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REPORT — From the July 2018 issue

The Death of a Once Great City

The fall of New York and the urban crisis of affluence

By [Kevin Baker](#)

New York has been my home for more than forty years, from the year after the city's supposed nadir in 1975, when it nearly went bankrupt. I have seen all the periods of boom and bust since, almost all of them related to the "paper economy" of finance and real estate speculation that took over the city long before it did the rest of the nation. But I have never seen what is going on now: the systematic, wholesale transformation of New York into a reserve of the obscenely wealthy and the barely here—a place increasingly devoid of the idiosyncrasy, the complexity, the opportunity, and the roiling excitement that make a city great.

As New York enters the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is in imminent danger of becoming something it has never been before: unremarkable. It is approaching a state where it is no longer a significant cultural entity but the world's largest gated community, with a few cupcake shops here and there. For the first time in its history, New York is, well, *boring*.

This is not some new phenomenon but a cancer that's been metastasizing on the city for decades now. And what's happening to New York now—what's already happened to most of Manhattan, its core—is happening in every affluent American city. San Francisco is overrun by tech conjurers who are rapidly annihilating its remarkable diversity; they swarm in and out of the metropolis in specially chartered buses to work in Silicon Valley, using the city itself as a gigantic bed-and-breakfast. Boston, which used to be a city of a thousand nooks and crannies, back-alley restaurants and shops, dive bars and ice cream parlors hidden under its elevated, is now one long, monotonous wall of modern skyscraper. In Washington, an army of cranes has transformed the city in recent years, smoothing out all that was real and organic into a town of mausoleums for the Trump crowd to revel in.

By trying to improve our cities, we have only succeeded in making them empty simulacra of what was. To bring this about we have signed on to political scams and mindless development schemes that are so exclusive they are more destructive than all they were supposed to improve. The urban crisis of affluence exemplifies our wider crisis: we now live in an America where we believe that we no longer have any ability to control the systems we live under.



Construction on 57th Street, Billionaires' Row, by Fred R. Conrad

Those of us who have been in New York for any amount of time are immediately suspected of nostalgia if we dare to compare our shiny city of today unfavorably, in any way, with what came before. So let me make one thing perfectly clear, as that old New Yorker Dick Nixon used to say, and list right now all the things I hated about the New York of the Seventies: crime, dirt, days-old garbage left on the street, cockroaches, the Bronx burning, homelessness, discarded hypodermic needles on my building's stoop, discarded crack vials—and packs of burned-out matches—on my building's stoop, cockroaches that scattered everywhere when you turned on the light, entire Brooklyn neighborhoods looking like a bombed-out Dresden, subway cars on which only one door—or no door—opened when the train came in, subway cars cooled in summer rush hours only by a single fan that swung slowly around and around, deindustrialization, those really big cockroaches that we called water bugs for some reason and that crunched under your feet.

New York today—in the aggregate—is probably a wealthier, healthier, cleaner, safer, less corrupt, and better-run city than it has ever been. The same can be said for most of those other cities seen as recent urban success stories, from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, Atlanta to Portland, Oregon. But we don't live in the aggregate. For all of New York's shiny new skin and shiny new numbers, what's most amazing is how little of its social dysfunction the city has managed to eliminate over the past four decades. Homelessness is at or near record levels. The Bronx, poster child for the bleakness of the city in the Seventies, remains the poorest urban county in the

country, with almost 40 percent of the South Bronx, or more than a quarter-million people, still living below the poverty line. Bus-stop ads all over New York urge everyone to carry the emergency medication naloxone so that they can reverse some of the overdoses that kill nearly four New Yorkers every day.

The average New Yorker now works harder than ever, for less and less. Poverty in the city has lessened somewhat in the past few years, but in 2016 the official poverty rate was still 19.5 percent, or nearly one in every five New Yorkers. When the “near poverty” rate—those making up to \$47,634 a year for a family of four—is thrown in, it means that almost half the city is living what has become a marginal existence, just one paycheck away from disaster. By comparison, the city’s poverty rate in 1970—in the wake of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty—was just 11.5 percent. By 1975, during the supposed collapse of New York, it had increased to 15 percent, *a figure lower than it has ever been since then*.

The immediate cause of the increase in poverty doesn’t require much investigation. The landlords are killing the town. Long ago, the idea that “rent is too damn high” in New York was so thoroughly inculcated into the city’s consciousness that it became a one-man political party and a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. But the rent *is* too damn high, and getting higher all the time. Whereas the old rule of thumb was that your rent should be one paycheck a month, or about 25 percent of your income, the typical New York household now spends at least one third of its income on rent, and three in ten renter households pay 50 percent or more, according to the latest New York Housing and Vacancy Survey.

And the situation is getting rapidly worse. According to the same survey, the price New York landlords wanted for vacant apartments from 2014 to 2017 increased by 30 percent, while the median household income for all renting families from 2013 to 2016 went up by 10 percent. The burden has fallen hardest on those who can least afford it, according to the real estate database StreetEasy, with rents rising fastest on the lowest wage earners in the city.

The result has been predictable enough. Homelessness in the city has reached a level not seen here in decades, if ever. Today, an average of 60,000 people are provided shelter every night, in 547 buildings, by the city’s Department of Homeless Services. Most of the newly homeless are not derelicts or the mentally ill. Of these people 70 percent are families with children, and at least one third of the families include a working adult. They were simply priced out of a market that seems to have no ceiling, victims of the “ownership society” that is modern New York.¹ Whereas most New Yorkers used to rent apartments of all sizes, more and more of the buildings their families made home for generations have been either torn down and

¹ Although New York hosts what is estimated to be the largest population of homeless people in the United States, it is no coincidence that the other cities in the top ten are also generally seen as “success stories.” Tracking total numbers of the homeless has never been an exact science, but other cities that have some of the largest homeless populations include Los Angeles, Seattle, San Diego, Washington, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Boston, and Philadelphia.

replaced or “converted” to condominiums or “cooperative apartments,” which sound like something socialistic but are not. The average condo and co-op sale prices in Manhattan shot up past the \$2 million mark for the first time ever last year, while a townhouse will cost you \$6.28 million.

One common belief, even in many liberal circles, is that the cause of these outrageous rents and prices is the very government intervention that was intended to ameliorate them: rent regulation. This notion might have some validity if, say, rent regulations in New York stifled construction. But they don't. New buildings in the city are not subject to rent control *and never have been*. More than 40,000 new buildings went up during Michael Bloomberg's twelve years as mayor (2002–13), and another 25,000 buildings were demolished. The city continues to furiously tear itself down and build itself back up again. New buildings are spiked into every available lot, and they rise higher than ever before.

Far from discouraging new construction, New York's housing policies encourage and subsidize it at every turn—and, in doing so, have only made the city less affordable than ever. New York has had some sort of rent regulation continuously since 1943, and today nearly half of its apartments—966,000 in all, containing around 2.5 million people—are what is called rent-stabilized; that is, they are in buildings of six or more units, and are occupied by tenants who cannot be evicted or denied a lease renewal without due cause, and whose rents cannot be raised by more than a set amount determined every year by a government-appointed panel. This does not mean the rent doesn't go up. The rent on the rent-stabilized apartment that I've leased since 1980 has more than tripled in that time. Rents can also be raised when apartments are vacated, or when landlords make improvements to the building or to individual apartments.

Once the monthly rent hits \$2,700, if an apartment is vacated, or if the total household income exceeds \$200,000 for two consecutive years, the unit can pass out of rent stabilization. Forever. From 2006 to 2016, at least 139,000 apartments were deregulated, a number that includes an estimated one quarter of all apartments on the increasingly wealthy Upper West Side of Manhattan, where I live.

This is due to rising incomes at some addresses. But driving deregulation as well is the fact that private equity funds see great possibilities in your neighborhood. Your landlord is now much less likely to be a family or an individual who has owned one or two buildings for years, depending on them for a safe and steady income, and much more likely to be a faceless, massively financed international firm that is highly incentivized to force you out on the street and keep its investors happy. “Not long ago a rent-stabilized building would sell for ten or at most twelve times its rent roll—the amount of money, before expenses, that it generates in a year,” wrote journalist Michael Greenberg in a meticulous analysis that appeared in last August's *New York Review of Books*. “Today it sells for perhaps thirty or forty times that amount, or ten times what the rent roll would be after regulated tenants have been dislodged.”

What plagues New York, though, is not only the astounding rise in housing prices, disruptive as that is. It is also the wholesale destruction of the public city. Many of the city's most treasured amenities, essential to its middle-class character and built up for decades through the painstaking labors of so many dedicated individuals—working people and philanthropists, labor leaders and social workers, reformers and politicians—have now been torn away. Look at almost any public service or space in New York, and you will see that it has been diminished, degraded, appropriated.

The change in their day-to-day lives that has probably delighted New Yorkers the most over the past forty years has been the improvement in the city's vast subway system. Ridership has approached record levels in recent years, and on the first day of 2017, Governor Andrew Cuomo led a giddy celebration to mark the opening of three new stations on the fabled Second Avenue subway, which finally became a (partial) reality after first being proposed in 1920.

The self-congratulations were short-lived, as service on the remainder of the system began to decline precipitously. An antiquated and misconfigured train-signaling system—one that, at the rate the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is working on it, will be fully replaced sometime in the late 2060s, by which time nanobots will likely have been doing the job for a generation—began causing longer and longer delays, with both cars and platforms filling up with frustrated, angry passengers. The system's welcome new electronic scheduling signs began to report delays of such length—next train: 22 minutes—that they now produced only a Godot-like depression among riders.

In one of the many byzantine quirks of how we are governed in New York, the trains and buses are part of the MTA, which is controlled by Governor Cuomo. But the governor—allegedly a Democrat—rejected out of hand a proposal by New York mayor Bill de Blasio for a special “millionaires’ tax” to fix the transit system, offering instead a “genius transit challenge” wherein anyone who came up with a great idea to make the trains run on time could win a million dollars.

The reasons for the subway's breakdown are legion. But the more telling lesson here is that a tax on the wealthiest New Yorkers to restore even the most vital public good cannot be so much as entertained.



51st St. 6:11 pm, from the series Platforms, by Natan Dvir © The artist

The decline of the subways is just the latest diminution of public life in New York. Over the past few decades, what used to be regarded as inviolable public space has been systematically rolled up and surrendered to unelected private authorities. Starting with Central Park in 1980, much of New York's park system has been handed over to privately funded "conservancies," supposedly subordinate to the city government but in truth all-powerful, and quite determined to put everything on a paying basis. A visit to the Central Park Zoo, once free, now costs \$18 per adult, \$13 per child. A "total experience" ticket for the world-renowned Bronx Zoo costs \$36.95 for all "adults" over the age of twelve, \$26.95 for younger children, and \$31.95 for seniors—in a borough where the median yearly household income is \$37,525. (Rental of a single-seat stroller at the zoo will cost you \$10. A wheelchair is free but requires a \$20 deposit, lest you try to scoot off with it.)

Even the streets are no longer fully under public control. Starting in 1984, New York created seventy-five "business improvement districts," more than any other city in the country—though BIDs are now common in nearly every one of the nation's largest metropolitan areas. BIDs are supposed to be self-taxing coalitions of businesses, often employing the homeless and destitute to pick up trash, prettify the streets, and organize security patrols. But as the *New York Times* reported, one of the very first New York BIDs instead "organized the workers into what were called 'goon squads' to use force to chase homeless people out of bank lobbies with A.T.M.s."

In 2000, the Grand Central Partnership and the 34th Street Partnership BIDs finally settled a seven-year lawsuit charging that they had routinely paid their employees just \$1 an hour to walk security patrols and clean toilets. The BIDs had dragged out the suit in the hope that their often homeless workers would simply give up and go away. But before that could happen, Sonia Sotomayor, then a federal district court judge in Manhattan, found the business districts guilty of breaking minimum-wage laws, using their newfound source of almost free labor to undercut competition—and handing the money they made as a result to their already well-paid executives.

"You say you're doing so much for the city, but you're making that money off the backs of the homeless," Tommy Washington, then a forty-one-year-old former BID worker and plaintiff pointed out. "You donate lampposts, flower beds, Bryant Park. How are you going to represent beautify if you're doing ugly behind that?"

Washington's question goes to the heart of the new New York, whom it's for, and what it means. Everywhere now, private institutions have largely taken over the neighborhoods around them, repurposing them solely to meet their own needs.

Our tax-free universities have been among the most shameless offenders. Cooper Union—a cultural landmark founded in 1859 as a night school of the arts and sciences for working men and women—abolished its legacy of free tuition after clotting the Astor Place area with disturbing glass boxes and nearly driving itself into bankruptcy.

Fumihiko Maki's 400,000 square foot, \$300 million black monolith at 51 Astor Place—nicknamed the Death Star by local residents—may well be the single worst act of vandalism in New York since the original Pennsylvania Station was torn down more than fifty years before, a looming wall that effectively obliterates what was one of the oldest and most vital public places in New York.

Cooper Union may be the most egregious defacer of its own neighborhood, but it's far from the only one. New York University has torn down much of the historic West Village, including most of what was the landmark Provincetown Playhouse and a home that Edgar Allan Poe once lived in. (NYU partially re-created the facade of the Poe house. Quoth the raven: Fuck you.) Columbia University used (and abused) the power of eminent domain to kick out residents and small businesses at the western end of 125th Street, and is now stuffing that street with the huge, glassy, dreadful buildings of its new Manhattanville campus, courtesy of its own international vandal, sorry, *starchitect*, Renzo Piano.

This has become an accepted way of proceeding in New York, even for subsidized institutions that are supposed to serve a public purpose. Barclays Center at Atlantic Yards, in downtown Brooklyn, was sold to the public in an elaborate bait-and-switch scheme as part of a spectacular “urban utopia” complex to be designed by Frank Gehry. It ended up instead as an arena with all the charm of your basic bus terminal, home to an unwanted basketball team owned by a Russian oligarch. But then, as with any major New York development today, some form of deception is requisite. The Atlantic Yards scam was bankrolled with hundreds of millions in public funding—though the chicanery here is so involved that no one can even say for sure what the final public subsidy figures will be. The project includes at least \$100 million forfeited when the MTA, which has a subterranean train-marshaling yard there, sold its lucrative aboveground rights to the site to the developer Forest City Ratner, which was the *low* bidder for them. Hundreds of local residents have already been relocated, and before the whole charade is over, thousands more may be displaced from their homes, dozens of longtime neighborhood businesses will have been shuttered, and community leaders will have been shamefully compromised with emoluments ranging from a luxury-box giveaway to an on-site basketball arena “meditation room.” But in a brilliant piece of political legerdemain, no elected official was forced to actually vote for the project.

Sports stadiums long ago became a preferred method of legalized graft in America, with even such struggling cities as Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, and Oakland, California, willingly shelling out hundreds of millions apiece to retain or attract major-league franchises. But New York has taken the practice to stygian depths. The two major-league stadiums opened in 2009 were far from the first or the only large public subsidies the city has given to the Yankees and the Mets. New York had already spent more than \$100 million building free minor-league parks for both teams' farm clubs, in Staten Island and Coney Island, respectively. The current Yankee Stadium, erected on the site of what had been two beloved public parks, cost \$2.3 billion, according to journalist Neil deMause,

making it one of the most expensive stadiums ever built anywhere in the world. Construction was helped along with federal, state, and local government subsidies totaling \$1.2 billion. Nonetheless, the Yankees reduced the number of seats available to the general public by more than 9,000 so that the team could make room for thirty-seven additional luxury suites in its ballpark.

It was much the same with the Mets' new park, out in Flushing's Willets Point, which hoovered up \$614 million in public subsidies but nonetheless reduced the new ballpark's seating capacity from 57,354 to a mere 41,800 in order to increase its luxury suites from forty-five to fifty-four. But here the new stadium was intended only as the anchor of a grand plan by Michael Bloomberg to transform the entire area around it—one terminus of an axis of redevelopment set to run across the entire width of the city, on a scale that only Robert Moses might have attempted.

Willets Point, once the site of a monumental municipal dump, the "valley of ashes" in *The Great Gatsby*, had evolved into a happy jumble of some 250 small industrial shops, most of them specializing in auto parts and repairs in an area known as the Iron Triangle. There they had thrived and prospered for more than eighty years, despite the city's refusal to build them sidewalks, paved roads, or even sewers. Once the Mets had their new park, though, Bloomberg pushed through a \$3 billion development plan, with the Iron Triangle to become Willets West, mostly a gigantic shopping mall with 200 stores and what was planned to be 1.7 million square feet of retail space, surrounded by 5,500 market-rate and affordable apartments and other amenities.

To facilitate this process, writes the impassioned social advocate Jeremiah Moss in his wrathful howl *Vanishing New York: How a Great City Lost Its Soul*, \$1 billion worth of public land was transferred, gratis, to two developers, including Sterling Equities, controlled by Mets owner Fred Wilpon and his brother-in-law, Saul Katz. The whole scheme was ultimately blocked in court—it's illegal to give away public land in New York State without a specific act of the legislature—but the Iron Triangle was gone, its shops intimidated into closing by the threat of eminent domain, and then demolished by the city.²

² A more human-size new plan, including 1,100 apartments for low-income New Yorkers, has since been announced by Mayor de Blasio, which is a welcome development—but still not one that will resurrect hundreds of bulldozed family businesses.

Queens had long remained unscathed by development on this scale. More than anyplace else in New York, the borough retains some of the flavor of what the city was like in the Seventies, minus the crime and the decay. Almost one in every two residents is foreign-born, creating wonderful ethnic mixes in nearly all of its low-lying residential and industrial neighborhoods. But this cityscape is changing, too.

Much like the Martian spaceships from *The War of the Worlds* in both appearance and annihilating intent, the glass skyscrapers that now dominate Manhattan have in recent years jumped the East

River. The first one, a 658-foot Citicorp office building, arrived in Long Island City in 1989. For years it stood alone, an awkward sentinel among the neighborhood's eclectic mix of row houses, auto shops, and manufacturers. As many of those businesses moved out for parts of the globe that don't pay a living wage, their emptying factory floors and warehouses were at least replaced by droves of art, movie, and television studios.

Then, in 1997, came the first residential towers, the forty-two-story Citylights residence, followed nine years later by the five apartment buildings of the East Coast LIC complex. By 2015, the land rush was on. Twenty-nine new buildings were added last year alone, according to *New York* magazine, with at least twenty-eight more "on tap" for 2018–2020. The tallest building of all was announced last November, a \$3 billion project with a luxury condo towering 700 feet high.

Yet even this level of development is dwarfed by what is going on at the western anchor of Bloomberg's great crosstown axis. Hudson Yards, now approaching completion, is a project of staggering size, encompassing some sixty blocks along Manhattan's West Side—"the largest private real estate development in the history of the United States and the largest development in New York City since Rockefeller Center," boasts its primary developer, Related Companies. Its immense glass skyscrapers are overwhelming. From some angles, they look like battling Transformers; from other perspectives, they seem, aptly enough, more like the smokestacks of an impossibly large steamship, about to shove off from the rest of the city altogether.

The projected figures are numbing, almost too big to digest. By the time it's finished, Hudson Yards will encompass at least sixteen major buildings, with 18 million square feet of commercial and residential space, 1 million square feet of retail and "mixed-use space," a public school, at least one major hotel, and a five-acre public plaza. The ninety-two-story tower at 30 Hudson will, the developers say, boast the first open-air observation deck in New York higher than that on the Empire State Building. Its tenants will include a host of major corporations, while a seven-story shopping mall will include a Neiman Marcus department store, the likes of Dior and Chanel on the upper floors, and what they call a "Fifth Avenue mix" of shops such as H&M, Zara, and Sephora on the lower floors. (There will also be "seven destination restaurants.")

Things I liked about that old New York, now vanished?
My neighbors.

Most of them are gone or going now, after decades in the same visibly slouching, century-old apartment house where I live. In the apartment below ours, from the day I moved in back in 1980 with three friends from college, was Mercedes, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, with her extended family of three generations. When her mother, Anna, a sunny, religious, and unfailingly kind woman, began to decline with the years, Mercedes tended to her devotedly at home, bringing a hospital bed into their living room. But their rent-controlled apartment was in Anna's name, and when

she died, Mercedes and her husband could no longer afford even the stabilized rent and decided to move back to the Dominican Republic. After all those years, they were just gone, almost overnight.

Across the hall from me was Raymond, a self-destructive but amiable drunk who fell completely apart when his mother died. He could not keep up the rent, or himself, and was finally evicted and then banned from the block after several loud arguments with the super. He came back anyway and lay down in the middle of the street one afternoon—a small Irish-Latino man, in his perpetual baseball cap and scraggly beard, insisting in his gravelly, whiskey-soaked voice that they should just go ahead and run him over. Artie and James, our constant eyes on the street, who spend much of their time sitting out on the stoop trying to convince me that the Mets are a major-league ball team, waved off the traffic and persuaded him to get up out of the street. Forgiven by the super, Raymond now comes back to sit on the stoop with his old friends, a living ghost haunting the block where he was born.

We have been almost a parody of multiculturalism on our little street. Black and white, Hispanic and Asian; straight, gay, and transgender; families of all kinds—extended, adopted, arranged by convenience or design. Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist. I would come home and see the daughters of our Sikh mailman, before they grew up, playing baseball in the halls. In the evening, I sat at my desk in a little space, in this building cubbyholed with other little spaces and held together by what was once described as “a hundred years of spit and dust,” and felt as though I were poised over the center of the world. Beneath me I could hear a hive of dinnertime conversations carried on in half a dozen languages, smell cooking that came from all over the world, hear someone ringing a gong and repeating a Buddhist chant.

It is through all these interactions, multiplied a million times, that a truly great city is made. The street life—the warrens of little shops and businesses that once sustained our neighborhood in the sort of “exuberant diversity” that Jane Jacobs considered a prerequisite for a successful city—is being eradicated as well: the botanica on 96th Street that Susan, my sister-in-law, always visited to buy her healing herbs when she was in town; the Indian spice shop next to it, with the protective elephant-headed idol of Ganesh mounted outside.

These stores, like so many others in my neighborhood, have not been replaced. They are simply . . . *gone*. In an informal survey of Broadway, from 93rd Street to 103rd, I recently counted twenty-four vacant storefronts—many of them very large spaces, enough to account for roughly one third of the street frontage. Nearly all of them have been empty now for months or even years.

Almost everything of use has gone. There was Oppenheimer Meats, a butcher shop whose founder had reportedly fled Nazi Germany and, I was told, brought his business down to our neighborhood from Washington Heights sometime in the Forties. A large, imposing man with a bristling mustache, he would strut behind his counter like a Prussian field marshal, but he hired people of every

color from the neighborhood and left them to run the shop when he retired. Then, a few years ago, according to its new owner, Oppenheimer's rent was tripled. Out it went. Over on Amsterdam, between 97th and 98th Streets, was a whole row of enterprises: an excellent fish store, a pet shop, a Mexican restaurant named for Frida Kahlo, and a laundromat we used to call the St. Laundry Center, thanks to how part of its name had been torn out of its awning. Then they were all gone, too, without warning. Soon after, I ran into Shirley, doughty little Asian abbess of the St. Laundry Center. She said the landlord had upped the rent from a hefty \$7,000 a month to \$21,000, which is a hell of a lot of laundry.

On the corner of 98th and Broadway is the shell of what was once RCI, an independent appliance store founded in 1934 as Radio Clinic. It was one of the oldest surviving businesses on the Upper West Side. RCI's proprietor, Leon Rubin, left the Pale of Russia after his father was murdered there during the civil war that followed the revolution, when Leon was just twelve years old. In his shop, he used to sit in the front window in a white doctor's smock, pretending to "operate" on malfunctioning radios. RCI was passed down to Leon's son, Alan, and changed with the times, stocking up on appliances and electronics of all sorts. Alan's daughter, Jen, would demonstrate primitive Atari games in the same window where her grandfather had fiddled with radios. "This was his family's business, and my dad wasn't budging," Jen Rubin would recall, in a book she's written about the family business.

RCI survived being looted and vandalized during the blackout rioting in the summer of 1977, but it couldn't withstand today's Manhattan rents. The little shop lost its lease in 2014, the business chased off after eighty years in the neighborhood. Today, more than three years later, its storefront remains empty. Like so many other abandoned spaces along Broadway, its doorway has become a refuge for the homeless and the mentally ill, supposedly purged from our city streets.

A couple of blocks up Broadway from RCI was the old Metro Theater, originally the Midtown, an aging art house that dated back to 1933 and survived long enough to become one of the oldest cinemas operating in New York. It had fallen on hard times and was showing pornos when I first moved into the neighborhood. Then it was bought and restored by a repertory-cinema impresario, Dan Talbot, who renamed it the Metro, burnished and restored its elegant Art Deco interior, and started showing old movies and then first- and second-run releases.

The Metro was shuttered in 2005. (Talbot died late last year, just a month before another of his marvelous reclamations, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, an Upper West Side institution and still extremely popular, was shuttered for who-knows-what real estate fast shuffle.) Already struggling, the Metro was all but enveloped by an outsized construction project, the Ariel East and Ariel West, two more multimillion-dollar condo giants built directly across Broadway from each other. Rising to thirty-seven and thirty-one stories respectively, they are related in size and style to nothing else in the neighborhood. Their existence was enabled by the fact that St.

Michael's, a charming Episcopal church on the corner of 99th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, sold its air rights to developers. In New York today, survival for any older, underpatronized institution often involves cannibalizing the neighborhood it has pledged to serve.

The Metro never reopened. Its gorgeous marquee and purple-and-white terra-cotta tile work depicting the figures of comedy and tragedy had been landmarked, but there was no such protection for the interior. The developers ripped it all out, gutted it too quickly for anyone to object. It has remained empty and moldering for thirteen years now, the letters of its name and other parts of the facade left to slowly drop off, piece by piece, until there will be nothing left to landmark. Online neighborhood news sites constantly pass on rumors about what the Metro is likely to become, but nothing has materialized.

"I was really hoping for another bank or chain drug store, or a combination bank/chain drug store," read one reply to the latest conjecture.



Drawing by Steve Mumford

These are the choices we are left with now. If a movie theater you can duck into in the middle of the day was one of the small raptures of the modern urban landscape, all around us were the same sorts of existential conveniences. Those corner bakeries with the string-wrapped boxes where you could get a respectable layer cake on the way to someone's dinner party. A kosher butcher where you could pick up the lamb shank you realized you forgot just minutes before the family was due for Passover dinner. Decent Chinese food for a Friday night at home in front of the television.

We worry now in my neighborhood that the cobbler's shop across Broadway will be the next store priced out of business. The proprietor proudly displays calendar photos of erupting volcanoes from his native Ecuador in his shopwindows alongside pictures of his grandchildren at their confirmations. His grandson used to store

his toys and coloring books in the boxes under the unused shoeshine chairs. When you walk in, there is always the sound of classical music on the radio, and the smell of something very elemental and raw, leather and polish, the scent of a real place serving a real purpose.

It is almost the only store around that sells anything of use anymore. There are a few small hardware shops left still, some dry cleaners, a large grocery store, and a couple of bodegas. But otherwise, Jane Jacobs's "intricate ballet" of the streets is being rapidly eradicated by a predatory monoculture. Everywhere, that which is universal and uniform prevails. Chain stores, of a type once unknown in New York, now abound. On those same ten blocks of my neighborhood where so many stores have been emptied out, I count three pharmacies, six bank branches, seven nail-and-beauty salons, three Starbucks, two Dunkin' Donuts and three 7-Elevens, five phone-and-cable stores, four eyewear shops. The coming growth industry seems to be in urgent care facilities, of which there are already two, to serve our ridiculously underinsured population.

This is not an anomaly; the problem is pervasive. There are so many empty shops now that the issue has even begun to slip out from under the official doctrine that the city has never been better than it is now. In true samizdat style, an informal but growing network of dissident government officials, journalists, angry and frustrated private citizens, and even real estate developers began to force the problem into 2017's generally somnolent municipal elections. Last June, the office of Manhattan borough president Gale Brewer found 188 vacant storefronts along Broadway from Battery Park to Inwood—this on a main commercial avenue in an incredibly wealthy city, in the eighth year of an economic expansion.

Saddest of all is the planned demolition of the Essex Street Market. It was one of several indoor markets built by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia in 1940, back when the city endeavored to serve its people instead of just weed them out if they didn't make enough money. Built to house the myriad Jewish pushcart vendors of the *chazzzer mark*, the legendary outdoor marketplace along Hester Street, it provided them with a safe, sanitary place to peddle their wares, protected from the elements and criminal shakedowns. Over the years, it came to house a wonderfully diverse collection of food stands, shops, and miniature restaurants, representing many of New York's different cultures. But it is scheduled to be razed before this year is out, its vendors grudgingly relocated to Essex Crossing—another gigantically ugly "mixed-use development" going up on a wide stretch of land across Delancey Street, a space that had been kept vacant for decades as part of a corrupt political deal to keep more non-whites out of the neighborhood. And so we have come full circle, from a city that tried to help along its poor and embattled strivers to one that would rather keep the land barren until only the very richest are available.

The great threat to the New York of the Sixties and Seventies—and many other cities in the Northeast and Midwest—was

³ When he said this, and before he was rewarded for his outspoken racism with endless magazine assignments and book contracts, Roger

considered to be the flood of largely unskilled, uneducated African Americans from the South and

Starr was New York's housing commissioner.

Hispanics from the islands. "Stop the Puerto Ricans and the rural blacks from living in the city . . . reverse the role of the city. . . . It can no longer be the place of opportunity," the racist apparatchik Roger Starr implored back in the day. "Our urban system is based on the theory of taking the peasant and turning him into an industrial worker. Now there are no industrial jobs. Why not keep him a peasant?"³

This sentiment was articulated, over and over again, by many of the would-be gentrifiers. But the "peasants" poured in just as the hopeful and the desperate had always come, though they encountered, for the first time in New York's history, a city that no longer had many entry-level industrial jobs to offer them. The result was perverse, a New York that was home to more than a million welfare recipients and featured almost full employment for everyone else; a city where 7 million to 14 million square feet of office space—the size of the entire downtown of a metropolis such as Kansas City or Pittsburgh—was built in New York every year from 1967 to 1970, as Ric Burns and James Sanders noted in their history of the city.

In the success story that New York is considered today, the situation is just as perverse: the rents are driving people and commerce away, but some of the tallest residential towers ever built sit all but empty. The cause is once again a flood of outsiders, though this time they are not poor but among the richest people in the world. They have already proved themselves more destructive to the health of the city than the least-skilled poor, and their depredations will do incalculably more damage to New York over the decades and even the centuries ahead.

In the brutally Darwinian world of the poor, they usually got jobs, started families, became useful and productive citizens, or failed and were pushed back out of New York—back home or to another place—or ended up incarcerated or even dead. The rich, though, are with us always, and now for the first time as a purely rapacious force, consuming the city's most valuable assets and contributing almost nothing in return. "If we could get every billionaire around the world to move here, it would be a godsend," Bloomberg, the city's billionaire mayor, said in a moment of typical frankness back in 2013. But these are not your grandfather's billionaires.

New York has always attracted the wealthy and predatory, dating back at least to our most famous pirate, Captain Kidd. Coming here was seen as a sort of arrival, for individuals and businesses alike. Long a "headquarters town," as early as 1901 New York was home to sixty-nine of the nation's two hundred largest corporations. Their owners lined Fifth Avenue with their fairy-tale mansions—some of them later converted into museums or elegant stores—or filled luxury apartment houses such as the Dakota. They hired the most renowned architects to erect gigantic advertisements for their transformative, world-conquering enterprises, including many of the most memorable structures ever built in the city: Grand Central

Terminal; the Chrysler, Woolworth, Empire State, and Seagram buildings, among others. Noxious as the old robber barons could be, they at least dropped vast amounts of money into the local economy in the form of property taxes and purchases in elite shops. They employed people in droves—small armies of domestics, vendors, and workers at all levels—to service their needs and businesses. They contributed to the city through their building and philanthropy—Rockefeller Center, Carnegie Hall, the Morgan Library, and the Frick Collection, to name just a few examples.

The new rich infesting the city, by contrast, are barely here. They keep a low profile, often for good reason, and rarely stick around. They manufacture nothing and run nothing, for the most part, but live off fortunes either made by or purloined from other people—sometimes from entire nations. *The New Yorker* noted in 2016 that there is now a huge swath of Midtown Manhattan, from Fifth Avenue to Park Avenue, from 49th Street to 70th Street, where almost one apartment in three sits empty for at least ten months a year. New York today is not at home. Instead, it has joined London and Hong Kong as one of the most desirable cities in the world for “land banking,” where wealthy individuals from all over the planet scoop up prime real estate to hold as an investment, a pied-à-terre, a bolt-hole, a strongbox.

For most of a decade now, like lava flowing inexorably from some deadly volcano, the residences of the superrich have moved east from the Time Warner Center to create Billionaires’ Row, the array of buildings on 57th Street and several adjoining streets and avenues that is already dominating much of the Manhattan skyline. These “supertall” skyscrapers are defined as buildings taller than 984 feet: One57, at 157 West 57th Street (1,004 feet); 432 Park Avenue (1,396 feet). Well on their way to being built: 53 West 53rd Street (1,050 feet), 111 West 57th Street (1,428 feet), and 217 West 57th Street (1,550 feet). Finished or not, many of the apartments were—at first—snapped up as soon as they went on the market. The *Times* used to tick off their record-setting sales in its Sunday real estate section, down to the absurdly exact dollar and cent: one recent lower-end example, \$47,782,186.53! Nor are the records these sales set likely to remain for long. A triplex at the forthcoming 220 Central Park South will reportedly be sold for \$200 million, and a *four-story* apartment at the same address is priced to move at \$250 million. These would be the largest home sales ever recorded anywhere in the United States.

Who spends this sort of money for an apartment? The buyers are listed as hedge fund managers, foreign and domestic; Russian oligarchs; Chinese apparel and airline magnates. And increasingly, to use a repeated *Times* term, a “mystery buyer,” often shielded by a limited liability company.

This is not the benevolent “gentrification” that Michael Bloomberg seemed to have had in mind but something more in the tradition of the king’s hunting preserves, from which local peasants were banned even if they were starving and the king was far away. Or, to use a more urgent analogy, these areas are now the dead zones of New York, much like the growing oxygen-depleted dead zones of our

oceans and lakes, polluted with pesticide runoff and deadly algae blooms.

Already, Billionaires' Row has throttled what used to be one of the more eclectic and delightful avenues in Manhattan. Along with Carnegie Hall, 57th Street boasted the graceful Art Deco Fuller Building, Steinway Hall, with its piano showroom; the Art Students League, the Russian Tea Room; the gorgeous little gem of a bookstore that was Rizzoli's, already a refugee from its old stand on Fifth Avenue; the marvelous ramble of Coliseum Books. A steamship company office, where my wife and I once booked a trip to Europe. A diverse array of movie houses, including, once upon a time, the Bombay Cinema, New York's only Hindi-language theater. Countless little restaurants, churches, coffee shops, art-supply stores, studios, and galleries. High culture and little hideaways, together they made up a stretch of Manhattan at its most alluring, a boulevard that was at one and the same time touristy and tony, a place to browse and to slip inside, both European and unmistakably New York.

Now the Steinway showroom has been banished to 43rd and 6th. The Coliseum was chased away and died. Rizzoli's lived to sell books another day, but its irreplaceable store and entire building were demolished. The Art Students League, where many of America's finest visual artists learned and taught, and which proved a refuge for countless more fleeing Europe in the Thirties and Forties, was bound up like a kidnapped heiress in protective scaffolding, while the Nordstrom Tower at 225 West 57th Street was allowed to build a cantilevered segment over it, hanging there like a permanent sword of Damocles.

The superexpensive apartments along Billionaires' Row will include not only many of the priciest domiciles ever purchased in the United States but also the highest places anyone has ever lived in this country, more than eighty and ninety stories in the air. Super tall, they are also super skinny, like 1,500-foot embodiments of the rich themselves. The Steinway Tower—minus Steinway—at 111 West 57th Street even has an 800-ton “tuned mass damper” at the top of its 1,428-foot height, to keep it from moving so much in the wind that it will nauseate its residents.

Together, these buildings perch over Central Park like a row of gigantic predatory birds. There are now so many of the supertalls gathered so closely together that they threaten to leave the lower sections of Central Park, the only true architectural marvel to be seen here, in shadow for much of the year. One simulation found that the shadows of the highest towers may knife a mile into the park on the winter solstice.

When the journalist Warren St. John protested against these towers that block the sun and literally leave children shivering in the park, he pointed out that the highest supertall apartments—when they are occupied at all—house maybe a few hundred people, as opposed to the 40 million individuals who use Central Park every year. But this seems to be the calculation on which New York now operates.

ven for those who can afford the new New York, it is unclear how much they actually like it or maintain any ability to shape it to their tastes. What is the point, after all, of paying a fortune to live in a city that is more and more like everywhere else? New York is now jammed with some 62 million tourists every year, flocking to Disneyfied Broadway that is a pathetic imitation of what it once was. At the same time, its favorite nooks and crannies are being annihilated, even the more upscale ones. Bill Moyers, a longtime local resident, reports the same fate for all of his family's favorite neighborhood eateries, including Scaletta's, on West 77th Street. Moyers expects "something upscale and fancy" to replace it, but, he laments, "today's prices can only guarantee something worse."

Perhaps because they have done so much to annihilate the New York around them, every luxury of the new buildings is designed to pull its residents inward, away from the rest of us—the very antithesis of urban life. This is another way in which the rich and their real estate brokers have made essential changes to the nature of New York.

The latest and greatest condo amenities now include an "adult tree house" and a "sumac meander." The "grand-scale residences" at 70 Vestry Street, in TriBeCa, entice with "warm-hued Beaumaniere limestone quarried from the banks of the Seine River in France" (not to be confused with the Seine River in Dumont, New Jersey). The duplex penthouse at 50 United Nations Plaza "comes with its own infinity-edge pool" (judging by the proliferation of pools and billiards rooms, the average luxury condo owner in Manhattan is a combination of Esther Williams and Minnesota Fats); other "focal points" include "the 10,000-pound handcrafted stainless steel staircase," in case you have a hankering to drive your Sherman tank up and down the steps.

"Private outdoor space" is the true goal, and never have so many buildings been constructed in such an insular fashion in New York. Want a drink or a meal, a swim or a game of pool at the end of the day, a yoga class or a good book? There's no need to step out into the city. Something to do with the kids? Don't worry, there's no reason for them to go outside, either. All the best new buildings offer playrooms; the "grand-scale" 70 Vestry adds an "art area, climbing structure, ball pit, slide, magnetic wall and faux farmers' market."

The emphasis on privacy is constantly stressed. There is no need to expose even one's automobile to the prying eyes of the hoi polloi. My favorite fringe benefit, a luxury that has been steadily gaining favor not only in New York but also in such other favorite hangouts of the superrich as Miami and Singapore, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, is "en suite parking." Over in Chelsea, 200 Eleventh Avenue was offering a separate elevator for your car, which could be taken directly up to your floor, with "no senses of fumes, or sound, and it can burn for three-to-four hours before it imposes any risk on the building."

New York's great buildings used to be chockablock with beacons, crowns, ornamentation, friezes, and statues, pointing the way to the future. We did not always like what they were selling, but they made a public argument; for example, the Chrysler Building, with its brilliant Art Deco diadem and silver hood-ornament gargoyles; the Woolworth Building "cathedral of commerce," with its terra-cotta tiling, glittering mosaic and stained glass, and magnificent carvings; Grand Central Terminal, with its paeans to the history of transportation, celestial map, and statue of a glowering Vanderbilt; even the wonderfully gaudy, gold-frosted American Radiator Building, intriguing enough to become a major painting by Georgia O'Keeffe.

By contrast, Rafael Viñoly's new supertall 1,396-foot-high residential tower at 432 Park Avenue, which is taller than the Empire State Building (excluding its antenna-cum-zeppelin mooring) and now dominates the Manhattan skyline from many viewpoints, was inspired by . . . a designer trash can, according to its architect. It comes from nothing and nowhere, just an extension of an empty, overpriced receptacle, and it means every bit as much to the people and the city that it lords itself over.

Hudson Yards, meanwhile, features the \$455 million Shed, formerly the Culture Shed, no twenty-first-century Carnegie Hall but a six-story performance and exhibition space that is supposed to lend some cultural dimension to the vast development. The leading feature of its design is its "retractable outer shell" made up mostly of highly durable plastic; planned events include "Fashion Week, TED Talks, and concerts"—a virtual compendium of the banal and pretentious.

Next to the Shed, in Hudson Yards' Public Square, will be Vessel, the development's \$200 million interactive, artistic centerpiece. This is a fifteen-story collection of 154 connected staircases, which thousands of visitors can climb at the same time, continually passing one another. Not even its developer is able to take it seriously. Related Companies chairman Stephen Ross jokingly called it "the social climber."

It must be admitted that in the new city, the values of our public authorities seem just as misplaced. Those three new stations of the Second Avenue subway that New York finally managed to produce last year, after nearly a century of effort, are devoid of anything connecting them to the city that has awaited them for so long. In his fervent celebration of what is, in the life of the city, a minuscule accomplishment, Governor Cuomo praised the design of the broad, bland new stations to the *New York Times* as "a public space where community can gather and where culture and shared civic values are celebrated," and, at a news conference, predicted that "this is just the beginning of a new period of rebirth."

What actually happened was that the design of the new subway stations was outsourced to assorted stars of the modern art world, most of whom not one New Yorker in ten thousand would likely recognize by name or achievement. One of them, Chuck Close, filled his station with mosaic portraits of "New York artists who

have formed Mr. Close's wide circle," which includes Lou Reed and Kara Walker along with Cecily Brown, Philip Glass, Alex Katz, several younger artists he favored, and two self-portraits.

The artist Vik Muniz did Close one better, providing three dozen images of various friends, relatives, and cultural celebrities dressed up, reported the *Times*, like "normal people," including "the restaurateur Daniel Boulud holding a bag with a fish tail sticking out; the designer, actor, and man-about-town Waris Ahluwalia"; and Mr. Muniz himself, "in a Rockwell-esque scene of him tripping, spilling papers from his briefcase," as well as his son, dressed "in a tiger suit, like a Times Square mascot on lunch break." Isn't it marvelous? The artists are depicting themselves and their celebrity friends imitating *us*, waiting for a train and doing all the perfectly ordinary things that we ordinary people do!

It is one thing to replace some of the more offensive monuments and messages from the past, quite another to simply blank out everything with the generic and the tragically hip. Our buildings and our public art today are not a corrective but the easy disengagement of the developer. The void in our art reflects the sensory deprivation of our neighborhoods, where the complex and varied city has also been wiped out. Once the iconography of New York honored ideas, enterprises, achievers, and heroes, but today's public spaces speak a secret language of the cool and knowing, an inside joke that is lost on the rest of us. The things we have lost will never be found again, and the new things we have received are literally empty and spiritually devoid of meaning.

“**W**hat are you going to do about it?” Boss Tweed, the corrupt sachem of Tammany Hall, allegedly sneered when confronted about the nineteenth-century New York that he and his confederates so ruthlessly plundered. What are we going to do about a New York that is, right now, being plundered not only of its treasure but also of its heart, and soul, and purpose?

Bill de Blasio, our current mayor and previously an obscure local politician, was first elected in 2013, running against Republican Joe Lhota, a longtime state and city bureaucrat under the old regime and its ethos of development first, now, and always. Lhota ran a scorched-earth campaign, warning New Yorkers in commercial after commercial that a vote for some fuzzy liberal like De Blasio meant regression, meant going back to the bad old days of runaway crime, bankruptcy, and disorder. When all the votes were counted, Lhota had lost by nearly 50 points.

Vowing to be the mayor of “the other New York,” De Blasio announced his intention to go after the threat looming over so many voters: the cost of living here. The new mayor promised to “build or preserve” 200,000 affordable rental units over the next ten years, something that sounded like a good start.

Of those 200,000 units, it developed, 120,000 were to be “preserved,” mostly by negotiating with landlords to rehabilitate buildings that had fallen into extreme disrepair or were seized by the city for back taxes. Crucial as this sort of work is, it only stanch

the bleeding. The remaining 80,000 new units of affordable housing would start to materialize with De Blasio rezoning fifteen neighborhoods for higher-density habitation. The Bloomberg Administration had taken another approach, rezoning more than a third of the city but more often “downzoning” neighborhoods to limit housing capacity and preserve their “character.” Unsurprisingly, the downzoned neighborhoods tended to be whiter and more well-off than those that were upzoned, but ultimately a net of 15,000 buildings and 170,000 housing units were added during Bloomberg’s three terms. This approach, as well, did absolutely nothing to contain rents.

Worse still was the other tool that De Blasio would use to coax the developers into building in these newly rezoned hot spots: article 421-a of the property tax code. This has been the leading means by which New York has built new housing since 1971, when the federal government largely dropped out of the business. It works like this: developers get massive tax breaks on new buildings for up to thirty-five years as long as they rent 25 to 30 percent of the units in said buildings below market rates. The developers are taxed only at what the property—often a vacant lot—was valued at to begin with, excluding *all* the value their new building adds to the property.

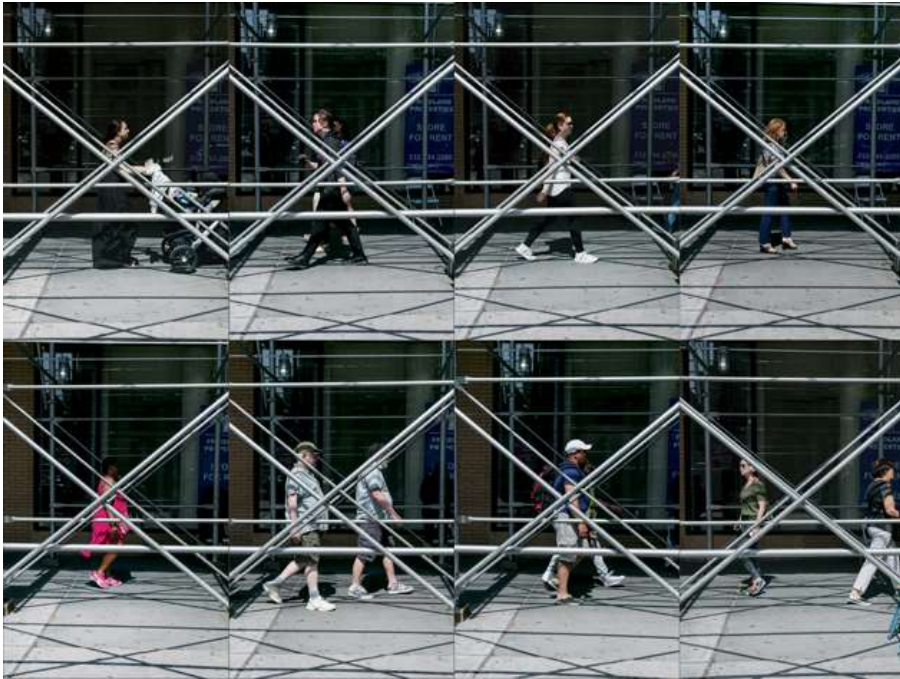
No one could ever accuse this provision of discouraging new building. But in recent years, 421-a has become most famous for leading landlords to add separate “poor doors” for their less wealthy tenants, as Extell announced it would do for its new tower at 40 Riverside Boulevard, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. (One is tempted to ask if the front entrance will be known as the “ghost door” for all those foreign investors who never show up.)

The greater problem, as Michael Greenberg spelled out in his *New York Review of Books* analysis, is that by its very definition new housing that is 25 to 30 percent “affordable” still means huge numbers of high-cost new rentals. It is, in other words, mass gentrification locked in for many years to come, while the city is further starved of tax dollars needed to maintain and improve its public services.

The 421-a tax break is an anachronistic tool left over from the Seventies, when both landlords and the middle class were abandoning the city in droves. Nothing could be further from the case today, and the recent evidence is abundant that continuing to use it is a counterproductive strategy, one that is subsidizing the wealthy while *diminishing* the amount of affordable housing available.

Not so coincidentally, as Greenberg reports, landlords have redoubled their efforts—often illegal—to bribe or intimidate their less affluent tenants into moving out. Some of the more egregious examples he cites are in Brooklyn: landlords cutting off heat and hot water, inviting belligerent homeless men to defecate and hold drug parties in the halls, not fixing collapsing walls and ceilings, nailing up plywood over doors, locking tenants out and getting them arrested, and, in one instance, even bearing false witness to get a

tenant committed, temporarily, to a psych ward. The neighborhoods themselves look much improved; it's just the people that were lost.



Photographs of scaffolding on Broadway by Elizabeth Bick

In my part of the forest, thank goodness, the process is (a little) more civilized, a sort of soft, running eviction. The large rental company that now owns every building on my side of the block (and much of the next block as well) brought in crews of what obviously seemed to be undocumented workers to repoint the brickwork, and thus drive up the rent for all of us by a couple of hundred dollars each month. Working out on precarious scaffolding in winter weather, these men were forbidden to talk to us, even when we tried to offer them water. As the older families move out, more crews descend on their apartments, tearing them apart, right down to the brick, in storms of noise and dust that go on for months.

They cut through electrical cables and crash through ceilings and walls too. An overly zealous smash that shattered our bathroom ceiling, in the workers' rush to get things done, led to that room being redone for the first time in thirty years. What we got was the same "deluxe" treatment that the new tenants receive: cheap linoleum tile made to look as close as possible to actual ceramic, cheap wooden shelving, and furnishings built to last a fortnight. All to lure the next tenants into accepting three times what my wife and I now pay. And there are rumors that next our perfectly adequate lobbies will be soon be "redone," which will no doubt raise our rents more.

I like my new neighbors. They're terrific people, just like the old ones, and drawn from nearly as many different places. Better educated, usually, with better jobs, but just as friendly and helpful. They tend to be younger, with younger families, and it's nice to hear and see so many kids in the building again. On the surface, this would seem to be what New York—and America—is all about: everyone moving on up another rung on the socioeconomic ladder,

the city filling again with the next extraordinary group of people who will cherish and enhance it.

But I try not to get too attached, for I know that their time here is limited. It couldn't help but be, paying as much as \$5,000 a month, as they do, to squeeze growing families into 700 square feet. They are transient, here only for a few years at most, until the next child or the next job—until they can buy a place of their own, or the home company in France or California decides to stop subsidizing such outrageous rents.

We are becoming a city of transients. Already, there are at least two apartments in my building operating as Airbnbs, an increasingly popular practice in many New York buildings; the only question is whether they are being run by the tenants or by the landlord. The potential safety or comfort of the rest of us, now living with night-to-night tenants who could be anybody, is not their concern.

The very idea of permanence is anathema to our landlords, just as it is to most employers in this city and in cities all over the country. It is the same thing for commercial spaces. Rather than drop their rent demands even now, landlords are often simply switching to short-term tenancies, better known as pop-ups. As Dennis Lynch detailed in *The Real Deal*, the real estate industry magazine, this can mean “experiential activation” renters “looking to penetrate a conference or event crowd—occupy a space for four days out of a month,” on average. Or a “brand launch” that might last six weeks. Or a “target market launch” that averages three months. Anything from a day to a year, with the landlords reportedly enjoying the fact that such temporary clients don't require a long lease and are very easy to evict if anything goes wrong.

Between 2010 and 2014, Lynch writes, the rents in sixteen Manhattan retail corridors tracked by CBRE Group, the self-described largest commercial real estate services and investment firm in the world,

skyrocketed by a whopping 89.1 percent while total retail sales for the borough grew by only 31.9 percent, creating what the commercial brokerage firm called “an unsustainable situation for some tenants as rents surpassed what their sales growth could support.”

What's more, this price gouging continued even as vacancies multiplied, a supposed impossibility under classical capitalist economics. The better business got, the more stores went under and were abandoned. The more storefronts went vacant, the higher rents kept going.

In some of the swankier districts of Manhattan, this can lead to the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Kanye West, or Tommy Hilfiger “popping up.” In less glamorous neighborhoods, such as my own, it's more likely to mean the headquarters of a political campaign, or the ubiquitous Halloween costume stores that open now in mid-September. But wherever and whatever they are, the lesson is the same: everything is temporary. The whole idea of a permanent community is fading away.

So what are we going to do about it?

Some practical reforms might start with ending 421-a and other subsidies for wealthy developers, thereby bringing the city tens of billions of additional tax dollars over the next few years and eliminating a major incentive for those who would build primarily for the rich. With that money, or at least some percentage of it, New York City could then build its own affordable housing—affordable for actual working-class people—without worrying about support from the federal government or 80 percent of the apartments going to more of the rich, absent or otherwise. And, as Greenberg suggests, an additional, dedicated half cent in sales tax, say—akin to how Los Angeles taxed itself recently to expand its mass transit system—could provide a permanent funding source to build and rehabilitate housing.

When it comes to the retailers, others have dared to suggest reinstituting commercial rent control. David Dinkins even made that idea part of his winning mayoral platform back in 1989, though—as happens with so many winning Democratic Party campaign promises—once he was elected, Dinkins quickly made it clear that he had no intention of seriously pursuing any such popular measure.

Unbeknownst to most New Yorkers today—so thoroughly has even the rumor of it been stomped out—the city *did* have commercial rent control for eighteen years, from 1945 to 1963. This was the most widely prosperous time in New York's history, and an era that many New Yorkers still remember as the city's golden age. How much that was because of commercial rent control is probably unquantifiable, but obviously it didn't hurt.

Another good idea would be to restrain ourselves. For some sixty-five years, from 1942 to 2007, New York co-ops were forbidden from gleaning more than 20 percent of their building revenues from storefront rents, under the IRS's so-called 80/20 rule. Co-ops, then more collectivist enterprises, were originally encouraged as a way by which working- and middle-class tenants could save buildings for themselves that had been neglected or abandoned by landlords. In time, though, they became one more preserve of the wealthy, and in December 2007 their lobbyists managed to get Congress to repeal the 80/20 rule and let co-ops charge stores whatever they wanted. Since then, New York homeowners have been able to join the ranks of the biggest landlords, running longtime small businesses out of their stores with extortionate rent increases while reducing or eliminating their own monthly maintenance fees and other assessments. In other words, we have met the landlords, and they are us.

Actually instituting these reforms, though, or pushing through any number of other good legislative fixes, comes up against New York's dysfunctional political system. Because of archaic rules designed mostly to suppress Tweed's Tammany Hall and other long-vanished political machines, the city's ability to alter its own rental and tax laws is largely subject to approval from Albany, with predictable results. As Greenberg reported, state legislators from outside the city—many of them Republicans—are routinely given enormous

contributions from developers, and subsequently thwart pro-tenant bills of any sort; from 2000 to 2016, city developers poured \$83 million into legislative races, “more than any other economic group.”

The prevailing idea that we now live in the best of all possible New Yorks remains a powerful one. A rationalization, perhaps, to compensate for the frustration we experience living in a system that no one really likes but that we feel helpless to alter. In a recent history-memoir titled *St. Marks Is Dead*, the journalist Ada Calhoun laid on another such coat of Pangloss with her entertaining narrative of one of New York’s most fabled streets and neighborhoods. She concedes that the apartment she grew up in now would cost \$5,000 a month but insists,

Who understands the soul of any place? Who deserves to be here? Who is the interloper and who the interloped-upon? Who can say which drunk NYU student stumbling down St. Marks Place will wind up writing the next classic novel or making the next great album?

Well, it will have to be a drunk NYU student who can afford \$5,000 a month in rent. What Calhoun and the other adamant Pollyannas refuse to understand is that a bar is one thing, a dance hall is one thing, and even a Gap or a Starbucks is one thing, but a bank branch is another. It is a carpet and a machine from which one extracts money, then leaves. No one is writing a novel or an album about it. Those things that we do not value, that we do not actively protect, fade away and die.

I used to hang out on St. Marks Place, back when Calhoun was a girl. I was seeing a dancer from Waycross, Georgia, and we would go drink seventy-five-cent shots at the Holiday Cocktail Lounge, and talk with old Ukrainian men about the great middleweights they had seen fight, and watch the punks out from the dance clubs play pool. Afterward, we would go back to her place in Brooklyn, where she turned me on to the joys of homemade curry and Patti Smith’s *Horses* album, among other delights. Walking back from her place to Manhattan one day, in the midst of a transit strike, I crossed the Manhattan Bridge with a couple of winos, with whom I stopped to watch the sun set over the Statue of Liberty, a moment I will remember for the rest of my life.

I did not believe that I was living in a utopia, or through the only possible iteration of St. Marks Place or New York City. But I defy anyone to have that experience in a bank branch, no matter how drunk they are.

Cities are all about loss. I get that. Intrinsically dynamic, cities have to change, or they end up like Venice, preserved in amber for the tourists. New York City, for all its might, is no more immune to economic sea changes than anyplace else—maybe less so.

It could be said that New York has been gentrifying ever since a lack of space started to push its dozens of shipbuilding yards off the East Side and over to Greenpoint in the years just before the Civil War. Many other industries followed, rarely to the city’s disadvantage,

unless you pine for the open-air rendering plants and stockyards that also proliferated along the Manhattan waterfront. Just, I suppose, as residents of Pittsburgh or Detroit don't miss the choking haze at noon that meant "prosperity" back in the day.

New Yorkers, over time, made just about anything and everything, from chemicals to bread, metal parts to chocolates, furniture to crates for shipping fine art, toys, and clothes of every description. Moreover, as the busiest harbor in the world for most of a century, it moved things. These industries were constantly in flux, and by the end of World War II, as the only great world city that remained unbloodied and unbowed, New York still had more than a million manufacturing jobs, more than any other city on the planet.

These numbers declined slowly at first, then more rapidly, with about half of the old manufacturing base gone by the Seventies. Deindustrialization continued rapidly in the Eighties, until today there are estimated to be fewer than 80,000 manufacturing jobs, in 6,000 companies. Some of the last and most integral parts of the city's working culture are now finally fading away altogether. The Meatpacking District is a euphemism for drunken club-hopping and shopping. The Garment District, caught between Madison Square Garden and the Hudson Yards excrescence, is dissolving into still more trendy bars and restaurants. The rag trade, so instrumental in shaping the very nature of New York, has been steadily pulled overseas for years. The same thing has happened to the makers of clothing throughout America. The advent of container ships would have spelled the end of New York's hundreds of miles of working waterfront and the tens of thousands of jobs it provided no matter how much the city tried to keep them. For a generation, the piers rotted down to the pilings, while the waterfront crumbled into a drugs and sex bazaar. Things change, people go. Favorite stores and bars close. The owner of that deli you love gets tired of carving cold cuts all day and decides to retire to Florida. So what?

The trouble lies not in the inexorable fact that cities change but in our failure to deal with that. Since the Seventies, all that our urban leaders, in New York and elsewhere, Democratic as well as Republican, have been able to come up with is one scheme after another to invite the rich in.

The prevailing critique of American cities from the right, dating back to the Sixties, was that our existing social welfare state was unsustainable. The question haunting our urban success stories today is whether the prevailing conservative addiction to privately owned, government-subsidized mega-development is sustainable. Already, there are indications that the whole gimcrack structure is starting to give way. Before the end of last summer, *The Real Deal* was reporting a significant softening of the Manhattan condo market, with inventory up a hefty 35 percent from the year before.

With many of their buildings still just half-full or less, even after the initial rush to buy into them, developers are scrambling now, trying to encourage brokers with higher commissions; offering to pay for buyers' closing costs, storage units, and parking spaces; and shaving

as much as 10 percent off the prices. The Madison Square Park Tower, an eighty-three-unit condo at 45 East 22nd Street, was offering, *The Real Deal* reports, “to throw in two studio apartments and two parking spots for any buyer willing to shell out \$48 million for the building’s 7,000-square foot penthouse.”

This weakness has even begun to spread to Billionaires’ Row. The majority investor at 111 West 57th Street claimed in court that the building is facing a \$100 million shortfall. All those sumac meanders don’t grow on trees. Extell’s One57 suffered the Row’s first two foreclosures in 2017, including a possibly record-setting \$50.9 million foreclosure on a condo contracted by one of its “mystery buyers.” (The *New York Post* later identified him as a Nigerian oil tycoon.) Extell even failed to rent out thirty-eight lower-floor units at One57, opting instead to list them for sale at a discounted price.



Photographs by Isaac Diggs and Edward Hillel. Above: Impromptu Michael Jackson memorial on a barricade next to the Apollo Theater, 2009, from *125th: Time in Harlem*. Below: A Red Lobster opening on the same lot, 2014

The danger of a city economy based on little more than these oversized piles of Jenga blocks should be obvious. *The Real Deal* demurred from trying to quantify just what the outstanding—and the soon-to-be outstanding—debt is on New York condos, but claimed, “It’s undoubtedly in the billions.”

More disturbing than any potential fiscal or physical collapse, though, is the moral collapse that New York has suffered. “Too often, life in New York is merely a squalid succession of days, whereas in fact it can be a great, living, thrilling adventure,” Fiorello La Guardia told New Yorkers during his 1933 mayoral campaign. Today, life in New York too often seems like a sci-fi version of itself in which we barely notice as our fellow human beings are picked off by the monsters living among us.

A little-noticed but quietly magnificent exhibition at Hunter College’s Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute this past year, “The New Deal in New York City”—part of the nationwide Living New Deal history project—put on display a vision for another way of life, a way of life that Mayor La Guardia was instrumental in

building. The exhibit featured images of the first public housing in the United States, built by New York City from 1935 to 1937 with funds provided by the federal Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration.

These projects—the First Houses, Ten Eyck (now Williamsburg) Houses, and Harlem River Houses—were built on a human scale, just four to five stories high. At First Houses, the spaces formerly occupied by one out of every three of the rotting tenements they replaced were left vacant, to let in air and light and provide room for children’s playgrounds and places where their parents could sit and talk. The buildings were small, and they, too, were no utopia—though they remain much-sought-after homes to this day. By 1941, according to the exhibit, a total of nine such projects had been built in New York, with 11,570 units, and more than 500 of these developments had gone up around the United States.

Unlike so much later public housing, they were not envisioned or designed as projects simply to store the poor but as integral parts of a new community. Their residents could take advantage of any number of other government-funded community projects all around them, from beautiful new swimming pools to refurbished—and free—schools and colleges. They could find work rebuilding their own city’s infrastructure or writing guidebooks to New York. They could attend plays and concerts of all sorts.

Their buildings and the public institutions around them were adorned by murals, painted not by art-scene stars imitating them but by artists who lived among them and depicted the histories of their place and their own lives. This, again, was not utopia. Marion Greenwood, painting her murals for the Red Hook Houses, groused about how she had to endure the criticisms of both bureaucrats and tenants regarding her work, both classes of people she felt had a much lower appreciation of art than the Mexican peasants she had formerly worked with. But this was America, too—and especially New York.

“I hope the day is dawning when private capital will devote itself to better and cheaper housing, but we know that the government will have to continue to build for the low-income groups,” Eleanor Roosevelt asserted matter-of-factly at the opening of the appropriately named First Houses. “That is a departure for us, but other governments have done it. Low-cost housing must go on in the United States.” Getting back to these first principles, to a city and a society that are committed to providing a decent life for all its citizens, is the only way we can regain “the great, living, thrilling adventure” that *La Guardia* envisioned.

New York has been—and should be—a city of ambition *and* contentment. Of the getting-there and the got, with plenty of room carved out for those whose desires do not include that deluxe apartment in the sky but simply making a living and raising a family by doing something useful, or not doing anything especially useful at all but existing, living, appreciating the vast urban swirl around them.

Yes, the rich will be with us always. But New York should be a city of workers and eccentrics as well as visionaries and billionaires; a place of schoolteachers and garbagemen and janitors, or people who wear buttons reading *is it fascism yet?*—as one woman in my neighborhood has for decades, even as she grows steadily grayer and more stooped. A city of people who sell books on the street—and in their own shops. A city of street photographers, and immigrant vendors, and bus drivers with attitudes, and even driven businessmen and hedge fund operators. All helped to get along a little better, out of gratitude for all that they do to keep everything running, and to keep New York remarkable.

Instead, our leaders seem hopelessly invested in importing a race of supermen for the supercity, living high above the clouds. Jetting about the world so swiftly and silently, they are barely visible. A city of glass houses where no one's ever home. A city of tourists. An empty city.

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Kevin Baker is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine*. His most recent essay for the magazine, "21st Century Limited," appeared in the July 2014 issue.

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