

# MANHATTAN'S WEST SIDE

## Post Daily Magazine



The Samtons on W. 88th: A tough six years.

Post Photo by Murray Friedman

**ARTICLE IV: The Problems.**

By ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ

**HARRIET T.**, resident of a Mitchell-Lama building in the West Side Urban Renewal Area, black, divorced, struggling to make ends meet on her \$20,000 plus salary as a college professor, mother of two sons, one in college and one in high school.

A West Side resident for many years, Mrs. T. moved to her West 90s apartment more than four years ago because the Urban Renewal Area offered blacks rare opportunity for desirable middle-income housing in an economically integrated area. Today Mrs. T. is looking into moving to Roosevelt Island. "The city has reneged on its promise of a well-integrated community here," she says bitterly.

"They're dramatically increasing the proportion of low-income and welfare tenants and in the moderate income buildings the income limitations are so low they might just as well be public housing," she adds. "I can't get into the bank here to make a deposit because the lines are so long with people cashing welfare checks."

**Blanca Matos**, 17-year resident of Douglas Houses, the West Side's largest public housing complex at 102-106 Streets and Columbus Avenue, husband Oscar, for 23 years bell captain at Statler Hilton, five children—two working, two in college, and a 5-year-old son who Mrs. Matos has to "make scared so he'll play only in front of the building because it gets dangerous around here."

Mrs. Matos, Puerto Rican, remembers when the neighborhood was "better," when there were more "mixed nationalities, a lot of Orthodox Jews, block parties, street bazaars." Then, she says, for a while there were "gangs but they went out of style and now are back again." She is disturbed by the rapes, muggings and stabbings that she hears about. With her neighbors, Mrs. Matos tries hard to keep the building in shape but their decorating efforts get vandalized and the building entrance is never locked.

**Peter Samton**, partner and design director for architectural firm of Gruzen & Partners, father of two children in private school, with wife Emily bought and renovated West 88th St., brownstone near Amsterdam Avenue in 1968, moving from Chelsea because the "urban renewal area promised a more integrated neighborhood than anywhere else in the city."

In six years, the Samtons have had their home broken into five times. Their block at the southern, uncompleted end of the urban renewal area is considered one of the most beautiful in the area but has been the scene of roof-top break-ins, muggings, burglaries, constant petty vandalism, a drug-dispute shooting, rocks thrown in windows, harassment of the brownstone and public housing children who play so well together on the street or in the playground of the public housing building on the corner.

"Construction has not moved ahead as expected," Samton says. "Our corners remain slums and now the new housing that is planned is for primarily low-income families. It disturbs me that there won't be more middle income people but it's hard to know what things will be like until the new buildings are occupied."

"What's most depressing," adds Emily Samton, "is that some very committed brownstone owners and apartment dwellers

are already giving up and moving out. They refuse to wait any longer to see if things will improve."

Behind the facade of renewal and renaissance that covers great chunks of the West Side from 59th to 110th St., there are areas of great discontent and frustration.

"Development on the West Side has been so visible that it simply masks the real problems," says Elizabeth Trebony, head of Project Find, which assists elderly West Siders between 34th and 86th Streets.

The "great sore" of the West Side—the Single Room Occupancy-Welfare Hotel problem—floods the area with unsupervised former mental patients, alcoholics, junkies, multi-problem families, and leaves the elderly vulnerable and the younger families scared.

A 1969 city-wide study of SRO buildings indicated that almost 50 per cent of the entire city's SRO tenants live on the West Side, occupying some 25,000 apartment units between 74th and 110th Streets. Although the hotels Hamilton and Hargrave have been converted to housing for the elderly and the Kimberly at 73d and Broadway is vacant, not much has changed the situation in five years.

"If anything," says community board president Robert Kagan, "it's worse." And, Kagan adds, the area still has the highest proportion of elderly of any neighborhood in the city.

The West Side Urban Renewal Program (87th to 97th, Central Park West to Amsterdam), initiated in the 1950s as the nation's model for economic integration within buildings, has been stumbling past the half-completion mark with a few years of stormy community debate.

Some groups have called for increasing the proportion of low-income housing. Others claim any increase would cause the community to tip into a slum or ghetto. And while the conflict was enough to cause some of the bitterest community battles the neighborhood has seen in years, federal housing funds stopped and made things worse.

"A lot of people lost faith in government's ability to produce and proceed in an open manner," says State Housing Commissioner Lee Goodwin, who helped break the deadlock by committing the state to complete the project. "There was a strong queasiness about seeing the area half done," she adds.

"On the whole," says Housing and Development Administrator Roger Starr, "you've got to say it's one of the most exciting residential urban renewal projects that's taken place anywhere in the U. S. What the West Side still faces is the great gap in mores between the middle class and lower income people that has not been resolved. Because they are so close to each other and because their ways of life are so different, they stiffen their attitudes towards each other instead of relaxing them.

Up in the Cathedral Parkway Urban

Renewal Area (CPW to Amsterdam, 111th to 168th Streets) there are four city-owned sites awaiting construction that could begin an upturn for the whole Manhattan Valley area. There are no funds to build. Development in the Morningside Heights community is deadlocked between the institutions like Columbia University that own 80 per cent of the land and the community that lives there.

With developer Paul Milstein seeking to build a 43-story tower one block south of his One Lincoln Plaza across from Lincoln Center and Christopher Boomis building a luxury high-rise at 96th and Broadway, some West Siders are concerned that once the building slump is over, the neighborhood is in for the same rash of luxury high-rises that has sterilized the East Side.

There are other issues. The final shape of the reconstructed West Side Highway will determine future traffic and congestion patterns. Vacancy decontrol rents and co-operative maintenances are skyrocketing—threatening the heavy middle-income population that has so long stabilized the area.

Schools are overutilized in the upper reaches and underutilized toward Lincoln Center, where there is a heavy concentration of private school families. The spreading phenomenon of the fast-food stores makes residents wonder if Broadway and other commercial spines won't turn into "one long 8th Street."

Recently, a rumor circulated in the area around 79th Street and Columbus Avenue that a McDonald's would open on that corner. "The community was up in arms," says Councilman Ted Weiss. "Five years ago a MacDonal'd's would have been considered a neighborhood improvement for Columbus Avenue. Today it's an anathema."

Crime—a constant topic of West Side conversations—is up in some areas, down in others. "When you can forget the feeling of danger, the West Side is a terrific place to live," says actress Nancy Charney.

Statistics don't seem to affect the way people live with the reality of crime as much as people's "feel" for it does. With stores staying open late, restaurants proliferating and night life in general picking up, many residents feel the community has gotten safer in recent years.

One guide, says Councilman Weiss, is the newstands. "Only a few years ago, none stayed open late except at 72d Street," says Weiss. "Now they're open late up and down Broadway."

Consistently, when you speak to residents about what's good and bad on the West Side, they will tell you everything that's happening within a small radius of their home. They know who lives above and below them, those their children meet in the playground, they organize food co-ops or babysitting services and they know the local shopkeepers as well as their neighbors.

Yet, as Assemblyman Al Blumenthal says, "there are so many diverse communities, they hardly relate."

Actor Jordan Charney lives in a 10-story apartment house on 74th between Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues. When he talks of "the marvelous shops offering home-made things" and "the assortment of people going into their own business" that is happening in "his" neighborhood, he is talking about the West Side up to 79th Street.

"Lincoln Center has pushed problems uptown," Charney says, "hiding them a little better because they're out of my neighborhood. Up there it's as scary as it used to be when we moved here seven years ago."

Bill and Sue Silver live at 90th and Riverside Drive. For them the demarcation line is 96th Street. "I'm enraged by the prostitution, drugs and alcoholism that I see at Broadway and 96th," says Bill Silver.

Everyone has his own set of dividing lines but the most common selection does seem to be 96th Street. "North of 96th there is a continuing sense of deterioration," notes State Sen. Ohrenstein. "There is a lower quality of building maintenance up there but it is a very viable area, it's just not getting the kind of sophisticated attention it needs."

Boundaries may differ and problems may vary but basic social, political and physical identities are not dissimilar. Each neighborhood has its share of alert activists who know what's going on around them and are ready to tackle whatever problems confront them.

It is very much a do-it-yourself state of mind that pervades each sub-community and whether it's tree-planting, day care, playgrounds or housing problems, West Siders don't wait for City Hall to solve them. For this they pay a price.

"Because we've been articulate, organized and responsible," says Anita DuBrul, co-chairman of the community board's health committee, "we're asked to deal with problems the city doesn't want. The city takes advantage of our chauvinism."

And yet, there are many like Nancy Charney who regard this as the "double-edged problem" giving the West Side a certain vitality other neighborhoods lack. "Sure we have more than our share of problems," says Mrs. Charney, who won't let her children get off the school bus and come upstairs alone even though her West 74th Street block has "gotten better."

"We have more than our share of problems," she says, "but in a sense that's why it is so good living here. Living on the West Side is like living in the world. There is no way you can ignore the realities of living in a big city. And if you want to live in the city, you might as well be in the middle of it."

**TOMORROW: Chelsea**