Ligon, Glenn. “Housing in New York: A Brief History, 1960–2007.”

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1000 Trinity Avenue

Bronx, 1960–1973. A public-housing project built in the mid-1950s. With 1,349 apartments in fifteen high-rise buildings surrounded by abundant green space, it was a Le Corbusier fantasy transplanted to the South Bronx. My mother claimed the projects were “beautiful” when we moved in. Given the decrepit tenements that surrounded us, I could see why she was grateful for our tiny, spartan apartment with its New York City Housing Authority–chosen paint scheme and blistering but reliable steam heat. In *The Flâneur*, Edmund White writes about a friend who defines a big city as a place where there are “blacks, tall buildings and you can stay up all night,” but by the early 1970s the excitement of living in the “big city” that was the Forest Houses had worn off. Bad public policies and rising crime had caused the project and the neighborhood around it to deteriorate. Despite our eyewitness view of the birth of hip-hop (“Hoodlums,” I was told. “Out there scratching up perfectly good records”), my mother decided that we needed to move to a safer area.

1871 Schieffelin Place

Bronx, 1973–1982. In 1971 my mother got a job at Bronx Psychiatric Center, a large inpatient facility at the northeast edge of the borough. Facing an hour-long commute to work, she decided to apply to transfer to a project closer to her job. Moving between projects was not an easy thing. Under the guise of maintaining ethnic diversity (i.e., white tenants), it was nearly impossible for a black family to relocate to a project that wasn’t already predominantly black, and the smaller, less chaotic housing projects in the northeast Bronx still had numerous white families living in them. Only letters from a social worker at my mother’s job helped ensure our application was accepted. We moved to a six-story building on Schieffelin Place, named after the man who released sixty starlings in Central Park at the turn of the nineteenth century, the descendants of which now number over 200 million. The Baychester Houses were quiet, marginally integrated, and so far removed from the South Bronx that the subway station near our house had signs that indicated whether the arriving train was going “to the city” or coming “from the city.”

172 Lafayette Avenue

Brooklyn, 1982–1983 When I graduated from college I decided to rent an apartment with a friend on the top floor of a brownstone in Fort Greene. In the early 1980s, Fort Greene was not the fashionable, pricey enclave it is now. When a friend asked a policeman about moving into the neighborhood, he replied, "Shake your head. I want to hear the wind rattle through it." While the apartment was fine, the owners of the building were notorious for their miserliness. During winter days there would be no heat in the building because "the heat is on when you are at home, not when you are at work." It didn't matter that I worked nights and that the boiler made no adjustments for weekends. When I complained to my friend Andrea about how "the Jews" were stingy with the heat and "the Jews" didn't keep the building up, she gave me a horrified look. "Glenn, I've never known you to be anti-Semitic," she said, her voice full of concern and reproach. "Anti-Semitic?" I responded, perplexed. "No, no, no. Not J-E-W. It's J-O-O. They're Korean."

380 Riverside Drive

Manhattan, 1983–1987. I sublet a co-op apartment with my boyfriend (whom I met when my toilet leaked into his apartment at 172 Lafayette Avenue). The owner bought it for her daughter to live in while she was in grad school at Columbia University, but it had sat empty for a couple of years. It was dark and needed a good paint job, but it was in a doorman building in a lively neighborhood. The sublet was illegal so I tried to keep a low profile in the building. I stayed there for four years, two years longer than the relationship lasted, and moved out only after a chance encounter with the owner of the apartment, whom I had only spoken with over the phone and who was clearly startled to find out that I was black. A week later her daughter called to say that her mother wanted me out.

100 Johnson Street

Brooklyn, 1987–1990. To support my nascent artistic career I took a freelance proofreading job at a law firm. When my sublet on Riverside Drive ended, one of my co-workers offered me space in a nineteenth-century wood-frame house he was renting on a two-block-long street in downtown Brooklyn. The apartment was an attic with sloping walls and a leaky roof, but it was big enough to use as a painting studio and had room leftover for a couch and a bed. Soon after I moved in, the owners of the building became embroiled in an eminent-domain dispute with the City, which wanted to expand the campus of the technical college across the street. Wary of a long fight over the house and tired of living with a roommate, I moved to a one-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights. The house was eventually condemned, and my former roommate used the small cash settlement he got from the City to resettle in Prague.

540 West 165th Street

Manhattan, 1990. A renovated apartment in a slowly gentrifying building in Washington Heights. It was across the street from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and adjacent to the Audubon Ballroom, the spot where Malcolm X was assassinated. My neighbors, immigrants from the Dominican Republic who had moved into the building in the 1960s, were shocked at the rent I was paying, although I thought it was a bargain compared with other Manhattan neighborhoods. I lasted there six months, moving out after a flood caused my bathroom ceiling to collapse (with little response from the landlord) and I came home one day to find DEA helicopters circling the neighborhood and thirty policemen in riot gear escorting drug dealers out the front door.

195a Washington Park

Brooklyn, 1990–1995. A studio apartment in a brownstone facing Fort Greene Park. The neighborhood had changed since I lived there in the early 80s. Spike Lee's production company was a few blocks away, there were new restaurants and cafés opening, and the neighborhood delis had started to take down their floor-to-ceiling Plexiglas robbery shields. Older black residents were bewildered by the influx of people into overpriced rentals in what they still considered a marginal area. As far as they were concerned, we were all part of a conspiracy to run them out of their homes, and they made no distinction between young white gentrifiers and black ones. I stayed in the apartment for five years until I decided that I needed a bigger living space.

168 Prospect Place

Brooklyn, 1995–2002. A one-bedroom brownstone floor-through on a quiet, tree-lined street in Prospect Heights. My neighbor Herbie jokingly called the area "Dark Slope" because the complexion of its residents was dramatically different from that of those south of Flatbush Avenue in more affluent Park Slope. It was from the roof of this building that I watched the World Trade Center collapse in 2001 and on Flatbush Avenue that I directed traffic later that day, pressed into service by a cop who needed a break to use the bathroom.

535 Dean Street

Brooklyn, 2002–2007. A one-bedroom apartment in a converted factory building on the edge of the Long Island Railroad train yard. The developers, gambling that soaring real estate prices in Park Slope would soon extend to Prospect Heights, created condos out of what was the long-empty Daily News printing plant. It was the first time I had owned real estate, buying the apartment from plans before construction had begun and waiting nearly a year and a half for the building to be finished. The apartment was on the fifth floor facing west and had an incredible view over the train yards of downtown Brooklyn and New Jersey. I realized this view would soon disappear when real estate developer Bruce Ratner announced plans for a Frank Gehry-designed basketball stadium and dozens of office and residential towers. If approved, it will be one of the largest developments ever built in the city and will dramatically change the character of the neighborhood. Facing ten years of construction and what was turning into a losing battle over eminent domain, overcrowding, and a lack of low-income housing, I decided to sell and move on.

395 Broadway

Manhattan, 2007–present. A condo building on the eastern edge of Tribeca. Converted in the early 1980s and adjacent to Chinatown, the building is full of Asian families who smartly favor low maintenance over doormen or an in-house gym. While most of my friends are moving to Brooklyn, seeking neighborhoodliness, more space, and lower costs, I decided that I liked living in this part of Manhattan, where nobody knows your name. Like any other neighborhood in New York, Tribeca is full of contradictions. Movie stars live around the corner from me, but at the base of my building is a shop called Western Spirit, which sells saddles, turquoise jewelry, and feathered headdresses to tourists, and from my roof I can see women sewing fake designer bags in garment factories that have been in continuous use since the nineteenth century.

My mother's dream was that she would end her days in a little yellow house in the country. She passed away, as I probably will, living in an apartment building with neighbors above and below. I was born here in New York, and like many other New Yorkers I lack imagination: the idea of living somewhere else has never occurred to me. Indeed, to live in New York is to have lived everywhere.