that for a bit of homespun philosophy?” This line is loaded with judgments about city living. In addition to implying that city dwellers spy on one another without regard for ethical conduct, she also claims that they do not go outside often enough. She argues that people should look at their own house for a change. This seemingly simple scenario, however, would be difficult to create in New York City. For one thing, no one actually has a house. Secondly, few people own their homes; everyone is a tenant and few would relish a building that someone else owns. By definition apartments are living spaces that make up a single building. Tenants that live in buildings with row after row of identical windows would have trouble even figuring out which window is their own. Admiring all of these windows is no less nosey than looking into windows from inside your apartment. Once in a while a person hangs Christmas lights or puts a plastic lawn chair on their balcony, but personal taste is hard to express in a communal area. Stella is subconsciously promoting a suburban ideology when she argues that people should go outside and marvel at their own windows.

Lisa, the socialite played by Grace Kelly, also voices misconceptions about the mentality of people who live in an apartment and a city. She says, “A murderer would never parade his crime in front of an open window.” Logical as this seems, she overlooks the fact that city living requires that you forget, to some extent, that eight million people surround you and that one of those people might look into your window. Jeff himself becomes a prisoner in his apartment and is almost murdered in
front of his window without a soul noticing. There is little that the neighbors share
besides space and, other than Jeff, no one actually seems interested in anyone else’s
life.

In this film, apartment living acquires a certain mystique and the viewer is
curious to find out exactly what each neighbor is up to. This is partly due to the fact
that the city appears deceiving. The anonymity of the tenants makes it difficult to
know their true natures. This film mounts a critique of apartment living, but within
that critique is a romantic idea that the city, its apartments, and the people who live in
them are exciting, sometimes dangerous and often mysterious.

Many movies explore the critical role that the apartment plays in the
formation of personal relationships. By examining the city and its apartments,
movies comment on sexual and racial boundaries and roles. In two consecutive years,
films about the Upper West Side won the award for Best Picture at the Academy
Awards: The Apartment in 1960 and West Side Story in 1961. These stories explore
two incredibly different sides of urban life, so different that it is hard to believe that
they take place in the same area. One sheds a comedic, though somewhat sad, light on
the seediness of living in an apartment. The other – a modern day Romeo and Juliet –
explores community boundaries and the dangers that exist in a world where different
ethnic groups are crammed into the same area. The line that had been so purposefully
drawn between apartment and tenement living in the beginning of the 20th century
was becoming blurred in the post World War II era. The massive deteriorating slums
created by apartment complexes were the new low-income way to live.
hesitations over apartment living formed as its role, and who it housed, changed. These films dramatize these tensions.

The 1960 film *The Apartment* beautifully shows a world that revolves around the function of that enigmatic living space. Jack Lemmon plays C.C. Baxter, or Buddy Boy, as the executives at the insurance firm where he works call him. Baxter resides in a three-room apartment on West 67th Street, “half a block from Central Park.” He is a bachelor who works on the 19th floor of an office that is represented visually by long lines of desks, clocks, typewriters and rolodexes. Baxter rents his apartment for “eighty-four dollars a month. It used to be eighty until last July when Mrs. Lieberman, the landlady, put in a second-hand air conditioning unit.” The apartment is practically a protagonist in this story; it provides a site for adultery; it destroys happy families; and it represents the exact opposite of the suburban home in White Plains where Mr. Sheldrake, the Boss, lives. Notably, Baxter’s apartment is not one designed to attract the upper-class. Rather, it is in a walk up building that has been divided (and thereby mutilated) into individual three-room apartments. Each character’s relationship to the apartment is crucial in determining how they are judged. Whether the character lives in the apartment, lives in a neighboring apartment, visits the apartment, or is completely disconnected from the apartment, all factor into the judgments that we, as an audience, make of them.

Early on in the film, when Baxter cannot go into his apartment because his boss is using it, he goes to sit on a park bench. In this scene we see that he is practically homeless, in part because his apartment is not a domestic space but is a

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commercial one. Baxter sits alone on a long bench in the middle of the night. Significantly, his apartment, which is supposedly private, is overbooked, yet the park, which is public, is empty. Baxter points out at one point that his apartment is “private property, not a public playground.” But we see that trying to find privacy in the city is a constant battle. One night, a floozy that Baxter meets in a bar provokes him into verbally admitting his questionable living arrangement when she says, after learning that he does not live with a family, “Night like this, it sorta spooks you, walking into an empty apartment.” To which Baxter ironically replies, “I said I had no family; I didn’t say I had an empty apartment.”

In the same way that the apartment is not private, it is not a true home. Having only one bedroom Baxter’s residence could never house a family, and having thin walls, he can never be completely comfortable or “at home.” The apartment does not belong to Baxter in a material or a symbolic way. The characters do not ever call Baxter’s home anything but “the apartment.” Even Baxter does not call it ‘my apartment.’ Baxter has practically no claim to the apartment: he lends it out to the men he works with and rents it from the landlady who can, and does, threaten him repeatedly with eviction. Baxter’s key floats around the office building as if it were the key to the executive washroom, an area that only executives are allowed to enter. Baxter’s dream is to be included in the group that gets to enter the washroom. The key to the apartment is passed around for one-night stands, and the executives barely register that someone actually lives there. Baxter is not enough of a man to stand up to them, and this is reflected in the fact that he lives alone in an apartment. This

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164 The park’s emptiness actually makes it more private for those who do decide to enter it at night.  
leaves the young bachelor exclaiming that he feels “shipwrecked among 8 million people.”

Every night, once his guests have gone, Baxter comes home, makes a TV dinner and eats on his sofa. In the first scene where we see Baxter in his apartment, “Grand Hotel” is playing on TV – a movie that mirrors Baxter’s own situation. Its slogan – “Grand Hotel. People come and go. Nothing ever happens” - links Baxter’s apartment to a hotel – a truly temporary form of housing. Though episodes take place inside the apartment, no long-term story can develop there.

Baxter, as an apartment dweller, is a man without a context. We do not know where he came from, and to our knowledge he has no family. The apartment cuts him off from any kind of community. He is a truly unremarkable man. In his book The Age of the Bachelor Howard Chudacoff investigates the stigmas that surrounded the image of the single male in this period, stigmas so strong that even a humble and honest man like C.C. Baxter cannot escape them. While Chudacoff argues that bachelorhood was feared from the early days of the American Republic, he also explains that in the mid- and late-nineteenth century, “fears over moral excess and threats to social cohesion (resulting from rapid social and economic change), fostered a growing concern over threats to the orthodox republican family.”\textsuperscript{166} America seemed to blame bachelors for the majority of moral problems in America, and it looked as though the city sided with bachelorhood. Simply by housing them, the city fortified bachelorhood’s already strong stigma. Chudacoff describes the “bachelor flat” as “multiple-room settings that combined the features of an apartment with those

\textsuperscript{166} Howard Chudacoff, The Age of the Bachelor; Creating an American Subculture (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 176.
of a boardinghouse. Often located in what became known as apartment hotels, these
types of residence first appeared in New York City in the 1870s.”167

The stigmas attached to bachelorhood grew in the mid-twentieth century when,
“family-centered values, which emphasized self-sufficient, child-centered suburban
domesticity, became a powerful ideal even though the ideal was unattainable for
numbers of people, especially racial minorities and the poor.” Until the political
turmoil of the 1960s, “[a]mong the middle-class and even among the working class of
the postwar generation, then, being a husband was “in”; being a bachelor was “out” –
but only temporarily.”168

Apartments, movies often claim, house a substandard kind of woman as well.
The Cold War was a time when people believed that women belonged in the quaint
houses of Levittowns that were designed specifically to enable them to do housework
while watching over the children.169 Women who worked and lived in the city were
thought likely to be single, since any providing husband would have brought them to
the suburbs. In The Apartment, the women who are housewives and live in the
suburbs are morally superior to the women who live in the city. The wives of
executives raise children and pass their time believing that their husbands are
constantly working late in the city. Meanwhile, their husbands commit all their
immoral and adulterous acts in the city, before they catch the 7:14 commuter train to
Westchester. The women in the city, however, are floozies who mooch off of their
families and seduce married men. The single women in the city are typically lonely

167 Chudacoff, 85. The apartment hotel that Chudacoff references is a different type than the
Ansonia, described in the first chapter of this thesis.
168 Ibid, 258.
169 May, 153.
drunks. (Both types of women, however, are portrayed as naïve and oblivious to the dishonest ways of men.)

In these films, which promote stereotypes that became embedded in the American consciousness, the very fact that a character lives in a city (and in an apartment) carries with it a set of low expectations. Like in *Rear Window*, Baxter’s home is partly public and partly private. This is largely due to the presence of neighbors. Baxter has to constantly remind his visitors not to play loud music and he has to lie about every aspect of his life to the suspicious tenants next door. In the face of constant scrutiny from his neighbors and his landlady, Baxter must hide how he lives and put up with the neighboring couple’s harsh judgments.

The role of the neighbor is complicated and can function in many different ways in the city. Close living spaces almost require involvement in other’s lives. While, as Jane Jacobs argues, this type of inherent neighborly surveillance lends security to a community, it can also be a source of judgments. In *The Apartment*, the neighbor can be both an enemy and a protector. Mr. Dreyfus is a doctor who, in the middle of the night, helps save Baxter’s love interest, Fran Kubelik, played by Shirley Maclaine. After her attempted suicide, the doctor wants to report the evening’s happenings until Baxter convinces him not to. The two are not actively involved in each other’s lives and only interact because it is inevitable in an apartment building. Baxter can successfully run his operation because no one notices who comes and goes, and no one will come knocking on his door for a cup of sugar, as they might be inclined to do in the nosy suburbs. Still, Baxter attempts to forge camaraderie out of the fact that they share a living space. He is concerned that Fran Kubelik’s reputation
will be tainted if the doctor reports her suicide attempt. He asks the doctor to separate
his career from his personal life. “Look, Doc, can’t you forget you’re a doctor -- let’s
just say you’re here as a neighbor.” When he agrees to this, Dr. Dreyfus’ role changes
and he stops making legal judgments and starts making moral ones. He tells Baxter:
“Well, as a doctor, I guess I can’t prove it wasn’t an accident. But as your neighbor,
I’d like to kick your keester clear around the block.” While there are some charming
and comical qualities in Baxter’s bachelorhood (he keeps a tennis racket in the
kitchen with which to strain spaghetti), his behavior is hardly adult. While Dr.
Dreyfus takes on a father-like role in protecting Baxter, he is actually more concerned
with protecting the single women around the city from dangerous bachelors.

The boundary between professional and private life is hard to pinpoint in both
the real-life apartment and in the film *The Apartment*. This complexity speaks to the
city’s uncertain moral atmosphere. Near the end of the film, Baxter offers to pay the
doctor for his help and the doctor refuses payment. Mr. Dreyfus says that he acted as
a neighbor, not as a doctor, and now that Baxter is becoming a grown man (and is
leaving the apartment) Mr. Dreyfus does not say this begrudgingly, as he did earlier.
Professional relations change to personal ones simply because everyone is so
physically close. From their apartments, neighbors are suspicious. But once they enter
each other’s living areas, neighbors can become friends. Baxter has a cordial
relationship with his landlady, who is trying to maintain a “respectable house” and is
consequently the boss of his private life.

The apartment also ties Baxter to his job so that his work life becomes so
intertwined with his private life that his private life doesn’t even exist. Baxter’s
an apartment is a commodity that he lends out to his co-workers and he has no place of his own to have any kind of social life.

In many movies the New York City skyline is emblematic of its gigantic size and suggests how overwhelming the city can be. The very architecture of buildings in New York makes people less ‘good.’ The skyscrapers in which the characters work in *The Apartment* give a literal meaning to ‘moving up the ladder’ – people actually move higher up into the sky as they are promoted. Starting as one of hundreds of workers on the 19th floor, Baxter climbs to the 27th floor where he has more privacy and personal space. However, the higher he climbs the less moral he becomes, and the more detached from the real world and his real life he is – he literally becomes less “grounded.”

Once he quits his job, Baxter must leave his apartment, which is easy to do considering he only invests one month’s rent in it at a time. The apartment is temporary. It both ruined Baxter’s career and forced him to grow up. The apartment lifestyle represents a stage in life that must, at some point, be left behind. When Baxter moves, we can assume that he will no longer strain spaghetti on tennis racket but will buy cloth napkins and settle down with a woman. We know that Mr. Dreyfus approves when he says that Baxter has become a mensch – a human being.

Unlike in the suburbs, people in the city – at least in films – have no children and no families. The Dreyfus’ who live next door are a childless Jewish couple. They are parental figures to Baxter but this role does not come naturally to them. The fact that they live next door to Baxter morally compels them to be involved in his private life. This alternative family is set in direct opposition to the type of family we see in
the single scene that takes place outside of the city. On Christmas day, we find Mr. Sheldrake in his picturesque, two-story home. He sits with his two boys in front of a beautifully trimmed tree in a brightly lit room. Even a phone call from the city about the attempted suicide of his mistress does not penetrate his idyllic home, though it threatens to. The city’s negative influence is explored in other films as well.

Just one year after the release of *The Apartment*, *West Side Story* told an entirely different story about the Upper West Side. Unlike Billy Wilder’s film, which takes place primarily indoors, *West Side Story* is set on streets and rooftops, with large groups of people and choreographed dancing. The film still feels enclosed and dark, but the spaces are public. This movie is not propelled by a debate over the use of a private space as in *The Apartment*, but instead focuses on the conflict over the use of public space. All of the action here is focused outside of the apartment and there are points in the film that imply that the apartment houses junkies and drunks, gives people no privacy and is not particularly safe for adolescents. The teenagers have nowhere to go except the streets, and this is where the problems and moral dilemmas of the film lie.

Interracial love on the streets of the city can lead to dangerous consequences. The duet “Somewhere” sung by the films two main characters, Tony and Maria, conveys their longing to find a place where they can live peacefully together. The chorus goes, “There’s a place for us,/Somewhere a place for us./Peace and quiet and open air wait for us/Somewhere.” The main reason that the two cannot be together is because they belong to rivaling ethnic groups. But it is not only the corruption, racial conflict and family feuding that makes the city unlivable for them. They are looking
for a place with peace, quiet and open air. Wherever this place may be, it is not New
York or any other city.

In a more upbeat manner the Jets, the Italian gang, parody their own
reputation in the song “Gee, Officer Krupke.” Explaining their delinquency they sing,
“Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,/You gotta understand,/It’s just our bringin’ up-
ke/That gets us out of hand./Our mothers all are junkies,/Our fathers all are
drunks./Golly Moses, natcherly we’re punks!”170 These lyrics are right on target as
reflective of the media’s usual portrayal of city dwellers. In this song, the comedic
insistence that the conditions of the city made each of them into delinquents,
highlights that they do actually live in a harsh reality that law enforcement officers,
government officials, and most adults don’t understand. Having little room inside of
their apartments, the kids congregate in the streets which they define as their territory.

As televisions began to enter the homes of more and more Americans in the
1950s and 60s, TV shows spread both the stereotypes and the romance of city life.
The city and the apartment were not suitable for a respectable family, but only for
working class people who did not have children. In some shows, the apartment was
not even shown as a complete living space but instead as one very drab and
impersonal room like the kitchen. In the television program The Honeymooners, the
audience is expected to laugh at the follies of the struggling couple living in a small
New York apartment with few amenities. The husband, Ralph Kramden, played by
Jackie Gleason, is an unenlightened, overworked and frugal bus driver. His wife,
Alice, is a crabby, bossy, woman who cannot be happy because she is denied all the
material things that are associated with suburban housewifery, such as a television.

The Internet Movie Database summarizes the show as follows: “A bus driver and his sewer worker friend struggle to strike it rich while their wives look on with weary patience.”\(^{171}\) The show focuses on the men’s attempts to earn enough money to leave the city. As each of their plans fail, however, it seems that their own foolishness makes them destined to stay put. In many ways, they are failed people too, who have nothing but each other. Despite the reality that families and ‘good’ people do in fact live in cities, many popular movies depict apartments as strange places that house strange people who use them in many different ways and for many different reasons. However, this observation, while derogatory in many films, is not necessarily so. The variety of people doing a variety of things is what makes the life of the city so rich.

**Conclusion**

The apartment, originally intended to be a private home within a multifamily building, epitomized affluent urban living at the turn of the century. This changed in the postwar period. The apartment became a tool to suburbanize the city. Redevelopment and new construction in the city was intended to replace the housing negatively associated with city life: family-less dwellings for singles and immigrant slums. The building of mega-sized apartment houses that were meant to mirror the privileges that suburban life offered, actually led to a more destitute city. Through the displacement of communities and the institutionalized isolation that the new form of apartments created, the apartment took on a new identity that was very different from

its pre-war ancestors. It was no longer a home embedded in a neighborhood and community, but an isolated, private space for the nuclear family. The formation of communities was hampered by both the design of the housing and the fact that public housing came to be a last resort for the city’s most impoverished. As the century passed, apartments were set to undergo even more transformations.
Chapter 3- Where Have All the Families Gone?

In contemporary New York life, the struggle over who is housed in an apartment has come to represent a bigger debate over who the city is for, and who apartments belong to – the tenants or the landlords, the wealthy or the poor, the state or the city. These questions, it seems, play out against the cultural, political and social trends of their era.

Although most of Manhattan’s residents live in apartments, the apartment continues to be perceived across the nation mainly as a living space for single people. But as New York has come to thrive economically, living in a city has come to mean something new as well. Instead of being seen as a last resort for people who cannot afford the suburbs, the city has become a desirable place for families and singles alike. As apartments have come into higher demand, tenants face new challenges in their rapidly changing neighborhoods. This chapter is, in part, about the fights and struggles occurring today among working- and middle-class people trying to stay in the city, their homes, and, their apartments.

The popular word for the changes affecting the city is gentrification. While this chapter is informed by works on gentrification, it is not meant to answer the question of whether gentrification is good or bad or whether the Upper West Side is, was, or will be gentrified. Every neighborhood in New York, as of late, is experiencing some sort of gentrification. Some, like the Lower East Side or Harlem, are seeing particularly drastic changes. But the type of the transformations occurring in different neighborhoods reflects their different historical context.
While the Upper West Side was designed for the upper-class, social and political events intervened, resulting in a neighborhood that houses everyone from the very wealthy to the very poor. Today, the apartment has undergone another transformation in its role and a new era of drastic change has dawned. What, then, does its recent popularity mean for tenants who lived in the area before its current boom? Who is most entitled to the Upper West Side’s apartments?

**The Upper West Side in Flux**

I have lived in the same apartment for my entire life. The neighborhood around me, with the exception of one corner on 100th and Broadway where businesses perpetually fail, remained largely unchanged for the first 18 years of my life.

Upper West Siders disagree about what they believe makes the area a good place to live. On Facebook.com, a social networking website where people post profiles, contact friends, and send out event invitations, a number of groups have attempted to define the neighborhood. One group called, “Upper West Forever,” lists qualifications for what it takes to be a true Upper West Sider. Included on the list are affiliations with popular stores and restaurants. Another criterion, the group claims, is that “Your hatred for the East Side is matched only by your hatred for...um...you can't think of anything you hate more.” Even though this claim is – in part – a joke, it exemplifies the allegiance of group members to “their” neighborhood.172

Woody Allen shrewdly sums up the stereotypical reputation of the Upper West Side in *Annie Hall* in 1977, when he says to a college student, “You, you,

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you’re like New York, Jewish, left-wing, liberal, intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, the socialist summer camps and the, the father with the Ben Shahn drawings, right, and the really, y’know, strike-oriented kind of, red diaper, stop me before I make a complete imbecile of myself.” With these few sentences, Allen succinctly labels an entire generation of the Upper West Side’s population, a generation that, in the last few decades, has begun to disappear. As new high-rises go up and new groups move in, many, from Woody Allen to members of facebook.com, mourn the loss of the New York they once inhabited.

A New Era

The changes happening inside the apartment today are a direct result of the changes happening around it. I began thinking about this topic because the prewar apartment in which I grew up has seen a great amount of change in recent years. My parents, after living in our apartment since 1979, recently learned that the rent stabilization that enables them to afford our home will be expiring sooner than anticipated. It is hardly coincidental that this news came just as the pace of the neighborhood’s transformation has quickened. Stabilized rent is adjusted according to maintenance costs and renovations made by the landlord. As the neighborhood has become more posh, the landlord has had more opportunities to attract high-paying tenants. Under the guise of improvement costs, the rents have increased more rapidly in pervious years than ever before, pushing them ever closer to the $2,000 per month limit. At that threshold the apartment rent can be raised to “market rates,” which would, in essence, evict our family. Presently, an apartment identical to our own, one
story below us, rents for $6500 a month, over four times what my parents currently pay.

The ‘building improvements’ range from minute to major, but they inevitably hike up the rent for current tenants while simultaneously making 290 Riverside more appealing to new tenants. The improvements are often unnecessary changes that cost the landlord little monetarily, but make older tenants much more uncomfortable. In the summer of 2007, for example, a notice appeared in the elevator: Every tenant’s key to the lobby door had to be replaced with an electronic key by the end of the month. Each apartment was entitled to two free keys but the third key would cost twenty dollars and the fourth key, fifty. This meant that my parents, who have raised two children in the building over 29 years, had to pay seventy dollars for two small pieces of plastic that would open the door when it was swiped over a censor. Families were, in essence, being charged for having children. The fee was ridiculous, the change was sudden, and the reasons for the inconvenience were vague. Though this change was ostensibly for our safety, the new technology in no way improved the actual lock on the building and was more susceptible to technological malfunctions. A few weeks after it was installed, the sensor broke and for an entire day the door was left propped open.

The new key sensor was not the only thing installed at the lobby door. Two cameras were placed above the entrance as well. These were not security cameras, since the building has no security guards to watch them. What they actually did was take a picture each time the door was opened by the electronic key. Rent stabilized tenants had numerous theories for why these were installed. Most thought that the
cameras were there to track whether people were subletting their apartments. Some suspected that the administration was trying to prove that children of rent stabilized tenants, like myself, were not living in the building full-time. This would mean that they would no longer be entitled to inherit the apartment and its rent regulations from their parents. Consequently, the apartment could then be rented at market rates.

It was not just unsettling rumors and a general feeling of anxiety that were causing strife; no copies of the key could be made for dog-walkers, housekeepers, home health care providers, relatives, or houseguests. People’s lives were being thoroughly disrupted by this change and for the first time in my recent memory the building was buzzing with conversation. Elevator small talk became more agitated, and signs went up to organize a tenant meeting. Petitions were posted in the lobby to stop the key change and, shortly after that the bulletin board that held them was taken down! Fliers placed in the elevator were also removed by the landlord, so emails started circulating.

To get the new key, each tenant had to go down and see the landlord in person. No exemption was made for the elderly, the disabled or people employed full time. One respected tenant, who is a judge, went to ask for a third key for his 16-year old daughter who had always lived in the building. He was shouted out of the office by an angry landlord who called him a “rentocrat,” an insulting term for those living in the building under rent control or stabilization who do not pay market rents. It became clear that these small changes were aimed at inconveniencing long time rent regulated residents who were paying significantly less for their rent than newer residents.
In addition to the small changes that lead to increased rent and harassment of the regulated tenants, big ‘capital improvements’ in long delayed maintenance are undertaken, the costs of which are then ‘passed onto’ the tenants in the form of major increases in their rents. Brick buildings demand periodic maintenance to prevent the decay of the mortar between the bricks on the façade which can lead to leaks or structural damage. If done correctly, these costs are not great. But, if maintenance is postponed for years or even decades, the costs of repairing the outside can be huge – in the multi-million dollar range. In our building, there had been literally no maintenance since my parents had moved in. Shockingly, this work was undertaken recently and has raised the rent in each apartment hundreds of dollars per month. This has forced many tenants above the rent stabilization limit and into the uncharted territory of the “free market!”

How things function inside an apartment reflects the trends of the neighborhood around it. On the Upper West Side today, chain stores are putting mom and pop stores out of business, real estate prices are rising, and many long-term residents feel the unique character of the neighborhood is disappearing.

I believe that the preservation of middle- and what is left of working-class New York is a worthy objective. But what this preservation entails cannot be the result of purely economic nor purely nostalgic sentiments. It is natural for people to resist change, which makes it difficult to assess what exactly is being lost and gained during a neighborhood’s transformation. One book, The Suburbanization of New York edited by Jerilou Hammett and Kingsley Hammet, is a compilation of essays that address different aspects of city life that have been commodified, suburbanized,
or homogenized. There are valuable accounts of how some of New York’s most unique neighborhoods and events have been converted or destroyed to make room for a new, profit driven city. At points however, the essayists sound a little self-righteous.

In their chapter, “Suburban Manhattan,” Neil Smith and Deborah Cowen make an aggressive, and at times convincing, argument that The Gates, a massive installation art piece that was put up in Central Park in 2004, was an example of the suburbanization of the city. The Gates themselves were a series of bright orange arches that hung fabric over every path in Central Park. During the two weeks of the exhibition, tourists flocked to New York from around the world. Insisting that the exhibit was part of a trend of “new hygienic urbanism,” the authors write that it was “embraced above all by the suburbs.” It posits that people who had avoided the city for years came to see The Gates because it appealed to their suburban tastes. In part, this may have been the case. Crowds did cluster around the fashionable 59th street exit of the park, rather than entering further uptown. However, this seems less a case of the suburbs impacting the city than the other way around. I don’t agree with Mayor Bloomberg’s conclusion that the show was important because it proved that “New York is safe and exciting.” I think that the piece was important because it was in the city, it interacted with the city, and it was truly available to the public. If the citizens of New York embraced it, the exhibit could truly, for a time, become part of the city.

174 Ibid, 34.
175 Ibid, 34.
When I visited *The Gates* I walked mostly on the Upper West Side, where I found families and residents of the area strolling through the brightly colored curtains in awe of how the vibrant colors brightened up that dreary fall day. I didn’t even mind the crowds further downtown; in fact, I found them genuinely exciting. I imagined that the city had been thrown back 100 years. Instead of kids playing video games inside or families watching TV on this random Sunday afternoon, people had decided to stroll through the park with no objective other than to admire the scenery. Tourists were coming to the city for reasons other than shopping. If that was not New York influencing the world, I don’t know what is. The park was lively; the exhibit was free; and although the art was less grungy than the public art that would have been found in New York in the 1980s, it provided a beautiful way to use a public space.
The actual exhibit was incredibly expensive to install and the city could not have afforded it, nor attracted such a great crowd, in the 1970s or '80s. But New York is changing and if the city is going to spend more money on tourism and frivolous undertakings, public art seems like a good place to start.
With every new era there is a different ‘old’ New York to romanticize. The changes in the Upper West Side can be best understood through an analysis of their historical and cultural context. Many people call the changes in the neighborhood ‘gentrification,’ but to merit the term’s use it must be properly defined. Only then can the word be deemed appropriate or inappropriate for describing the Upper West Side.

**Defining Gentrification**

Gentrification is a term loaded with emotional, economic, social and racial implications, each of which helps to define it in some way. Some definitions focus on the physical changes associated with gentrification, centering on improvements in a neighborhood’s housing stock, services and an increase in land values. A class-based definition focuses on the fact that wealthier populations move in to areas with less wealthy residents. Many go one step further, adding that these new, wealthy tenants are *displacing* older tenants who have lower incomes. This definition is often associated with the negative qualities of post war urban renewal programs. Lastly, one definition emphasizes the racial component of gentrification, labeling it as a process in which an area that was predominantly composed of racial minorities becomes more heavily populated by white residents.

Each of these definitions can be applied to different neighborhoods, cities, political climates and historical periods. The printed editions of the Oxford English Dictionary available in the Wesleyan library do not include the word “gentrification” because it is a phenomenon that was not labeled until the 1970s. However, the more current OED online does include the term and defines it as: *The process by which an*
(urban) area is rendered middle-class. The verb “to gentrify” was: To renovate or convert (housing, esp. in an inner-city area) so that it conforms to middle-class taste; to render (an area) middle-class.\(^{176}\) Unexpectedly, these definitions are not about what changes a neighborhood, but instead focus strictly on the fact that the transformation was middle-class. For this reason I would not label the Upper West Side’s current transformation “gentrification,” as middle class tenants are being evicted to make room for the wealthy.

The Upper West Side was, in many ways, gentrified in the 1970s. This is when my parents and many other tenants first moved to Riverside Drive. At the time, the street outside the building was often littered with used needles and condoms. Some tenants who moved in during this period consider themselves the people who helped “save” the building when it was moving towards abandonment.

When I discuss gentrification with other college students, all of us have an immediate set of assumptions. The most prevalent of these is that a neighborhood will lose its ‘cool’ factor. Gentrification is often described by young, radical people as villainous, a paradox since they are among those who can/will be/ have been ‘gentrifiers.’ Among some groups the “grungy” quality of the 1970s and 80s has lost its complexity and become idealized. In one song entitled, *New York I Love You But You’re Bringing Me Down*, the Indie-Rock music group called LCD Soundsystem, rues the demise of what they consider New York culture but, like many, they mix it up with a misconception of what life was like in the “good old days.”

\begin{quote}
\textbf{New York I love you but you’re wasting my time}\\
\textbf{Our records all show you were filthy but fine}
\end{quote}

But they shuttered your stores when you opened the doors
To the cops who were bored once they’d run out of crime

New York you’re perfect don’t please don’t change a thing
Your mild billionaire mayor’s now convinced he’s a king
And so the boring collect
I mean all disrespect

This interpretation of New York is purely wistful, and while I catch myself mimicking this attitude, it ignores the harsher realities of a time when drugs, crime and disease ran rampant. It also implies that those who long for the good old days speak from a privileged position; they were not subject to hardships like racial prejudice, unemployment or having their family torn apart by drugs. It is one thing to long for a diverse and exciting New York, home to more communal spaces and a wide range people, art and music. It is something else altogether to idealize a New York that was actually crime-ridden, racially segregated, dirty, and full of inequities.

Although it is only in my lifetime that our block has really changed into a safer, quieter place, what I see happening around me today is not gentrification, as the OED would define it, because the Upper West Side is not a lower income neighborhood becoming middle-class. It’s a “mixed” neighborhood, and its property values are often already high and its population substantially middle-class. The people who are moving into the neighborhood today are almost all wealthier than current residents. Many of the lower income tenants still residing on the Upper West Side can remain in the neighborhood due to rent controls and stabilization. Having made it through the first round of gentrification, their housing may not be at risk. But in many ways the fight is no longer for lower income groups to stay on the Upper West Side. Certain pockets aside, that battle has been largely lost. Now it has become
a fight for the middle-class and even the upper-middle-class to stay put. The prices for new housing are not only far beyond what lower income families can pay, but beyond what a middle-class family can pay.

Economic and political circumstances have encouraged entirely new demographic groups to move to the Upper West Side. The U.S.’s faltering economy is enabling many Europeans to buy property in the city. As an increasingly wealthy community moves in, the academics, artists, musicians and writers that arrived in the 1970s and came to define the neighborhood are now facing active efforts by landlords to oust them from their buildings. The gentrification that took place 40 years ago was both detrimental and beneficial to the area. While it forced many poor people out or into depressing public “projects,” it also led to a somewhat economically and racially diverse area. Today’s transformation, by contrast, seems to leave little room for anyone but the richest.

Similar changes are affecting every neighborhood in Manhattan. While gentrification in different areas shares a certain set of characteristics, its impact varies according to each neighborhood’s specific characteristics. For instance, though there are similarities, the changes happening on the Upper West Side are not necessarily the same as the changes happening in Harlem, the neighborhood bordering the Upper West Side, just to the northeast. Harlem is an historically African American neighborhood, whereas the Upper West Side has fluctuated in its racial makeup over time. Therefore, the impact of gentrification on Harlem will appear to have heavier racial implications than on the Upper West Side.
Harlem’s early history is quite similar to that of the Upper West Side. The uptown area was fairly undeveloped until the mid-1800s when, with the growth of rapid transit, speculators built new urban housing intended for upper-class whites. But as Lance Freeman explains in his book, There Goes the ‘Hood; Views on Gentrification from the Ground Up, it became clear that developers had over-speculated, and many landlords “found themselves with vacant properties that scarcely began to return their investment.” Freeman explains, “Rather than lose investments, a few landlords turned to another market that was perpetually in search of housing—blacks…Under these circumstances blacks came to enter Harlem in great numbers.”

Harlem and its elegant housing stock, offered residential opportunities that were rarely available to African Americans facing continuous discrimination. Quickly, through the effort of its residents, Harlem began to form into “a mecca for black culture and the black intelligentsia,” as Freeman calls it. With the great migration, which brought millions of African Americans from the Southern states, the neighborhood blossomed. However, it also began to overcrowd due to the restricting boundaries in Upper Manhattan. “If housing discrimination… and the resultant overcrowding were the seeds of Harlem’s future despair,” Freeman explains, “the Great Depression was the sun, air, and water that allowed these seeds to spring forth and recast Harlem from the city on a hill for blacks to a slum community.”

A population already subject to prejudice in the job market was left with few occupational options in the 1930s during the Great Depression. The world that gave

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178 Ibid, 17
rise to the artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance entered an era of decline. Even after World War II, when the city was building new housing, Freeman points out that, “there was virtually no private investment in Harlem in the postwar period, and this translated into a steadily deteriorating and aging housing stock. By 1969 only 9 percent of Harlem’s housing stock had been built since 1940, and the bulk of this housing was likely to be public housing that served to further concentrate poor and disadvantaged households.” 180

Harlem took each of the city’s downturns harder than other neighborhoods and when an economic recession struck the city in the 1970s, “Harlem lost nearly a third of its population. Like other depressed communities, commercial enterprises followed this out migration.” 181 After having suffered abandonment and disinvestment, the crack epidemic of the 1980s was even more detrimental to the neighborhood. However, in the last part of the century, the city’s economy began to heal and each neighborhood, Harlem included, saw changes that were received with both skepticism and welcome.

Lance Freeman’s book mainly examines the effects of gentrification in Harlem by using the reactions of long time residents as his primary guide. It is incorrect to assume that the reactions residents have to gentrification will be simple or unanimous. “If gentrification were a movie character,” Freeman writes, “he would be both villain and knight in shining armor, welcome[d] by some and feared and loathed by others, and even dreaded and welcomed at the same time by the same people.” 182

In an article co-written by Lance Freeman and Frank Braconi, the authors

181 Ibid, 71.
182 Ibid, 61.
argue that gentrification does not necessarily cause massive displacement in most areas, though past scholarship and neighborhood residents often describe it that way. “If it proceeds without widespread displacement,” they write, “gentrification also offers the opportunity to increase socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic integration.”\(^{183}\) In this case it is unclear, however, whether integration is taking place or whether isolated enclaves are forming next to and within each other.

For example, as the city’s economy has recuperated, real estate developers have jumped at the chance to take control of Harlem and its abandoned houses. Columbia’s efforts to take land in West Harlem have provoked mixed, but often guarded reactions. “Most of us are not against the university expanding; I welcome that,” one resident told the *New York Times*, “‘but they have this all-or-nothing attitude[.]’”\(^ {184}\)

As I have written this thesis, it seems that every week the news tells the story of a community stronghold that has been forced to close because of gentrification. The article, “Harlem Mainstay Survived Riots, but Falls to Renewal” tells the story of a restaurant that shut down after almost 50 years because of a decline in customers. The owner says that the loss of business was due to the fact that black families have been forced to move out and the white families that are taking their place don’t like his food.\(^ {185}\)


In addition to the city’s improving financial situation, a number of factors have allowed for gentrification to rapidly intensify. A trend of “suburbanization,” is taking place all over the city (which, as is clear from the previous chapter, is actually nothing new). More substantially, however, many of the postwar protections from the free market economy that were put in place for the working- and middle-class are now threatened or disappearing. One factor is that rent controls are vanishing. Another is that housing that was built with the specific intention of providing homes for the middle-class is in jeopardy. Lastly, large private institutions, like Columbia University, are influencing the housing market and using eminent domain\textsuperscript{186} to take over land that was previously deemed ‘undesirable,’ (to those who did not live on it), or condemned as ‘slums’ in the mid-twentieth century. The loss of each of these tenant protections is having a severe impact on the city, its housing stock and its residents.

\textbf{Rent Control}

Rent control is one of the most famous federal protections instituted in the 1940s. When rents rose because of the housing shortage during the Second World War, the government elected to institute the Emergency Price Control Act, which froze rents at their 1943 levels. After the war, the Act expired and Congress enacted the Federal Housing and Rent Act of 1947. “Under this Law,” one history of rent legislation states, “new construction after February 1, 1947 was totally exempted

\footnote{\textsuperscript{186} Eminent domain refers to the power of a local, state or federal government to seize land for public use such as building a school or railroad. However, “[i]n recent years ‘public good’ has been expanded to include private economic developments which use eminent domain seizures to enable commercial development for the purpose of generating more tax revenue for the local government.” (http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/domain.html.) This is why Columbia University can seize land.}
from controls while pre-1947 buildings remained subject to continuing regulation."\textsuperscript{187}

Over the next few decades, some laws were passed that led to massive decontrolling of rents and some laws implemented new controls. Overall, Rent Stabilization, which was introduced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, limited annual rent increases and “incorporated an automatic mechanism for periodic rent adjustments. An adjustment feature was soon added to the rent control system in order to preserve, maintain and improve this older housing stock.”\textsuperscript{188}

Though rent controls have been altered over the years, their postwar purpose remains in tact but has been subject to constant scrutiny by economists and landlords. One article’s title explains a particular qualm that some people have with the program: “Rent Control Must Go; Touted as a program for the poor, it has actually served as an enormous subsidy for the middle-class. In the process… it has helped to destroy New York.”\textsuperscript{189} It is often the case that Rent Control is loved by those who can live in the apartments because of it – my family included – and hated by landlords who are forced to keep their rents below market rates.

If a fair assessment of maintenance costs deems that the landlord is spending more on the building, a rent increase is legitimate. But when land values increase, landlords of unregulated apartments are free to charge higher rents even if their maintenance costs are not increasing. Why landlords should be entitled to take a larger portion of a tenant’s salary simply because free market theory advocates it, I do

\textsuperscript{187} Joseph A. D’Agosta, Deputy Commissioner for Rent Administration, \textit{Rent Regulation After 50 Years; An Overview of New York State’s Rent Regulated Housing}, New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal, 1993, 3.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid, 5.
not understand. While it is true that there are people who are not in the lowest income bracket who benefit from rent controls, market rents would prohibit even these people from continuing to live in New York. Arguments against rent control often reflect a bigger prejudice. The article just cited makes such callous remarks about who is entitled to live in the city that it discredits itself by arguing that the city should, in fact, be reserved for an elite group:

“Rent Control abolition will probably help the more stable areas of New York for a very crude reason: The increased rents will make it more difficult for the poor to penetrate. Since the landlords will have to compete for tenants, more money will certainly be spent on maintenance. What will be the effect on the tenants? Most will probably pay the new rent grudgingly and will have less to spend on other things…More important, high rents in New York City will certainly encourage some families to leave the city and others will not move in. This out-migration is probably desirable. New York should plan for a much smaller population….We can expect the complaint that driving the ‘middle-classes’ from the city will be a terrible loss. Some claim that these people are the ‘lifeblood’ of the city. Quite bluntly, we can do without those elements of the middle-classes who have demanded endless subsidies and other “social programs” that ultimately benefit them. But what about the poor? In a considerable sense, concern about housing the poor in New York today is rather like worrying about the accommodations in steerage while the ship is floundering. Precious little can be done for the poor if the entire city is poor.” 190 (Italics mine)

The argument that the poor and middle-class demand constant assistance from the city is untrue. Having every class of people contributes to the cultural diversity of the city, but even more importantly, New York, or any other city, simply cannot function if inhabited only by the wealthy. What I see happening today is that working-, middle-, and upper-middle-class tenants are all facing the end of their regulated rent status and desperately grappling to remain in the city they have invested in for so many years. A city belonging to only one economic class, whether

190 Ibid, 155.
the richest or the poorest, would lack many of the qualities that attract people to New York today.

The argument over rent regulation can be extensive and heated. Each part of city life relies on other parts and a change in one area impacts the quality of life in another, not to mention that the health of a diverse population is crucial to the maintenance of a city. For example, one New York Times article explains that crises in public housing affect the private housing market as well, “the public abandonment of neighborhoods- encourages the private abandonment of buildings.” Healthy public housing helps the private housing sector.

While I believe heterogeneity is desirable in New York, I was surprised to find that not everyone my age deemed it pertinent to the city’s health. What follows are excerpts from a conversation I had over the internet with a person who lives on the Upper West Side who I know from Junior High School.

Friend: So your thesis is about the gentrification of our neighborhood, are you positing that it's good or bad?
Me: bad… [To keep it simple]
Friend: hrm
Me: do you think it’s a good thing?
Friend: well, my apartment is now worth close to 1.5 mill and my parents bought it for 90k
Me: oh, you guys own it, we rent, there's a difference.
Friend: And I walked back from Columbia at 4am last night without blinking an eye.

--This person immediately links the rising value of his parent's property with an increase in safety in the area near Columbia.--

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Me: I'm not trying to say that I wish we could go back to a time of crack addicts and crime.

*Friend*: *Yea but you really can’t have it both ways.*

Me: I don't believe that.

*Friend*: *It can’t really be safe and cheap. The bottom line is that you have to respect competitive market forces when it comes to prices.*

--The idea that an area cannot be safe if it is not upper-class dismisses many of the communities that have made New York great for centuries. The immediate jump to market forces being the “bottom line” simplifies the argument about land values and whether or not an area is safe. It negates all other influences often responsible for the correlation between crime and poverty. To see market forces as a law of nature also ignores specific demands of the people living in cities. --

Me: why?

*Friend*: *Cause otherwise some one's being screwed.*

Me: Poor people are being screwed.

*Friend*: *Not really.*

Me: The ones who can’t afford to just move around, get displaced.

*Friend*: *Is that the worst thing in the world?*

Me: For them!!

*Friend*: *Why? If they can’t afford to live in a place, doesn’t it make sense for them to move?*

Me: If they are living somewhere and they have other kinds of investments in a place besides money –”market forces” shouldn't simply force them to uproot their entire lives.

*Friend*: *I mean, it seems to me that life might be harder for them if they're living beyond their means.*

Me: Then there should be protections in place that allow them to live within their means.

*Friend*: *Also, why would a landlord rent out a property for the long term to someone if it's going to be rent controlled. Communism doesn’t work.*

Me: Because he [the landlord] should earn a living that is reasonable for a person - not an extravagant profit while the tenants are forced to pay the very most that he can decide to charge. I’m not arguing for communism.

*Friend*: *I dunno, government subsidies, redistribution of property.*

Me: Not even redistribution - allowing people who are already in a place to remain there. It’s not even the ‘poorest’ people. I wouldn't be able to live in NY if
my apartment wasn't rent controlled and both my parents earn a good living.

--He went on to say that his dad was moving out of the city when his rent control expired and that he could have chosen to stay in the city but was instead choosing to move to Westchester. --

Me: But a lot of people couldn’t [have that choice] and what does that mean for the city? The whole reason New York is a place people want to live is because of its history.
Friend: No, they want to live here because it's the financial capital of the world.
Me: I guess it depends who you ask.

I realized that I never really thought of New York as the financial capital of the world and this was the main point on which my friend and I differed. Many of the differing views on rent control reflect differing views on who deserves to live in the city’s apartments. Recently, the city seems to cater to wealthy singles and families with suburban ideals. Although New York has long been available to the “tired…, poor…, huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” unless there are controls like those of the postwar era in place, the Upper West Side will only have space for the wealthy newcomers.

Certainly, signs are appearing that the Upper West Side is experiencing an upper-class migration. Census Data helps illuminate the neighborhood’s changing population. In 1980, on the Upper West Side the median household income was $16,861. By 1990, it was $46,464 and by the last census in 2000, this neighborhood’s median income was $78,066.\(^{193}\) Store after store closed citing increased rents as the cause.

\(^{193}\) U.S. Census Bureau, Census Data for zip code 10024 from [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov), June, 2007.
In November of 2006 I went home for Thanksgiving and learned that that Movie Place, our independent video rental shop, which had “24,000 titles, making it one of New York’s best-stocked video stores; the average Blockbuster carries only about 5,000 films,” was closing after 22 years because of a rent hike. I ran over there armed with cupcakes, my camera and a few questions. I found a melancholy group of workers behind stacks of DVDs that had already been taken off shelves. The store not only supplied the neighborhood with videos but employed local high school students to make home deliveries.

8. Above the exterior of The Movie Place on 106th Street and Broadway. Below the interior of the store that is now closed.

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A New York Times article that covered the story put into print what everyone had been mumbling, “The Upper West Side is suffering through a spasm of late-stage gentrification, with many of its restaurants, shops and grocers replaced by bank branches and chain drugstores. Mr. Dennis [the owner] … declared: ‘Our neighborhood is becoming a punch line. You walk down Broadway, and it's a Flintstones background: Duane Reade, wireless place, Duane Reade, wireless place.’”195

Petitions went around the neighborhood to protest the closing of the store, and the community showed a tremendous amount of support for its owner. Still, stores and restaurants that have been staples of the area are disappearing in a seemingly unstoppable sweep. The examples are endless. In February of 2008 Jennifer B. Lee reported that, “Cafe La Fortuna, a beloved three-decade-old cafe that drew John Lennon, Yoko Ono and other Upper West Side residents with its garden, opera music and Italian desserts,” closed because of a rent increase. The owner explained that,

195 Ibid.
“[t]o survive, we would have had to charge $10 for a cup of coffee.”¹⁹⁶ Residents and businesses are both being impacted by one critical factor: rent. As the Upper West Side gets more posh, rents skyrocket and the cycle repeats itself. Banks on every corner are ugly and impersonal, but only these corporations seem able to pay the unregulated rents.

As I walked home on West End Avenue, leaving the Movie Place behind for the last time, I looked up and saw something equally disturbing. Towering over the pre-war buildings of the neighborhood, which often stand at around 15 stories, were two massive skyscrapers under construction on Broadway. These shiny new apartments complete with subzero refrigerators, were built to attract wealthy, young, singles and married couples, many of whom work in finance. These towers have had a drastic impact on the residential neighborhood, changing it from a small scale low rise neighborhood into one resembling midtown.¹⁹⁷ I began noticing the new tenants in the elevator of my own building – young, wealthy, blond and cold – and the changes have hit home, literally.

¹⁹⁷ Last summer the New York Times did a piece on these two towers called, “High Anxiety: As their skyline soars, Upper West Siders fret that the small-scale, low-rise feel of their streets will be forever cast into deep and daunting shadow.” June 17, 2007, City Section.
9. These towers loom over the older buildings, both casting shadows over them and blinding neighborhood residents with their cold reflective surfaces.

**Middle Income Housing Stock**

The notorious Park West Village project was, for years, middle income housing with rent stabilized apartments. In 1983 a “major developer in New York City [began] efforts to convert to condominiums part of the Park West Village development on the Upper West Side.”\(^{198}\) This meant that tenants would own individual apartments rather than renting them from a landlord. This was a controversial move on the part of the developer Helmsley-Spear Inc. because, as officials of the tenants association said, “the conversion would violate the project’s 1952 agreement with the city.”\(^{199}\) This agreement specified that in order to acquire the Federal subsidies that gave the original developers a discounted price for the land, there could be no changes in the property’s use for 40 years without approval from

^{199} Ibid, B6.
the City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate. In 1989, however, the apartments were converted to condominiums after lawyers claimed that it was unclear that developers did in fact need city approval. The original contract also required the provision of “rental” housing, but in 1981 this word was changed to “residential” which included condominiums. This exemplifies the vulnerable position of tenants in privately owned establishments. Apartments in the neighborhood have come into high demand, and the housing that was developed to retain the city’s middle-class is disappearing.

A second legal vehicle for controlling rents, the 1969 Rent Stabilization law, “provided for a Rent Guidelines Board with the power to establish levels of rent increases for renewal leases and new tenancies.” This gave power to the state legislature to adjust rent laws. The Rent Guidelines Board is composed of 9 members chosen by the Mayor; two who represent tenants, two for landlords, and 5 on behalf of the public. The Metropolitan Council on Housing website explains that, “In practice, the public members have tended to come from the business, financial and real estate sectors -- and tend to be pro-landlord.” The site continues, “As a result, for decades the RGB has not acted to preserve affordability when it comes to setting rent adjustments. Every year, the RGB has voted to increase rents - even in years when costs for landlords went down.” According to a 2005 Housing and Vacancy survey

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201 D’Agosta, 5.
in New York, real median income in the city is falling, and New York “now has 28.8% of its households paying more than 50% of their income for gross rent.”

Mitchell-Lama housing was built under the Limited Profit Housing Companies Act and provides affordable housing to many New Yorkers. It has also been drastically impacted by the RGB’s votes and many tenants today are fighting not just against rent increases, but also for home rule, which would give the decision making power back to the local government. A New York Times article describes, “Tenant organizers contend that legislators in Albany are insensitive to the interests of New York City renters and are beholden to landlord interests.”

In 2006 the RGB voted for a particularly large rent increase, ignoring the “growing concern about the ability of the middle-class to afford to live in New York City.” A New York Times Op-Ed ran in 2008 stating that, “This month, researchers at New York University released a report finding that the number of apartments considered affordable to hundreds of thousands of moderate-income households, like those of starting firefighters and police officers, had plunged by nearly a fifth from 2002 to 2005.”

The article explains that a lot of Mitchell-Lama housing has been, or will be, deregulated. Landlords are opting out of the program, which can make “renters paying $1,000 a month… [see] their rent soar to as much as $5,200.” The piece aptly assesses, “That’s not a rent increase. That’s an eviction notice.” Some landlords

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203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
argue that there are tenants who could afford to move elsewhere but are clinging to their apartments. “In some cases this is true,” the Op-Ed retorts, “[b]ut most of the residents in Mitchell-Lama apartments really need their rooms. By shoving their rent up to what the rest of the market can bear, owners could be shoving these tenants on the streets or, more likely, out of the city.”208

In the summer of 2007 I went to the annual Rent Guidelines Board Hearing, where rent adjustments are decided. This meeting is open to the public.

10. When I arrived a crowd was gathered outside of the Great Hall at Cooper Union, carrying signs, making speeches and protesting the Board’s expected vote to increase rents.
11. In the center of the crowd stood a large report card with Mayor Bloomberg’s name on it and a series of grades for different categories. That day, before New York Public schools would be giving out report cards to the city’s students, Bloomberg received an overall “F” for housing.

The crowd of people passed through metal detectors and bag inspections to watch the nine people who were about to make a vote that would impact many New Yorker’s immediate future. While it was inspiring to see the mix of people who were present, once the proceedings began their efforts began to look futile.
The tenant groups protested loudly as vote after vote went against their interests. One representative on the Board argued that the expenses of the landlords demanded a rent increase, and a chant of “blah, blah, blah” rose from the crowd. One person yelled, “Shame on you!” and as the meeting continued, police slowly moved to stand in between the stage and the people seated in the auditorium. The people protesting were not there simply to cause a ruckus, but were there to demand deep consideration for the tenants whose lives would be affected. Adriene Holder, who is on the Board and argued for a zero percent rent increase, held everyone’s attention as she argued that the “[o]ne size fits all approach has to change.” She even said that the “written Guidelines Board is part of the problem.” She was referring to the fact that the Board has “voted for rent increases every year since its inception in 1965.” The Board also has a history of overestimating landlord’s operating and maintenance costs. The crowd took to their feet, chanting, “No repairs, no increase.”

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The end result of the meeting was, in fact, an increase. A New York Times article reported the next day that, it “voted 5 to 4 to allow increases of 5.75 percent on two-year leases and 3 percent on one-year leases.”\textsuperscript{211} Although this increase was not as large as the year before, it was significant, putting that many more tenants close to the $2,000 rent decontrol cap. Reforming rent laws to protect lower income tenants need not imply a resistance to new construction and a revamped city, “Everybody wants New York to thrive, to build to the skies, to nurture the glamorous people who make the city sparkle,” the New York Times Op-Ed states, “But the last thing the city needs is to become an oasis for the rich with no affordable places for teachers or police officers or firefighters or secretaries or nurses or ordinary folks. That is not a real city. It is a wealthy ghetto.”\textsuperscript{212}

The disappearance of affordable housing protections threatens a large part of New York’s population. As the apartment becomes more desirable, it is becoming available only to an increasingly exclusive group. The apartment itself has not become a more attractive space; in fact many newer buildings are often of a lesser quality. Their walls are thinner, rooms are smaller, and ceilings are lower. But as the neighborhoods around apartments become more appealing, the two become a package and consumers not only buy a living space, but a living experience.

For example, the Trump Place apartments have an almost comical way of advertising the lifestyle that is available to their tenants:

\textit{At Trump Place, you'll experience contemporary living with top-of-the-line, sumptuously-appointed interiors and unparalleled beauty.}


Linger over a glass of wine and watch the sun sink behind the majestic Palisades Cliffs from your terrace retreat. Snip a few sprigs from your windowsill herb garden, then whip up a champagne brunch in the fully-equipped gourmet kitchen--complete with granite countertops and stainless steel appliances.

Indulge in luxuries and amenities unsurpassed…

Experience Trump Place, the pinnacle of luxury high-rise living and the rich cosmopolitan lifestyle only New York City can offer!213

In this way, apartment living is a privilege and a commodity in itself.

Columbia University

Not only is it becoming difficult to find an affordable apartment, but people also fear they will lose their homes to powerful private institutions. Columbia University, an historic perpetuator of neighborhood imperialism, sits just north of the Upper West Side, in an area called Morningside Heights (110th-125th Street). Columbia has a tremendous influence on each neighborhood that it borders. In 1897214 the school moved its main campus to 116th street which, at that time, was still fairly rural and detached from the city. Since then, the school has grown considerably, adding another campus further uptown, and recently, after years of proposals, it has received approval to expand further into West Harlem.

Columbia University has historically resisted fully integrating itself with the surrounding community. It has, instead, acted in two extreme ways; either remaining

completely cut off from its neighbors or taking over their land and apartments and eviction them to build university facilities. In an article from 1988, one man describes his first glimpse of the campus in 1957 as a vision, “literally, of a city on a hill: I had taken the wrong subway line, landed in the middle of Harlem, and threaded my way up through the same dangerous park terrain that was later the site of the proposed gym. But on the campus itself I seemed to enter another world. The classical dome and majestic Greek columns of Low Library seemed to symbolize the life of the mind itself.”

Besides being an elite school with a campus set apart from the neighborhood, Columbia often struggled with its neighbors to control space. Many nearby residents feel that the school infiltrates and overpowers everything it touches.

This pattern extends back historically. In 1964, “A 10-year plan for the renewal of a 92-block section of Manhattan’s upper West Side surrounding Columbia University was revealed … at City Hall.” This plan basically expounded Columbia’s intent to completely redesign the Upper West Side. The plan, in its enormous scope, never came to fruition, but even its proposal was audacious.

At times the turmoil of the city penetrated the ivied gates. The most famous conflict between Columbia and its non-affiliated neighbors, happened in 1968, when the University was set to construct a gymnasium. Not surprisingly, as Robert McCaughey explains in his history of the school Stand Columbia, it was Robert Moses who suggested to Dean Courtney Brown in 1959, “that the university seek

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permission from the city to build its new gym in Morningside Park.”^{217} Because
Columbia did not have the funds necessary for the project, its construction was
delayed multiple times after its approval. Meanwhile the political atmosphere began
to change, and in the 1960s the nation’s youth became organized in both supporting
the Civil Rights Movement and protesting the Vietnam War. By April of 1968,
Columbia’s plans no longer looked politically and socially benign. Not only did the
construction involve seizing land from current neighborhood residents, but the
proposed gym was set to have one entrance for the students and a separate entrance
for the public.

Residents and students protested and rioted over Columbia’s policies, which a
large part of the community considered racist. One Community Action Committee
was quoted in the *New York Times* as writing, “‘Columbia and other institutions in
our community have deliberately forced the removal of almost every black, Puerto
Rican and oriental (except those officially affiliated with the university) from
Morningside Heights, thus turning it into a white ghetto.’”^{218} The Committee
demanded that Columbia “‘irrevocably relinquish all claims to Morningside Park,
repair all the damage already done to that park, restore the ballpark to the community
and restore the park exactly according to the wishes of the community.’”^{219}

The protests also centered on the school’s attempts to create a campus that
was impenetrable to the community. The article explains, “The group’s demands also
included the return of College Walk—the thoroughfare between Amsterdam Avenue

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^{217} McCaughey, Robert A, Stand, Columbia; a History of Columbia University in the City of New
^{218} Lawrence Van Gelder, “Columbia Students Help Occupy Flats Run by University,” *New York
Times*, May 18, 1968, 1.
^{219} Ibid, 1.
and Broadway at 116th Street—to the city as a public street, and removal of all fences separating the community from the campus.”

While students and residents succeeded in stopping the construction of the gym, the experience shook the campus to its core and became a radicalizing moment for many college activists.

Columbia’s financial health depended on the city’s health, and when the city faced financial crisis in the 1970s, the university felt the effects. Conversely, when the neighborhood recovered later in the century, the campus profited. “As the fortunes of New York City and its Upper West Side recovered from the depths of the 1970’s, Columbia’s location in the big city became an asset, not a liability,” Morris Dickstein writes. Soon, “[t]he school grew especially attractive to suburban kids bored by the homogeneity of the world they’d grown up in.”

Today, Columbia is an ever growing force on the Upper West Side. Plans are underway for a 17-acre expansion called Manhattanville. “Many businesses and residents…would be relocated under the plan,” one article discloses. For some, the obligatory removal of residents and Columbia’s promise “that they will be placed in situations equal to or better than the ones they leave” sounds eerily similar to Robert Moses’ urban renewal plans. It is clear that the neighborhood is wary of Columbia’s expansion, so the university is attempting to pre-empt criticism and curb any skepticism that may be left over from the riots of 1968.

With the current political atmosphere, and the city’s disposition towards gentrification, Columbia has been met with less resistance than in the past. The University’s webpage has a regularly updated schedule of briefings and tours of the

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220 Ibid, 1.
new Manhattanville area. The school has put an enormous amount of effort into publicizing the beneficial impact its expansion will have on the Upper West Side and West Harlem. Faculty, staff, and students, receive numerous emails inviting them to events where they can learn about the expansion.223

It is logical that the school’s efforts to reduce apprehension about its growth focus intensely on its own students and its faculty members – many of whom were likely college age when the riots took place in 1968. For, fifty years ago, it was the protests of students – generally wealthy, white and non-native to the neighborhood – who brought the media’s attention to the project’s discriminating policies and forced the school to shut down construction. This begs the question: Does the University have a more genuine attitude towards integrating the neighborhood? Or is it that their potentially most powerful opposition simply less concerned?

People have begun to flock to the Upper West Side with certain expectations already in mind. These expectations have formed in various ways that should be familiar to us from the first two chapters.

New Reality and New Fiction; the Media

In the last 60 years, television has dramatically shaped America’s perceptions of the apartment. TV has served to both mirror and distort city dwellers’ living conditions and lifestyles. As always, stereotypes continue to dominate the portrayal of New York City.

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223 Email forwarded from David Rosner to author, originally sent from Office of Communications and Public Affairs at Columbia University. February, 2008.
In 1996 the *New York Times* published an article that examined the realism of New York’s TV characters’ housing. It stated that, “In the 1950’s, on ‘The Honeymooners,’ the Kramdens appeared to live in a large, ugly kitchen in Brooklyn, the best they could afford…”\(^{224}\) The setting was economically realistic, and the show portrayed the Kramdens as the stereotype of people who lived in the city – the childless pair who could not afford to move to the suburbs or were too ignorant to follow the rest of the white working class.

Recent television shows have also emphasized that the typical American family does not live in apartments. We still see that single people are the most popular subjects of city-based sitcoms. However, they are not the malcontent, social outcasts that singles were portrayed as in the 1950s. These new characters have *chosen* to postpone married life in order to afford a carefree life in the city. These singles are not stigmatized by the television networks but idolized by their audience. The women on *Sex and the City*, for example, are exalted for their independence.

The apartment setting plays a dramatic role in shaping the lives of these young, hip, and sexy characters. The young, urban professionals on today’s sitcoms live in roomy, chic apartments. Unlike *The Honeymooners*, which mainly took place in a barren kitchen, *Sex and the City* focuses on the highly sexualized bedroom of each of the women’s apartments. The apartment is no longer shown as a dark, dirty, asexual space but a bright, trendy, and sexually alive place. While these sitcom apartments seem to cultivate intimacy, they also limit it. The characters, though single, are in constant search of camaraderie: they go on dates, frequent bars and forge alternative families. They are each looking to fend off the loneliness cities can elicit.

As the city gentrified, so did the television shows about it. Today’s sitcoms about New York focus on a frivolous and fashionable lifestyle; their characters are mostly childless, unmarried young people. When the city was in an economic depression and its population was less affluent, these shows would have been dismissed as too unrealistic. As cities have gentrified and become desirable places for young people to live, TV shows have not only adapted, but have added their own elements of fantasy.

The show *Friends* makes numerous outlandish claims, including that “a coffee-bar waitress and an unemployed assistant chef…are mysteriously able to afford their funky but spacious Greenwich Village apartment with terrace.”225 Characters on *Seinfeld* do not even lock their doors “so the zany next-door neighbor can barge in, without tempo-slowing buzzers and bells.”226 These situations could not have existed when both the city and the idea of single adulthood were articulated as deviant.

Thus, despite the apartment’s newfound trendiness, the suggestion that it is best suited for unattached singles persists. Consequently, like all stages of life, singleness must come to an end. The first of the women on *Sex and the City* to purchase a ‘true’ home is Miranda, who plays a lawyer. After the birth of her son, she decides to move to a house in Brooklyn. She struggles with giving up her Manhattan-centric ideology but realizes that her fashionable single life is a thing of the past. In the television series *Friends*, two of the main characters are married towards the end of the show. After they have twin babies, they decide to move to the suburbs. The last

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episode of the series mainly revolves around their saying good bye to the apartment which has also been the central set. The characters ceremoniously leave their keys behind for the landlord, realizing that each of them has, at one point, lived in the apartment. The group leaves the empty space to go and have their last cup of coffee in their main hang-out, Central Perk. They have all grown up, and we assume that they will go on to form families, move out of their apartments, and stop hanging out at the coffee shop.

In addition to reflecting the trends and re-enforcing the stereotypes of city living, contemporary sitcoms are actually reshaping what it means to live in New York. It is impossible to know when reality is shaping fiction and when fiction is shaping reality, but it is clear that the relationship between the two has become stronger and the line between fictive and real New York has become increasingly blurred. Many New Yorkers find *Seinfeld* amusing because the situations are ‘so true.’ On the other hand, millions of people watch *Sex and the City* and yearn to live like Sarah Jessica Parker’s character, in a largely fictionalized version of New York. No one in her ‘New York’ takes the subway or wears the same outfit twice. Still, this romantic image of the city draws wealthy young people to New York who hope to mimic a very specific lifestyle. Thus, the fantastical elements that these shows give New York have actually influenced the city in real life.

Some shows encapsulate distinctly realistic New York experiences. For example, one episode of *Seinfeld* comically reveals the trials of trying to get a nice apartment. The character George must compete with someone for a recently vacated, roomy co-op. They each try to impress the tenants’ committee by sharing their most
tragic life stories. In the end, however, a third party gets the apartment, simply by giving the landlord 50 dollars. This bribery is hardly unrealistic. What is actually unrealistic is how meager the amount of money is. In interviews with tenants in my building, I have heard accounts of people having to come up with thousands of dollars in cash for the landlord to secure their spot on Riverside Drive.²²⁷

Like real New Yorkers’ lives, shows set in the city often revolve around the characters’ apartments, neighborhoods, and rents. Today, two-thirds²²⁸ of New York’s residents are in the vulnerable position of renting their apartments. An episode of Sex and the City opens with the main character, who is a freelance writer, stating that “New York welcomes and shelters the tired, the poor, the persecuted who have been forced to leave their homes at the whim of a ruling class. Therefore it’s ironic that all Manhattanites face the same horrible uncertainty; knowing that any day they may have to utter the tragic words ‘my building’s going co-op.’”²²⁹ Faced with the fact that she cannot afford to buy her apartment, and the doubts over whether she actually wants to invest in it, another decision confronts her. Her boyfriend, who can afford to buy two apartments and renovate them, proposes that they move in together. As she debates whether she wants to marry him she asks her friends, “‘Maybe this is all happening because my building is going Co-op. Is this a real estate merger? Am I a real estate bride?’” One replies, “‘If there were unlimited apartments in Manhattan we’d all be single forever.’”²³⁰ Renting an apartment, in this case, means single life. And owning two apartments (one would be too small), means married life.

²³⁰ Ibid.
shortage of apartments in the city is actually driving the events of these characters’
lives. Though this is a fictional and somewhat lighthearted upper/middle-class
portrayal of the subject, the threat of losing living space looms over every renting
New Yorker.

Through television, millions of people form concrete ideas about New York
without ever visiting it. Rent struggles that are so real for middle-class New Yorkers
now appear on popular shows, heavily influencing national perceptions. Glamorized
characters who struggle with apartment living on TV receive more attention than the
people who face these struggles in real life. Despite this disjuncture between fiction
and reality, these shows reveal the vulnerability of city life.

While characters on sitcoms face rent woes, regular New Yorkers confront
these issues in reality. Tenants are subject to the whims of a landlord and can be
evicted for a number of reasons, whether economic, social or simply personal. Today,
many landlords make overt attempts to free their property of rent controlled tenants.
On 111th Street a friend of mine is currently living in an apartment that is a veritable
construction zone. As the building renovates every apartment, the current residents
often go without hot water and heat. Moreover, the tenants themselves are divided
over whether or not the building should become co-operatively owned.
Advertisements for the building imply that owning one of its apartments leads to a
high quality of life. One ad sells the neighborhood as much as it sells the small
apartment:

“This property represents a rare & golden opportunity to make a home in this
vibrant neighborhood. The Columbia University area, also known as Morningside
Heights, is rich in services & alive with energy. Start with upscale grocery stores,
a diverse array of restaurants, a music scene at Smoke & big laughs at The underground Comedy Club. Then throw in Riverside Park, a new public library, St. Luke’s Hospital plus easy access to the #1 train, buses & cabs and you’ll wonder why you haven’t moved here sooner.”

The reputation of the neighborhood has been incorporated into real estate advertisements. As the pace of the area’s transformation has sped up in the last year, suddenly my own life faces tremendous change. When my parents learned that, just as they hit their late-sixties, our apartment will lose its rent stabilized status, they began looking at apartments to see if they could afford to buy something. The idea of leaving the city, and even the Upper West Side, was heartbreaking for my father who has spent a large part of his life in the neighborhood; and since the arrival of the news my mother stands marveling at our view of the Hudson River every day. My parents began searching the neighborhood for a place they could afford, and in the mean time I collected real estate ads from them.

Each of the ads promotes the changes happening on the Upper West Side, rather than its history. These promotions are clearly not aimed at old-timers like my parents. One ad claims, “This is a fine home in an area undergoing major new developments and conversions, and new dining and shopping (Whole Foods market is coming to 97th & Columbus) … It’s where everyone wants to be!” The apartments my parents saw were small, but each of their promotional materials emphasized the neighborhood’s appealing qualities: “Choose from a wide variety of grocery stores, gourmet markets and wine stores or dine at one of the local restaurants, with many of the more popular establishments offering outdoor café seating. Columbia University,
Symphony Space, Central or Riverside Park, Hudson River Bike Path and Tennis Courts are nearby. The area offers many excellent public and private schools as well. The appeal of these apartments relies entirely on the reputation of the neighborhood. The ads barely mention the actual apartment and instead focus on the lifestyle that comes with it.

**A Familiar New Frontier**

The city that is always changing faces a new frontier today. New Yorkers glamorize the past and newcomers glamorize the present. Reality and fiction intermingle on TV and in people’s imaginations. Most apartments constructed today are meant for the upper-class. Because the wealthy now see New York as an appealing place to live, even the middle-class now struggles to stay where they are. As the city appeals to a growing number of single people, it becomes less available to the middle-class families it once sought so hard to keep.

Apartments are in some ways designed to insulate the wealthy from the city around them, as they were in the early twentieth century. New buildings have gyms, spas, grocery stores, valet service, and even restaurants within the confines of the property. But these apartments are no longer required to convince a class of people to live in them so they are often designed, as they were in the postwar period, to pack a large number of families into each building. Hence, apartments are not nearly as expansive as they were in the late 19th century. Now that the city is a commodity in

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itself, the apartment’s new high demand has changed how it is constructed, how it is
used and what it symbolizes.

Is this just another phase in the life of the city? Or is it a losing battle that will
leave the city only to the richest? If rent protections disappear, will the middle- and
working-class completely vanish? This leaves many people wondering how much of
a role New York’s past should play in its future. Is “brand new” what the city should
be?
Conclusion

Apartments have been accepted as appropriate housing for New York’s affluent, poor, and middle-class. At different times they have earned a reputation for being tasteless, dangerous and impersonal, but also classic, elegant, and unique.

While the very richest in New York do still tend to live in brownstones, the New York Times recently reported that the price of Manhattan’s apartments have hit a record high. Though the national housing market is facing a crisis, “so far, wealthy Wall Street executives and foreign buyers have stayed in the market [in Manhattan], paying record prices in a range of buildings.” And prices remain high. “The average price of a Manhattan apartment in the first three months of this year was $1.7 million, up 33.5 percent from the same period last year,” the article reports.

While New York City grows ever more popular for the rich, other signs point to the fact that the city is simply becoming too expensive for many people. Columbia University, a major influence in bringing a richer population to the Upper West Side, is now dealing with the difficult situation of a competitive housing market: new and younger faculty are reluctant to move to New York because the housing is so expensive. Columbia, consequently, must offer higher salaries to get new faculty to move to the city.

As my parents try to plan for a new stage in their life, they do so amidst the changing life of the city. Since rising rents may cause them to move, my brother and I may need to say goodbye to our childhood residence. Like Baxter in The Apartment,

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235 Email from David Rosner to author. February, 2008.
it seems that leaving the apartment symbolizes our growing up – and growing *apart* from our home. The apartment is taking on a new relevance in the city, and so it will take on a new relevance in our life. One day someone else will move into our space on Riverside Drive. If she can stay on the Upper West Side, my mother will not have the space to run her practice, and the traditions we have with our neighbors will, at the very least, change. My brother and I will decide if New York is a place where we can and wish to make a life.

Nobody’s acceptance of, or resistance to, change is completely right or wrong, and class tensions have everything to do with how transformations are perceived. The nature of a city is to change and there will always be a strain between the new and the old. It is the responsibility of the city’s citizens to mediate these tensions, sometimes fighting change and sometimes accepting it. But a city’s population is its livelihood, and the city must also find ways to accommodate its diverse and changing population. With careful consideration, we must decide what is worth fighting for.


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