



Emma Russell

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Dec 6, 2016 · 8 min read

Welcome to the “City of Dreams”

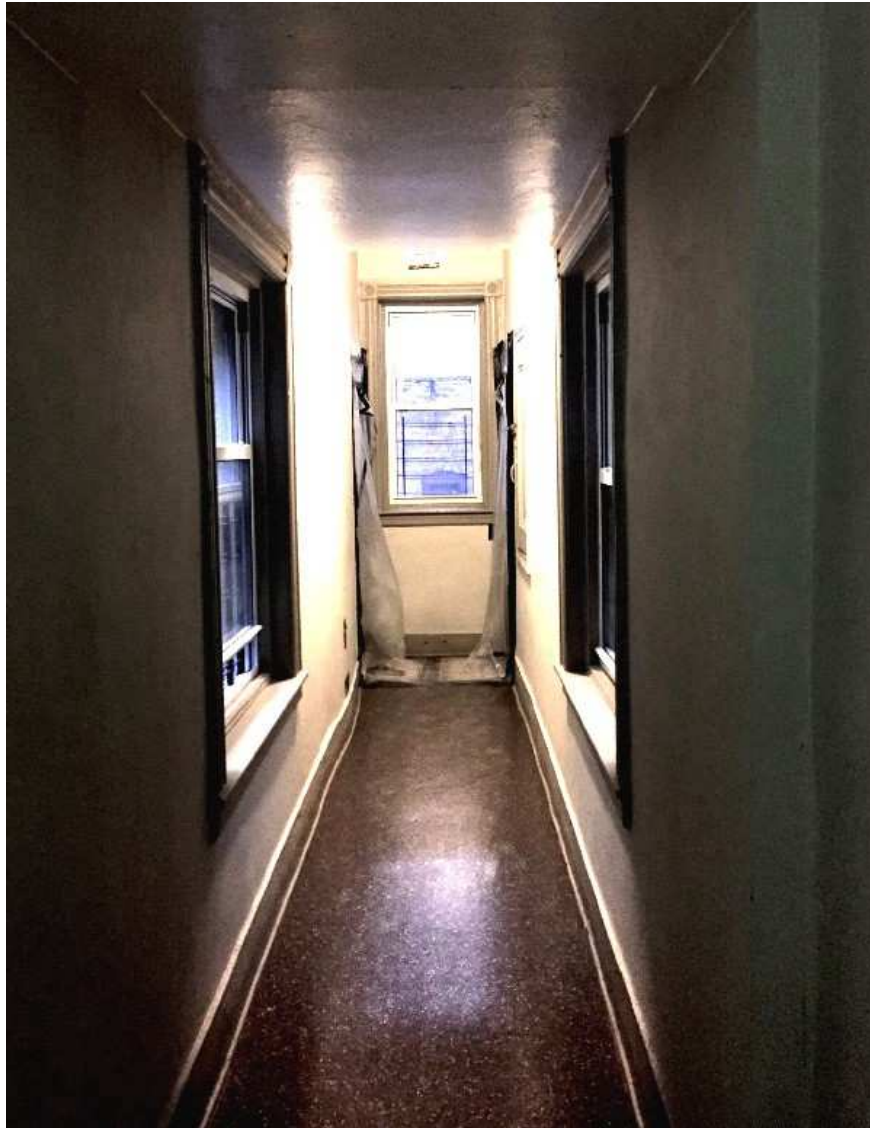
Eviction Notices, Harassment and Abuse for Tenants in New York



Toledano tenants protesting for their right to cooking gas.

“When you wake up in the morning, do you like who you see in the mirror? If the person you see is an asshole, then you’re probably a landlord!”—Sami Chester, tenant organizer

For the tenants of 325 East 12th Street, frozen turkeys and boxed dinners were this year’s Thanksgiving feast. Compliments of Raphael Toledano the 26-year-old landlord who cut off the building’s gas nearly seven months ago. From alleged construction abuse, court harassment and landlord negligence, the East Village residents have experienced the full force of New York’s predatory landlords. An experience echoed across the city’s five boroughs.

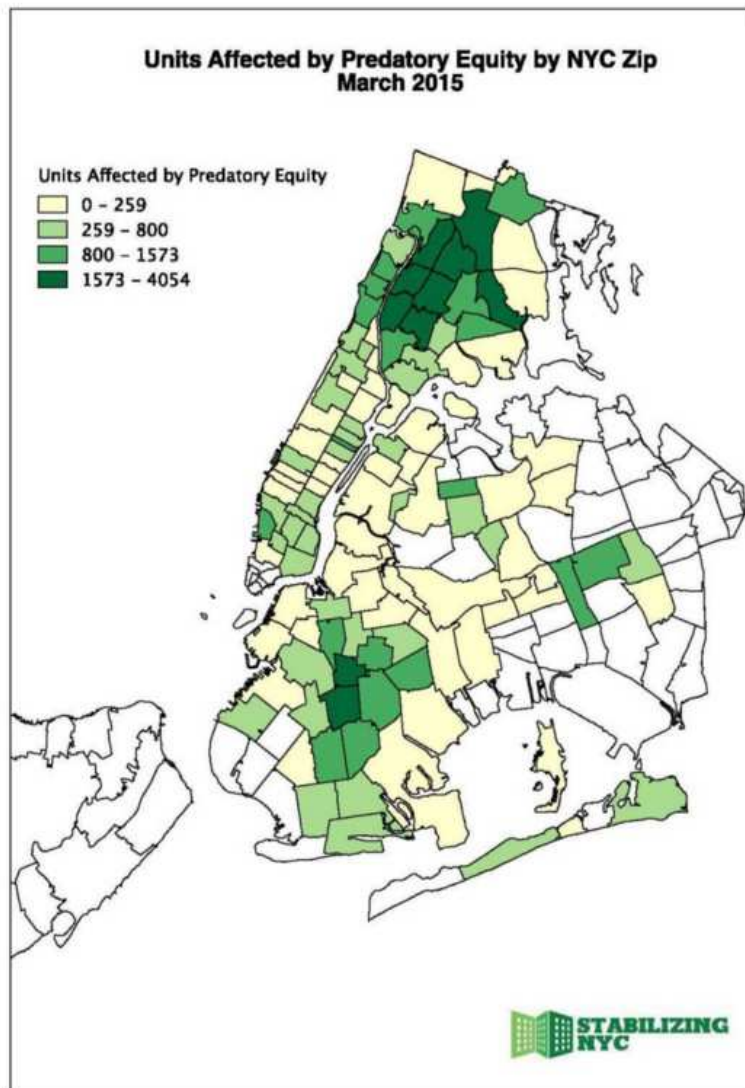


Two Toledano's fourteen gutted apartments

Trissy Callan, who has lived in the building for more than 39 years, says Toledano has already evicted 14 out of the 36 rent-stabilized units. Pressuring tenants out of their homes with eviction notices and claims of non-payment, making her feel “like a piece on Toledano and Trump’s Monopoly game board.”

“Watch out, citizens, the thugs have been elected!”—Trissy Callan, tenant.

In September 2015 Madison Reality Capital provided Toledano with a \$124 million mortgage to purchase 17 buildings around the East Village and Chelsea area. Allowing him to buy rent-stabilized properties at inflated costs, knowing that if he forced those tenants out, the value of his buildings would soar.



Properties affected by predatory equity according to Stabilizing NYC.

Dubbed by tenant activists as “predatory equity,” this risky model of speculative over-funding has encouraged landlords to take out inflated mortgage loans from banks. These can be upwards of 80% of the acquisition costs, the Stabilizing NYC coalition claims in their report “Banking on Gentrification.”

“Under the weight of these inflated debt obligations, landlords have to manipulate the laws that govern New York City’s housing,” the report said. Implementing “systematic harassment tactics in the hope of raising rents and replacing low-income tenants with higher paying residents.”

Toledano’s methods have included complete gut renovations of apartments, leaving residents breathing in toxic asbestos dust from the construction work. This can be “very dangerous in terms of respiratory illnesses,” worries Sami Chester a tenant organizer who works with the Cooper Square Committee, a tenant rights group operating in New York since 1959. He explains that the dust is especially detrimental to the health of “pregnant women, children and elderly people who have trouble breathing.”

William Engel also describes feeling “completely harassed by the negligence.” Citing piles of broken furniture, decaying wood, cardboard and rotting garbage being left in the empty dwellings, which have encouraged rodents and cockroaches to breed. These hazardous conditions have attracted Environmental Control Board fines from the city’s housing court, however, few have been paid. As landlords see legal fees as the price of doing business in New York City.



Protesters outside Madison Reality Capital

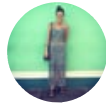
At the protest on East 12th Street, the New York State Senator Brad Hoylman appealed, “Landlords need to hurt like the tenants are hurting.” In his campaign he explained that while the property might merely be a commodity to Toledano, his aggressive methods are distressing real people and ruining their homes.

“When you destroy a person’s home, ultimately you’re destroying their spirit.”—Sami Chester, Cooper Square Committee tenant organizer

“A landlord should be someone that increases the moral value of the community not the other way around,” Sami Chester claims. When the property is valuable, landlords kick out all “the mom and pop” stores, the kinds of stores that watch out for your children, collect your packages if you’re not in and really look out for you in the community. “What we have to do is get a better sense of our civilization, and think about what we really want to leave behind.”

Chester is a tenant co-ordinator at the Cooper Square Committee, one of the fifteen grassroots neighbourhood-based organizations that make up the Stabilizing NYC coalition. Their aim is to target tenant harassment, preserve affordable housing and provide legal and advocacy aid to tenants in need.

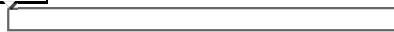
On their website, they list the ten predatory equity landlords they believe cause the most damage in New York City. The most prominent of which are Ved Parkash—dubbed the “City’s Worst Landlord” by public advocate Letitia James in November 2015 and the infamous Steve Croman, who was recently charged with 20 felonies.



Ceiling

from Emma Russell

01:04



A Croman tenant suffers from construction harassment.

The New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman led the investigation against Croman, focussing on his tenant harassment and predatory business practices. In December 2015, Croman owed over a million dollars in ECB fines alone, having accumulated many more from other agencies as well. He had 141 court defaults, 4 stop work orders and was ordered to vacate two buildings.

New York's rent regulation laws "are meant to protect tenants from rapid rent increases in a tight housing market," the Stabilizing NYC report states. However, Steve Croman is responsible for the destabilization of 390 rent-stabilized units in the last five years. This "unnatural drain of affordable housing has a broader impact on an increasingly unaffordable city."



A light floods with water after a bathroom leaks upstairs.

Cynthia Chaffee's pre-war, walk up on East 18th Street, was bought by Croman in 1999 and "from the day he bought the building he's been harassing the tenants horrendously. We weren't prepared for it," she says. "He came in and made people prove they were tenants, taking us to court and asking us to prove it was our primary residence."

"He gave us no heat, no hot water, we were freezing. Then he started the renovations and there were all the issues with breathing in toxic, contaminated dust. We had it tested and it had elevated levels of crystalized silica in it...It didn't matter if it was next to us, above us, below us, it would cause so much damage to our apartment, it would create leaks."



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Croman tenants talk about their experiences.

Hitting the most vulnerable first, Chaffee describes how Croman targeted the elderly and those whose first language wasn't English, successfully evicting 62 out of the 72 apartments he owned. Even Helen Rejewski, a 91-years-old resident of the West Village, was served court papers and claims to have been violently harassed by those working for Croman. An article in the West View News noted she was handcuffed and taken to the New York Cornell Weill Hospital by police as an attempt, by her landlord, to scare her.



Photo by: Stop Croman Coalition

Croman is notorious for using the ex-cop Anthony Falconite to harass his tenants. Louis Cortez, a tenant on 338 East 100th Street claiming; “a couple of times [Falconite] came to our apartment without saying anything and then went inside, asking for IDs and asking who we are.”

In an apartment building of mostly Latin-American immigrants, the threat of deportation is an added fear. Many speak little or no English and even when they do, their knowledge of the law is limited. Geovany Izquierdo, an immigrant from Ecuador, claims many of the long-term tenants in the building have since fled, accepting the buyout payments from Croman.

predatory landlords begin evicting rent-stabilized and low-income tenants, whole communities are being priced out of the neighborhoods that have been their home for decades. This shift in demographics is known more commonly as gentrification, a term coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1970s.



Gentrifying Neighborhoods in New York.

Between 1990 and 2010–14, gentrifying areas of New York experienced an increased “number of college students, young adults, childless families, non-family households and white residents,” according to a report by NYU’s Furman Center. Out of the 22 neighborhoods classified as low-income in 1990, the report categorizes 15 as “gentrifying” today, showing a 34.3% average percentage change in household rent.

The population of those that identify as black also declined in gentrifying neighborhoods between 1990–2010, while those that identified as white increased from 18.8% in 1990 to 20.6% in 2010. This has been particularly well documented in Harlem, an