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# Robert Perl: The East Village's Counterculture Landlord

BY BILLY GRAY (/AUTHOR/BILLY-GRAY/) APRIL 10, 2013, 11 A.M.

Robert Perl bought his first East Village building, 273 East Third Street, in 1988, the year the Tompkins Square Park riots erupted over the imposition of a curfew on the neighborhood focal point, then a veritable tent city.

Mr. Perl, the president of East Village specialist Tower Brokerage, is a rarity among local landlords for his long tenure and his wistfulness about the gentrified area's squalid punk rock past. Today he's among the area's most prolific landlords, with only Abe Haruvi, Ben Shaoul and Steve Croman doing as much.

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GRAFFITI LAMENTS THE EAST VILLAGE'S GENTRIFICATION OUTSIDE  
THE FORMER MARS BAR.

"It's bittersweet," he said. "This was an incredibly exciting community in the 1980s and 1990s. It was so wild and vibrant. Then again, it's cleaner and safer. I've had news correspondents come to my office who talk about covering Laos during the Nixon bombings who say they felt much safer there than they did walking home at night on Avenue B."

These days, the most fearsome experience to be had on Avenue B may involve trying to get as a resident or business owner. Mr. Perl said that retail asking rates range from \$60 per square foot for a large space on a non-retail block to \$175 per square foot. "Retail is strong," he said, "but not as spectacularly strong as property values."

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It's tough to discuss rent in the East Village without summoning the ghost of *Rent*, Jonathan Larson's cultural touchstone set in the waning days of East Village bohemianism. At least, it's difficult to separate the two when speaking with Mr. Perl, who was one of the two landlords of Life Café on the corner of Avenue B and 10<sup>th</sup> Street, where Mr. Larson wrote much of the musical.

The 30-year-old Life Café closed in 2011 following a dispute between Mr. Perl and the other landlord, Abraham Noy. "It was a tale of two landlords," Mr. Perl said. "[Mr. Noy] wanted \$175 a foot for his corner, and I was happy to get under \$100 a foot. If you have one tenancy, how do you equitably share this? I'd have gladly gone in front of any arbitration to settle the matter. But the other party is like, no. Their objective is to make as much money as they can at the cost of anyone else."

Mr. Perl's advocacy on behalf of Life Café owner Kathy Kirkpatrick during the rent dispute, and his affinity for the East Village's increasingly blunted edge, suggests that he is a benevolent landlord in a neighborhood with an ingrained suspicion of, or antipathy toward, real estate professionals. "The cynicism they have today is very different from the 'Die Yuppie Scum' days" Mr. Perl said. "You were more likely to be lynched as a capitalist pig in the '80s than today. Money is something people look up to now, as opposed to deride."

His mark on the East Village even extends to the annual Howl! art festival, which he helps organize.

"We want to maintain as much of the counterculture here as possible," he said.

Having said that, Mr. Perl and Tower Brokerage are marketing several noteworthy retail spaces, including 2,200 square feet at the new 189 Avenue C, with asking rent of \$87 a foot. "You can't stop corporate America," he said while depicting the controversial 7-11 coming to Avenue A as the latest example of corporations "insidiously working their way into the East Village and making it like the rest of the country."

Of course, the "bright orange and green" of 7-11 is only the latest beacon of change in the neighborhood. Another is 51 Astor Place, developer Edward Minskoff's 430,000-square-foot Cooper Square office tower. Still, Mr. Perl is guardedly optimistic that the East Village will not become an expressly luxurious redoubt anytime soon, thanks in part to its small tenement-building bones.

“The building stock is a bulwark against a lot of expansion” Mr. Perl said. “It’s not like suddenly you hit some critical mass and everything changes. It’s a very gradual process. The East Village will never be Park Avenue.”

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