

HELP ?

New York's 10 worst landlords: Steve Croman

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Steve **Croman**, an aggressive young landlord who has bought buildings on Mott and Mulberry Streets, is one of New York City's worst. He is trying to drive the tenants from their buildings to make way for residents who can pay higher rents.

Full Text:

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One of the first things Steve Croman did after purchasing a row of buildings on Mott Street last year was to crash the tenants' association meeting. The wiry, unshaven landlord showed up with a wide smile and plenty of promises. He even brought his wife, Harriet, and his dog, a Jack Russell terrier named Eddie. Schmoozing with his new tenants, Croman assured them he had no drastic plans for their building.

It wasn't long before the tenants realized that this was a lie. What Croman really wanted was for all of them to move out. Croman may be only 31 years old, but he has already earned a reputation among his tenants as an aggressive landlord. Over the last two years, he snatched up buildings on Mott and Mulberry Streets. Croman then launched a full-scale campaign to drive tenants from their rent-regulated homes.

Boutiques, art galleries, and pricey restaurants have popped up recently in and among the 100-year-old tenements lining Little Italy and the northern parts of Chinatown-neighborhoods that are beginning to earn the trendy moniker NoLiTa. But where Croman is concerned, this tale of gentrification has a dark side.

After Croman renovates his empty apartments, the rents skyrocket. Along the way, this brash young landlord is helping to redefine the face of these neighborhoods: pushing out struggling artists and immigrants to make way for investment bankers and corporate lawyers. And Croman is proving that a landlord need not turn his building into a crack den or physically assault his tenants in order to turn their lives upside down. Croman declined to comment, saying he was too busy to be interviewed for this story.

One of the landlord's targets is Jelon Vieira, the artistic director of DanceBrazil, a respected Afro-Brazilian dance company. Vieira, 45, pays \$700 a month for a two-bedroom apartment at 252 Mott Street, where he lives with his 16-year-old son. Vieira says Croman tried to get him to leave by offering him \$5000, then \$15,000. When Vieira refused, Croman cranked up the pressure.

According to Vieira, his landlord has called him more than 30 times over the last few months to pester him about moving. Croman has even showed up at the choreographer's office to try to persuade him in person. Vieira is often away on tour and sometimes has friends house-sit. Now Croman is using this against him, trying to evict Vieira by claiming he sublet the apartment.

Croman's smarmy, duplicitous style can be even more unnerving than his persistence. "He calls you like you're his best friend," says Vieira. "[He asks,] 'How are you? How's your health?' " When The New

York Times gave DanceBrazil a glowing review last fall, Croman phoned Vieira to offer his congratulations-and to exhort him to move out. About Croman's behavior, Vieira says, "It's disturbed me to the point where I can't really concentrate on my work."

Vieira grows exasperated when asked what he thinks about the effect of his landlord's behavior. "This is about kicking the poor people out of Manhattan-the blacks, the Hispanics," Vieira claims. "Croman talks to you-if you have an accent or are black or Hispanic-as if you're stupid. One day he came to me and said, you have to move out because I'm saying so; the judge has ordered it." (Vieira says Croman's court action against him is still unresolved.)

Croman's tenants who do not speak English may be the most vulnerable to his manipulative tactics. Virtually all of the residents in Croman's building at 234 Mott Street are immigrants from China or Hong Kong. Some keep shrines to Buddha in their apartments, while others hang oranges next to their doors for good luck. Since Croman took over the 21-unit building in 1996, tenants say, he has emptied about one-third of the apartments.

Chao Chang Huang, 50, moved into the building with his three children and wife in 1987. A former restaurant worker who now suffers from kidney failure, Huang pays \$534.91 a month for an apartment with two tiny bedrooms. Croman tried to entice Huang to leave with an offer of \$5000, but the tenant refused to go, then filed a harassment complaint with a state agency. Now Huang is the last resident left on his floor. "I don't feel it's right of him to ask me to leave," Huang says through a Cantonese translator "My wife picked up cans on the street to pay the initial cost of moving in."

Croman has not given up on the Huangs, however. He has brought eviction proceedings against them, claiming they have too many people living in the apartment. And the Huangs' teenage daughter, Stephanie, says Croman badgers her every time he bumps into her on the street. "Why aren't you guys moving? Your apartment is so small-it's not fit for you," the landlord says to her. "Why don't you translate for me and tell your parents I'm willing to pay?"

A walk through the Huangs' building offers glimpses of rotting floorboards, a poorly lit hallway, collapsing ceilings, and trash strewn outside the basement. Last summer, a housing inspector cited the building for 135 violations. Croman made some repairs after the tenants' association brought him to court. But the residents continue to complain of sporadic heat and irregular cold and hot water. For three months, the Huangs had only hot water, leading Stephanie to wonder if Croman was purposely letting the problem linger in order to drive out her family. "I'm not sure if they're playing a game or something," she says.

For those who continue to hold out, life becomes even more difficult. Just ask Bill Obrecht. "He invited me into his offices and asked me what did I want to leave this apartment," says Obrecht, 46, whose building at 280 Mulberry Street was taken over by Croman in 1997. "I said, half-jokingly, \$100,000. And he said, 'I'm going to have you evicted because your apartment is worth more to me empty than with you in it.'"

Obrecht has been battling Croman in court ever since. A music teacher at Pratt Institute, Obrecht moved into a small one-bedroom apartment in this 33-unit building in 1979. He pays \$300 in rent, but says he has so far spent \$9500 in attorney fees trying to stave off Croman's eviction efforts. Croman has accused Obrecht of running a sound-studio business out of the apartment, but the tenant says he uses his music equipment solely for his own work. Obrecht has already spent countless hours trekking to housing court, waiting in lines, filing court papers, and meeting with his attorney. The composer devoted so much time to this drudge work that, he says, it felt like it was my job."

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Up-and-coming downtown Manhattan landlord Steve Croman, 31, is pressuring longtime tenants to leave, then replacing them with residents who can pay much steeper rents.

As if this legal fight were not exhausting enough, then the drilling started. In less than six months, Obrecht says, his landlord has emptied 28 of the building's 32 units. As Obrecht's neighbors left, Croman began gutting their abandoned apartments. The pounding of sledgehammers, heavy clouds of dust, and vibrating walls drove out a few more tenants. Obrecht began to feel like he was living in a war zone. One day he looked up above his shower and discovered a huge hole. "You could see the ceiling bulging and you could hear them working with their sledgehammers upstairs," Obrecht says. "And sure enough, it came down."

The interior of Obrecht's building used to look like a classic tenement-part of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* was filmed there-but since Croman has remodeled, it more closely resembles an airport hotel. A new batch of tenants has already moved into the renovated apartments, paying \$2200 for a two-bedroom and \$1600 for a one-bedroom. Yuppies have replaced struggling artists, and Obrecht has spied neighbors sipping Scotch in the hallway.

Despite all he has endured, Obrecht still does not want to leave. "I'm hoping this will be over soon and he'll just give up," says the musician, sounding more resigned than optimistic. "I'm tired of fighting."

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