

Houses Divided

Jesse Lin

Class of 2024

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2024

Jacqueline Lara picked her second cigarette of the day. Above the kitchen counter, the prednisone for her asthma watched as the Newport slid out of its packet into Lara's fingers. She lit the nicotine stick with the gas stove and fired it into her lungs; to hell with her emphysema.

She talked of buying a 2017 Volkswagen she saw the other day to get as far away from New York City as she could, just for a little bit: to Denver, the Poconos, anywhere but home on 401 16th Street.

The last time she left home, in 2021, Lara had protested for two years against Mayor de Blasio's plan to demolish part of her public housing project, Fulton Houses.

Lara reheated her Café Bustelo in the microwave and sat back down in her thinking chair. Her eyes lit up at memories of the Google building turning rainbow every June for Pride month outside her kitchen window. The unabashedly wealthy walking below wore Gucci and Louis Vuitton. The more discreet wore Loro Piana. She talked disdainfully about them peeing in front of the Houses after their nights out.

Ten streets north, 10th Avenue separated luxury apartments from Fulton Houses' sister development, Elliott-Chelsea Houses. It's choked on school days with black SUVs picking up children from one of the most expensive private schools in America.

The neighborhood's abandoned railway was commandeered by Related Companies, one of the country's largest luxury housing developers, and turned into the High Line, a walkway park flanked by Related Companies' luxury apartments with patrician names like the Tate. It connects Chelsea to Hudson Yards, the largest private real estate project America has seen.

Related Companies, founded by the Miami-Dolphins-owning billionaire, Stephen Ross, poured \$25 billion into the once gritty, dockyard neighborhood, now replete with high fashion brands like Dior and Cartier. Not the most haute of French couture, though; one has to find a Chanel bag elsewhere.

No other neighborhood could bring in as much money as theirs to fund public housing repairs, the mayor admitted to a disapproving town hall crowd in December 2019. After building the new apartments on top of the public housing rubble, the high rents from residents sporting designer brands would finance the \$366 million-worth of maintenance costs at Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

Lara and her neighbors' input wasn't solicited for the proposed demolition. They protested once they found out about the plan, forcing the city to form a committee to

address their concerns over transparency, the Houses' future affordability, as well as meet the Houses' repair needs without demolishing their homes.

The pandemic sent the committee's meetings online. One of the original protesters died. Lara had to get rid of bedbugs from her mom's apartment.

When she helped her mom move to Ocala, Florida, the Sunshine State beckoned her to stay while her son kept paying the rent at Fulton Houses. After languishing in Florida for two years, two of the original protesters called to bring her back to New York City.

The Working Group had chosen two joint developers to renovate their homes, Related Companies, which has one of the largest affordable housing portfolios in the country in addition to its luxury housing stock, along with Essence Development.

They wanted to demolish all of Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

"I was just telling [my mom] I want to save my home," Lara said, but her mom didn't want to be left behind.

Lara sold the house and everything in it, and into the 1992 Chevrolet went her mom, the wheelchair, and the dogs. Driving on I-95 would be a straight shot up to New York City.

"It was really hard driving back here," Lara said. "All I was thinking about was Fulton. I have to go home, I have to go home, I have to go home. I have to fight."

She put down her cigarette and sang her way to the fridge to make lemon chicken and rice for her seven-person household.

*These eyes cry every night for you
These arms long to hold you again*

In went the adobo and Great Value onion powder with the chicken breasts. One pan fed her two daughters, her son, her granddaughters, and her granddaughter's stepsister.

"I don't know how long I'm gonna last," Lara said, "but I want to make sure my kids have a home."

Mixed-income housing fears and public housing hopes

The median public housing household pays just \$500 in rent, whereas half of renters in New York City shell out nearly a third of their paychecks towards rent; a quarter of renters spend half of their earnings.

\$500 from households can't maintain public housing infrastructure for the city's public housing population that's larger than Atlanta and Miami, and that concentrates the country's most vulnerable demographics. 89% of residents are Black or Latinx, and 77% of families are headed by a woman.

Although sheltered from the housing crisis, public housing residents aren't protected from the stigmas and perceptions of public housing associated with the look of the buildings: poverty, drug use, crime, an undignified place to live.

The plan at Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses is to demolish the buildings in order to rebuild in a style palatable to the greater neighborhood when contrasted against the luxury apartments across the avenue, all while displacing the least number of residents as possible, who are majority Black and Latinx. Related Companies and Essence Development will first demolish the building exclusively housing senior citizens at Chelsea Houses and one building at Fulton Houses before building two towers that will house more than 5,000 Fulton Elliott-Chelsea public housing residents. By 2040, the more affluent will live in their own buildings from those in the low-income public housing buildings.

"Now when you tell me these buildings are going to be separate, some for low-income residents, some for market-rate apartments," said the founding director of the National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities, Mark Joseph, "I hope your next question is, 'Are we back to separate but equal?'"

The redevelopment plan for the Houses encapsulates the fears, hopes, and solutions surrounding the housing crisis plaguing New York City, and the country. It's a chance for the city to do mixed-income housing right, and to learn from the mistakes of previous mixed-income projects following the privatization of public housing, such as Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Calabri Green in Chicago, where less than 20% of former public housing residents returned after the projects' completion.

Developers want to build apartments, but cities want a certain percentage of new apartments built to be affordable, Joseph explained, whether they are part of public housing redevelopments or not. City zoning agencies are willing to change regulations to give developers more land and airspace to build more affordable units. The developers

say, *No, we don't want low-income people messing up our buildings*. Threatened with the withholding of building permits, developers relent, but with a catch. They often design two entrances, a shiny door for market-rate tenants and another for low-income tenants: a 'poor door,' as it's known in academic circles.

Segregation goes against the value of public housing for Lara, and many of its residents, as a place to start life over in a community that looks out for each other.

"It's not gonna feel the same. I feel like he's gonna push us to the side," Lara said, referring to Jamar Adams, a former vice president in Related Companies' affordable real estate arm and who grew up in public housing in North Carolina. Now, he's the face of Essence Development whose board of directors is composed at least in part of Related Companies' founder and president.

Since she was 12, home had been where Lara, and eventually her five children, felt safe enough to sleep: subway cars and Central Park benches.

After a man in a subway car undid his pants in front of her and her daughters, home became a shelter next to Bronx Lebanon Hospital. She recalled being packed in like sardines while seven months pregnant with her youngest daughter.

She got a call on December 17th, 2002 from her social worker who had encouraged Lara to apply for public housing. There was an apartment for her.

On the express train down from the Bronx, she was "scared it would look like a dump," she said. "I had no idea what public housing was like."

When she arrived, the brick facades of Fulton Houses stared back at her. The windows were clean, there was a garden outside, and a maintenance worker, Valentín, was still putting new tiles in the kitchen. She found her "forever home."

"December's what I call the month of hopes and dreams," she said. "I wanted to get down on my knees and thank God."

Privatizing public housing, an institution birthed from housing squalor

Fulton Houses is just about as old as Lara and comes alive in the summer for Family Day. The tenant association president, Miguel Acevedo, brings out watermelon and pizza, sets up tables for outside organizations to inform residents of city programs, and organizes games for the kids.

The design of the Houses fosters community, following the modernist style so indicative of projects in the city: light, concrete frames clad in brick, allowing architects to build higher for cheaper with as small of a footprint as possible to allow for maximum green space surrounding the towers.

The ‘tower in the park’ design and unadorned facades are “minimal, practical, like workwear clothes,” said Jonathan Ritter, president of the New York City chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians.

New York City was the genesis of public housing in America during a crisis of housing squalor back in the late 19th century and going into the 20th. The stripped-back design ethos reflects the working class living within its walls. Its foundations were intended as steppingstones for residents to their middle-class dreams.

Across the country, whole city blocks were once filled with tenement buildings that looked like an unimaginative child had built a cube of Lego bricks where fires and disease could rip through.

The Housing Act of 1937 gave states and localities great leeway in how to provide adequate housing to replace the dim, claustrophobic tenements.

Combing through the housing authority’s archives at LaGuardia Community College, decades of letters, reports, spreadsheets, blueprints, and maps show that the housing authority seized property through eminent domain or bought land for considerably under their assessed value to construct Elliott Houses in 1947, Chelsea Houses in 1964, and Fulton Houses in 1965.

Residents and store owners who were to be displaced by Elliott Houses’ construction sent letters to then-Director of Public Housing, Allan Harrison, asking when they should expect the demolition to happen. “March 15, 1941” came the reply. Two months early came the bulldozers.

“Architectural historians have a joke that Europe was leveled by bombs, but the U.S. did it through the bulldozer,” Ritter said.

Many in previously tight-knit, immigrant communities could not get guarantees from the housing authority’s rehousing division that they would move close by. Ritter said most did not return to live in the Houses. Some did return for Elliott Houses’ inauguration day with signs: “Unfair to people moved off site,” “Where are applications and petitions of 1940?” “We love our Chelsea. We refuse outsiders coming in.”

But the heavy-handed seizure of blighted property proved so effective at constructing public housing in New York City that the rest of the country followed in its footsteps. The Director of Housing was often unavailable to answer questions from soon-to-be-displaced residents due to his frequent travels to Washington D.C. and visits to other housing authorities.

“I see a great nation...blessed with a great wealth of natural resources,” President Roosevelt acknowledged in his second inaugural address about the state of the country in the early 20th century. “But here is the challenge to our democracy: In this nation, I see tens of millions of its citizens...who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.”

He could’ve made the same speech today.

The federal government’s political appetite to fund public housing dwindled in the years after Fulton Houses was constructed. Housing authorities across the country used a provision of the Housing Act of 1937, Section 18, to demolish and rebuild their public housing developments. Transitioning their mixed-income developments to Section 8 of the Act then allows the housing authority to access federal subsidies that fund a portion of the public housing rental cost through public debt, instead of the government directly appropriating dollars from its budget to public housing. It allows private developers to also access that public debt and build non-public housing developments in the same vicinity as their public housing counterparts.

That call for demolition didn’t happen in New York City, according to Joseph. It instead built additional apartments on the unused spaces between public housing buildings.

Income restrictions actually barred the very poorest of the poor from living in New York City public housing, explained Ritter, so working-class incomes sustained the city’s housing authority for longer than others across the country.

“If any place has a claim to the success of public housing, it’s New York. But it’s debatable,” Joseph said.

The city couldn’t stay the course forever.

Money has been a trickle for the New York City Housing Authority for decades, said Nicholas Bloom, a professor of urban policy and planning at Hunter College. To keep day-to-day functions running, the housing authority can apportion what little is left of its budget reserved for elevators, windows, brickwork—capital costs—toward operating

costs: custodial staff, hot water, heat, and electricity. But that means big ticket costs get neglected, that pipes rust over, paint chips, and asbestos accumulates.

If the New York City Housing Authority were to receive the \$78 billion it needs over the next 20 years tomorrow, nearly half would immediately go to remedy “life-threatening” issues: non-functional smoke detectors, missing child guards, deteriorated water pumps, dilapidated roofs, and antiquated electrical parts.

The current situation is untenable, a rare, shared sentiment everyone agrees on.

No longer a leader of public housing, the New York City Housing Authority is following the rest of the country, first by placing public housing projects under private management funded under Section 8 since 2015, and demolishing and rebuilding public housing, beginning with Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

But a smaller, less populated project is usually a guinea pig when a housing authority looks to demolish public housing for the first time, explained Nicholas Bloom, a professor of urban policy and planning at Hunter College.

“It’s weird they chose Fulton Elliott-Chelsea because it’s so dense,” he said.

There are three reasons to tear down a building, said architect and former president of the Consortium for Sustainable Urbanization, Fredric Bell: decay and decrepitude; when something’s too referential to the past (“Economic opportunity, put in a good sense, or greed, put in a bad sense”); and personal taste.

“I think the tear down at Chelsea is because of the second reason,” Bell said.

Mayor de Blasio admitted as much with the first proposal to demolish part of Fulton Houses. Rents in the Chelsea neighborhood were high enough for the project to finance the estimated \$366 million needed to repair Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses back in 2019.

It also means that rents in Chelsea-Hudson Yards are oppressively expensive for average New Yorkers, far outpacing income over the past decade. As of March 2024, RentHop, a website that aggregates apartment listings, [found that](#) the average price for a studio apartment in the neighborhood was \$3,400.

By the [city’s own estimations](#), that would barely be affordable for someone making \$163,000 a year. The most modest offering in Related Companies’ portfolio in Chelsea is a studio going for \$4,495; within the same building is the most expensive offering, a \$8,195 two-bedroom.

The sheer number of luxury apartments in Chelsea has only grown in recent years with a large influx of luxury units compared to affordable ones that doesn't alleviate the city's housing crisis. In 2022, [more units were constructed in Chelsea-Hudson Yards](#) than in any other neighborhood in the city, 40% more than the next neighborhood, Greenpoint, one of the most notoriously gentrified areas in the five boroughs.

When the neighborhood around Lara began to move away from its seedy past and adopt its high-brow associations, "I thought we would be accepted," she said. "But they say these buildings don't fit. The city's just not for us anymore."

It pays to do things right

Susan Connelly is the owner of Housing Opportunities Unlimited, one of the few companies in the country that relocates residents during redevelopments. Related Companies and Essence Development subcontracted the company to ensure residents are informed of the plan's developments and to temporarily relocate residents away from the site as necessary.

"Have you even talked to anyone who actually *supports* the demolition?" was the first of the barbed questions she asked over the phone.

Demolition supporters do live in Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses, though they are concentrated in the tenant associations and at meetings held in the community centers at Fulton Houses and Elliott-Chelsea Houses. Walking through the courtyard at Elliott Houses on a sunny afternoon when residents were mingling outside, only one senior resident said they supported the demolition plan out of the ten residents spoken to. The others expressed various feelings of outrage, fear, and resignation.

Acevedo, the tenant association president for Fulton Houses, has been one of the most vocal supporters of the redevelopment from the beginning. The tenant associations, the housing authority, and the developers are the central pillars working in tight partnership to ensure the redevelopment's success. That raises concerns for residents who have some basis to be distrustful of the housing authority's intentions with its long history of legal entanglements.

Connelly, who's turned from a tea to a coffee drinker since her company was subcontracted, said she could be as critical as she wanted about the developers, though she saved most of her criticism for the New York City Housing Authority and avoided talking specifically about Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses as much as possible.

She has found that inexperienced developers and housing authorities make mistakes or don't know the legal framework within which they have to operate. During redevelopments, she said, information is often kept from residents, and community engagement efforts are often tacked onto the original plan as an addendum.

For New York City, which is only just starting to catch up with new housing policies in the private and public arenas, she said, its inexperience with new endeavors and ideas shows.

"New York City is different from other places," said Connelly. Her company has been involved in redevelopments all across the country for decades and what surprised her about Fulton Elliott-Chelsea was, "how little NYCHA knows about redevelopment."

In the South and Midwest, she said, she's had to tell housing authorities that they can't pay residents to move out. They act as a consultant to the developers and housing authorities who are often ignorant about federal public housing rules and regulations. Their advice is often met with displeasure by developers and housing authorities who believe they know better; it often costs them more in the long-run.

She said it hasn't been her experience with New York City.

However, the housing authority was the defendant in—and has lost—multiple lawsuits in the past five years. In 2018, the US Attorney General alleged the housing authority knowingly deceived federal inspectors over the amount of lead in its buildings. Official training materials were provided with suggestions on how to successfully mislead inspectors. In 2020, the housing authority also lost a lawsuit to residents whose rents were intentionally miscalculated.

Most recently, this year, the housing authority has been embroiled in a bribery lawsuit that alleges a "culture of corruption" within the authority. The US Attorney for the Southern District of New York indicted 70 current and former employees of the authority with taking over \$2 billion in bribes in small maintenance contracts, including at Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

A 2022 report by Human Rights Watch also found that at two developments that had transitioned to Section 8, Ocean Bay and Betances, eviction rates were higher than the average across the housing authority's portfolio.

A database created for this article compiled the housing authority's data from all of its developments between 2010 and 2023, including information as mundane as the number of stairwells in a development, to data points like population, average rent, and

the percentage of families dependent on social security. The records show that while rent has increased with inflation in developments directly managed by the housing authority, official population and rent figures for Ocean Bay and Betance have remained the same since they transitioned to private management, in contrast to the Human Rights Watch report stating eviction rates were higher than normal, which would suggest the data should expect to show minor fluctuations in the population from year to year.

In fact, all data for privately-managed projects remain the same from year to year. They ostensibly have the same population paying the same amount in rent each year since they were converted into Section 8 developments. It suggests population figures, rent, and simple data points are not collected or updated once developments transition to Section 8.

“[The housing authority] is like an octopus, and the head doesn’t know what the tentacles are doing,” said Iziah Thompson, a senior policy analyst at the Community Service Society of New York that turns housing research into resident advocacy.

Residents against the demolition of Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses largely distrust the tenant associations at the ends of those tentacles to represent their best interests.

Acevedo, the tenant association president for Fulton Houses, swiped through photos of deteriorated pipes on his iPhone 14. He sat behind his office desk with the newest blue iMac in a New York University dormitory basement. Behind him, a Gucci box.

“People say the insides can be fixed. They can’t be fixed,” he said.

He was a jokester with a strong New York attitude when criticized. When not at his day job as a superintendent of two New York University dormitories, he gets back to Fulton Houses around 4:30pm, or goes to the casinos on the weekend in Atlantic City (“My wife likes going there.”)

How he got to be tenant association president, Lara said, was by intimidating her.

After ten years living in Fulton Houses, Lara decided to run for tenant president in 2012. She recounted a large “seven-foot” man showing up at her door to say that because of her inexperience, she should stand aside and let Acevedo, with his connections to elected officials and savvy political maneuvering, be tenant president.

“Miguel’s very gangster,” she said. “He does anything for money.”

Asked why he wanted to become tenant association president, Acevedo replied, “It’s a voluntary thing. I wanted to give back.”

“The project folks”

Tucked into Series 7, Box 0089E7, Folder 35 at the housing authority’s archives is a March 4, 1971 op-ed in the *Chelsea-Clinton News*. The city wanted to build a 40-story and 8-story building with 400 “middle-income” apartments in Chelsea (also known as Clinton.) 20% of the apartments would be for low-income residents.

The op-ed’s author, Eileen Jennings, asked rhetorically, “Who will benefit from the Clinton housing plan?” before answering her own question. “Only the master planners and their real estate allies, who will ‘improve’ the homes of the poor right out of existence. And the first step is to divide the community.”

The divisions at Fulton Elliott-Chelsea explode at meetings meant to inform the Chelsea neighborhood and public housing residents of the development plan’s details. They disagree bitterly over whether the privately-managed, mixed-income community presented by the developers will benefit the residents the way it’s intended to. For Lara, the future of Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses is bleak; for others, it’s their best dream.

Mixed-income housing, Joseph said, is based on the notion that exclusively low-income communities don’t benefit anyone. Mixing different families of different incomes have intended economic and social benefits that are intended to benefit everyone, not just low-income residents.

He had no doubt the buildings would be built, but though mixed-income housing is extremely effective at transforming the look of a neighborhood, “what it has failed to do, in our twenty years of research, is build social cohesion.” Stigma and exclusion follow public housing and low-income residents into mixed-income communities that have failed to provide low-income households the economic and social benefits hoped for.

While the local community board has not yet taken a position on the redevelopment, it held meetings that gather residents and locals from the wider neighborhood to listen to the developers and the public housing authority talk about the merits of the development plan.

The meetings and protests took over Lara’s life again. The corners of her mouth drooped as summer turned into fall. As fall turned into winter, her eyes filled with mascara, her lips with lipstick. She lost fifty pounds in December from not eating and staying up at night wondering what she’s going to say to protest the demolition.

“I’m running out of arguments,” she said.

Residents and community board members have the opportunity to voice their opinions and ask questions of the developers and the housing authority during these meetings.

Joseph questions what the city and developers will do to ensure the low-income residents are included in the larger community at Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

“The fact these buildings are separated raises that question sharply,” he said. “Most developers aren’t ready to answer those questions. They just want to build their buildings.”

Essence Development did not reply in time to comment on how to integrate public housing residents with non-public-housing residents beyond placing them on the same plot of land.

Other residents who support the demolition plan were more concerned about dignified living conditions.

11 residents expressed their support for the demolition plan at the most recent meeting held at Elliott-Chelsea Houses to gather comments on the environmental impact of the proposal.

Tired of living with inoperable elevators and inconsistent hot water—as well as mold so rampant that inspectors who needed to use the bathroom refused to go, one resident said—they are angry the proposal’s timeline has dragged on. It’s now expected to take ten years when many don’t know how much longer they have to live. They accepted these brick-clad buildings no longer represent the neighborhood’s character, that are often referred to as an eyesore by Chelsea residents and officials, a pimple in the larger neighborhood, and were ready to move on to something better.

A teenage girl testified of leaks in the ceiling left for years. “And the housing people, they scraped the popcorn ceiling and that doesn’t do anything at all.”

Lara said she was escorted out by police from a meeting hosted by the developers last November. She said Related Companies and Essence Development handed out copies of a [Wall Street Journal article](#) written about Related Companies’ involvement in the demolition and redevelopment of Liberty Square, a Miami public housing project of the kind that the developers also envision for Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses.

“Razing Liberty Square,” a PBS documentary that aired this past January, described the climate gentrification of developers at Liberty Square. As sea levels rose in Miami, land further inland became more and more valuable to speculators and developers. Liberty Square, one of the oldest segregated public housing developments in the country, was eyed for its location high above the waves.

In a meeting on November 16, 2023 between some local community board members and key protesters against the demolition plan, concerns were raised that Fulton Elliott-Chelsea Houses would see the same consequences as what happened in Miami: empty lots and partially finished apartment buildings.

“Miami demonstrated the development tactics,” said community board member Joe Restuccia in a WhatsApp recording, “a lot of tactics we’ve seen so far. It wasn’t fully beneficial for residents.”

When Related Companies denied their connection with the Liberty Square project, Lara said she called them “a liar” and was subsequently removed from the meeting by police. People who did not live at Fulton Houses were not allowed in the meeting, including another journalist, a lawyer representing Lara, and protesters living in Elliott-Chelsea Houses. The protesters said that Acevedo barred the meeting at the last minute to be exclusively for Fulton Houses residents.

Acevedo denied that allegation.

“I really wanted you to be there,” he said to another Elliott-Chelsea protester before a January community board meeting. “If it was up to me, I would’ve let you in.”

“Everyone's going to be in their own bubble,” said Celines Miranda, a protestor with Lara who wasn’t let into the meeting, about the future development. “We're going to be ‘the project folks.’”

Source List

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Postscript

I wouldn't have come across this story had I not pursued a rage within me, and without lots of serendipity.

Coming into the journalism school, I really didn't know what I was interested in or what I was passionate about writing, except that I had a vague anger in the middle of my stomach whenever I thought about economic inequality.

I grew up keenly aware of what money can do, and what not having it can do.

My parents had always worked in Chinese restaurants since they immigrated to the States. Every day around 10 at night, I saw my mom count the money that was in the cash register and write a number on the calendar below that date. Sometimes it would be in the single-digits, sometimes there would be two digits. Rarely were there three digits.

We were in the middle of Appalachia, in a town of 1,800 people.

I never knew, truly, how much money the restaurant was getting in a town like that. I did know that my mom became slowly more assertive in her intentions of moving us out of that town. My dad always said to give it a few more years. Their arguments eventually ended in broken eggs on the floor and me in the back seat of our white GM, my mom behind the steering wheel, and my dad outside the driver's window.

Where was she going to go beyond those rolling Appalachian hills?

She didn't press the gas.

This memory was what I felt in the back of my mind when our reporting professor went around the class asking us to choose our beats.

"Economic inequality," I said when Daniel got to me.

"That's a big topic," he replied. I needed to zero in on a story.

There's a note from August 24, 2023 in my phone that says, "The World School v Public School across the street."

In the note is the email of one of the guest lecturers who came to speak at the journalism school. Our reporting class had the pleasure of being able to talk one-on-one with him.

He also went around and asked us what our beats were and gave us some ideas on what to pursue. For me, he suggested I look into one of the most expensive private schools in the country and the public school next to public housing across the street.

I stepped out of 23rd Street station, looking for Avenues: the World School and P.S. 033, the public school one block away. I didn't know what I was doing, I thought something might happen if I just showed up and looked at the buildings from the outside.

I had to walk past Elliott-Chelsea Houses and there was a playground with people sitting around chatting. I asked each one of them probably one of the most stupid questions I could ask: why was there scaffolding around the public school? To others, I asked if they had children who went to the public school. *No, a lot of them actually get bused in. They don't live in these buildings.*

By the way, they want to tear down these buildings.

That caught my attention.

It led me to go back to Elliott-Chelsea Houses to sit in the courtyard, down ten streets to Fulton Houses, over one neighborhood to talk in the office of an architectural historian, and cross a borough to comb through the housing authority's archives for five hours.

I sat in on hours of community board meetings over seven months, observing, scribbling notes, and staying around until most everyone had left.

I got on a bus to New Jersey and came back, only to get on a plane to Boston, then came back to talk in residents' apartments.

There were days of turning thirteen years of PDFs into Excel spreadsheets, and what seemed like eternities waiting for replies from the developers and the housing authorities.

Fire in my stomach kept me going through it all.