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## Here's What Happened on the Lower East Side in 2016



A rally was held outside Rivington House in April of 2016.

On the Lower East Side, it's been a year of scandal, rampant real estate development, momentous political transitions and even a few exciting new beginnings. Before 2016 becomes a distant memory, we wanted to take some time today to look back on the major stories we covered in the past 12 months and at some of the news items that caught your interest on The Lo-Down.

### RIVINGTON HOUSE FIASCO

No story was bigger for us in 2016 than Rivington House. It was actually in late 2015 (in two reports published on [Dec. 2](#) and [Dec. 18](#) to be exact) that we broke the news which would later rock the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio. Three months later, on March 23, the world outside the LES finally learned that the city's Department of Administrative Services had lifted deed restrictions, clearing the way for the luxury condo conversion of a former AIDS nursing home. The revelations led to [multiple investigations](#), policy changes and [legislative reform proposals](#). But while there were [vague promises from the mayor](#) to create some type of new senior housing facility on the Lower East Side, the neighborhood has so far been denied what it wants most: the return of Rivington House to the community.



Rendering shows huge new towers dotting the East Side waterfront.

## MEGA-TOWERS ON THE WATERFRONT

Residents in the Two Bridges neighborhood were reeling this year as a series of large-scale development projects were announced. They watched as Extell Development's 80-story luxury complex started to rise on the former Cherry Street Pathmark site. [In April](#), executives of JDS Development Group sat down with us, exclusively, to share details of their 77-story tower, cantilevering over a senior building controlled by the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council. As 2016 wound down, developers of big projects at [260 South St.](#) and [259 Clinton St.](#) unveiled big projects along the waterfront. [Residents reacted negatively](#) to the plans, but the city [rejected calls for a public land use review](#) in the neighborhood. Instead, they agreed to [conduct an environmental study](#), taking a look at the impact of nearly 3,000 new apartments in the area.



Essex Crossing under construction, August 2016.

## ESSEX CROSSING TAKES SHAPE

Two out of four buildings under construction in the big Essex Crossing project [topped out this year](#). Meanwhile, there were a series of announcements concerning high-profile commercial tenants. [In October](#), the development team let it be known that Trader Joe's would be taking a 30,000 square foot space in a 15-story mixed-use building at Grand and Clinton streets. [Earlier in 2016](#), NYU Langone Medical Center confirmed it was taking 55,000 square foot in another Essex Crossing building. [The developers also kicked off sales](#) for 55 luxury condos on Ludlow Street and released [renderings for the Market Line](#), a large public market that will stretch across three blocks on Broome and Delancey streets.



Lowline rendering; courtesy of Raad Studio/James Ramsey.

## THE LOWLINE MOVES FORWARD

[During the summer](#), the City of New York gave conditional approval to a proposal to create a park and community space in an abandoned trolley terminal below Delancey Street. The team behind the project, known as the Lowline, had been seeking access to the site for five years. [In an exclusive story](#) this past fall, we published the proposal submitted to the city by the Lowline team, which included many new details regarding their preliminary plan. Heading into 2017, the organization is stepping up its community outreach and fundraising.





Sheldon Silver leaves court May 3 after sentencing.

#### ONE POLITICAL ERA ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

In May, former Lower East Side Assemblyman Sheldon Silver was sentenced to 12 years in prison after being found guilty last year on federal corruption charges. While the former speaker remained free (appeals are ongoing), a new political era was dawning. Alice Cancel, backed by Silver's political organization, won a special election in the spring to temporarily fill the 65th assembly district seat that Silver had held since 1976. But she was defeated in the Democratic Primary held in September (the longtime community activist took a lot of heat for calling Silver a hero in an interview with The Lo-Down.) Yuh-Line Niou was the victor. The Financial District resident is now poised to become only the second Asian American in the state legislature.



Steve Croman after his surrender May 9. Photo: New York Daily News.

#### LANDLORDS UNDER FIRE

The state attorney general this year was seen as an ally of Lower East Side tenant advocates in their ongoing battle with notorious local landlords. In May, controversial property owner Steve Croman was arrested and charged with crimes related to what the AG called a campaign to threaten and intimidate rent regulated tenants. In November, the attorney general sued Larry Marolda, another landlord, accusing him of using illegal and unethical tactics. Property owner Samy Mahfar this year agreed to pay tenants in four of his LES buildings around \$200,000 to settle several lawsuits. The tenants accused him of allowing toxic dust to waft through their apartments during building renovations. In a separate matter, Mahfar was forced to withdraw an application for zoning changes on East Houston Street due to opposition from City Council member Rosie Mendez.



355 Grand St. was demolished over a period of several weeks.

### BUILDINGS DEMOLISHED, NEW CONDOS EVERYWHERE

One of our most clicked on stories of the year was a short post about the [approval of demolition permits](#) at 355 Grand St., a 200 year-old row house. The building has now been dismantled, with a new mixed-use project on the way. As the year ends, demolition crews are still on site at the former Rivington Street headquarters of Streit's Matzo. Soon builders will start erecting a 7-story condo project with apartment [prices starting at about \\$1 million](#). The condos are similarly priced at 196 Orchard St., [developer Ben Shaoul's luxury project](#) that swept away several independent businesses, including the beloved Turkish spot Bereket. Meanwhile, the new owners of the former Bialystoker Nursing Home on East Broadway plan to restore the city-protected landmark, while building new residential towers to accompany it. In the new year, they hope residents of the neighboring Seward Park co-op will [sell them development rights for the project](#).



The former home of Fontana's, 105-107 Eldridge St.

### SMALL BUSINESSES FADE AWAY

It was another brutal year for small businesses on the Lower East Side. Our most read story of the year, by far, was the announcement in January that Fontana's, the big bar and performance space on Eldridge Street was [closing after 12 years](#). The owners told that it, "just had become increasingly hard to be an independent business in New York City without compromising your vision." Other closings we tracked: [Ludlow Guitars](#) (17 years on the LES), [Cake Shop](#) (11 years) Belraf Fabrics (33 years), [Reed Space](#) (15 years), [Tapeo 29](#) (12 years), [Mission Cantina](#) (3 years), [The Little Shoe Store](#) (3 years), [Yunnan BBQ](#) (4 years), [La Petite Mort](#) (3 years), [Lisa Cooley Gallery](#) (6 years), [Sam's Spring Roll](#) (1.5 years), [Caballito](#) (2 years), [Pies & Thighs](#) (1.5 years), [C.O.W. Theatre](#) (3 years), [Stay Classy Bar](#) (1 year), [Lowlife](#) (6 months).



Rupert Noffs and Matty Bennett of the Lucky Bee. Photo from the restaurant's Instagram.

#### AND OTHERS ARRIVE ON THE SCENE

In spite of the struggles of restaurants and retail ventures, 2016 saw plenty of new arrivals. Notable new neighbors on the Lower East Side and in Chinatown included: [The Lucky Bee](#), a cutting edge Southeast Asian restaurant on Broome Street; [Osaka Grub](#), [Arancini Bros.](#), and [Top Hops to Go](#) in the Essex Street Market; upscale Italian chain [Serafina](#); [Chinese Tuxedo](#), an ambitious project on Doyers Street; [Speedy Romeo](#), the Brooklyn-based pizza specialist; [Delilah](#), a gussied up bar in the former St. Jerome's space; [Lalo](#), the new Chinatown project from El Rey chef Gerardo Gonzalez; [2 Bridges Music Arts](#); [Saluggi's](#) on Grand Street; [Bing Kitchen](#); [Soft Swerve](#), a new ice cream shop on Allen Street; [Little Canal](#); the coffee shop across from Seward Park; and [Suffolk Arms](#), the hotly anticipated cocktail bar from Giuseppe Gonzalez.



Photo by Melissa Horn/courtesy of Kossar's.

#### ICONIC LES BUSINESSES EXPAND, REVAMP

Beloved Lower East Side institutions were in expansion mode this year. [In February](#), Kossar's Bialys reopened after a four-month renovation project, unveiling spiffy new digs on Grand Street, a grill and full-fledged sandwich menu. Just a day or two before 2016 ended, the Pickle Guys soft-opened a [new store](#) in a corner spot at Grand and Essex streets, and planned a restaurant in an adjoining space. Meanwhile, Russ & Daughters [debuted a brand new restaurant](#) uptown, in the lower level of the Jewish Museum. The revered appetizing store also [announced plans](#) for a new 14,000 square foot production facility at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. And finally, Katz's Deli prepared to [open a new takeout shop](#) in Brooklyn (that move has been delayed until the spring of 2017).





The Metrograph opened on Ludlow Street in May. Photo by Whitney Browne.

### CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS ON THE MOVE

It was a good year for the arts on the Lower East Side. In March, Alexander Olch opened the Metrograph independent movie theater on Ludlow Street. The two-screen cinema, with a stylish second floor restaurant, quickly earned a reputation for high quality programming. It also became a magnet for independent film luminaries, who scheduled their openings at the Metrograph. In the summer, the International Center of Photography relocated from Midtown, opening an 11,000 square foot exhibition space at 250 Bowery. Existing neighborhood cultural organizations also took major steps in 2016. The Tenement Museum kicked off a \$12.5 million expansion and planned a new exhibition focused on the years after World War II. We interviewed the museum's president, Morris Vogel, about the expansion, as well as other topics. And ABC No Rio moved out of its crumbling Rivington Street headquarters and planned to build a new arts center on the Lower East Side.



Carmen Pabon. October 2016.

### WE LOST FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

Among those who passed in 2016: Carmen Pabon, community activist; Heshy Jacob, Grand Street leader; David Weinberger, district leader; Ron Budinas, Essex Street Market vendor; Jeffrey Ruhalter, Essex Street Market butcher; Al Orensanz, director of the Angel Orensanz Center.

We will see you in 2017.

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