

RESIDENT

P U B L I C A T I O N S

Manhattan's Worst Slumlords

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Rats And Bed Bugs Infest One East Harlem Apartment

By Mike McPhate

Rats the size of bricks emerge at night. You can hear them scurrying behind the walls of this tiny East Harlem apartment. They tore a hole in the corner of the kitchen.

Lucy Martinez, a 29-year-old housewife wearing black sweats lifts her bed mattress and a dozen bedbugs the size and shape of apple seeds scramble along the seams. The bugs infested her dresser, she said, so she trashed it. She keeps her clothes in plastic bags.

The youngest of her three children, 3-year-old Juan, displays his swollen, red bites—there's one below his right knee, on his left foot, and a nickel-sized one between the hairs of his scalp.

Other apartments in the six-floor building, tucked between a hair salon and grocer at 2371 Second Ave., reveal leaks, crumbling doorways, a toilet that hasn't flushed in six weeks, and black mold that crawls across walls and ceilings, some exposing holes. Last winter, the tenants say, the heat and hot water was cut off.

Martinez pays \$1,300 for her two bedroom apartment. Asked how she feels about the building's owner, who tenants say has ignored their complaints, she laughed. "What do you think?"

Martinez's mess of an apartment is an example of the kind of landlord neglect that has been exacerbated in recent years by Manhattan's soaring real estate prices, say housing advocates. It has become ordinary practice among some building owners, who stand to gain from driving out tenants then doubling or tripling rents, to simply ignore requests for repair, they say.

"It's a citywide problem that goes beyond a small group of landlords," said Chloe Tribich, an organizer with the tenant advocacy group Housing Here and Now. Tribich blamed the failure to root out problem landlords on arduous enforcement rules, which require the city to bring complaints to a judge rather than allowing officers to write citations like a parking cop.

The East Harlem building is owned by the R.E. Group, which owns dozens of apartment buildings in the area. Its CEO Steven Kessner did not return repeated calls for comment but in his weblog (stevenkessner.blogspot.com) he blames tenants, who he says overcrowd apartments, for his buildings' disrepair.

"Every building that Steven Kessner owns was extremely distressed when he acquired it and he has poured his heart and soul into turning them around," he wrote in July. "It is painful to see people move in, occupy them illegally and destroy them."

The group Movement for Justice in El Barrio, founded as a resource group for immigrants in Harlem, found during visits to locals that their main complaint was landlord behavior. Kessner, whose buildings consistently had fallen ceilings, bedbug infestations, and reports of tenant harassment, arose as the number one culprit, the group said.

"Steve Kessner has been the major force in a growing trend towards gentrification and displacement in East Harlem," said
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Juan Haro, a founding member of the group. “We’ve always believed that his goal was to push immigrants out.”

Housing advocates though say the problem extends to wealthier tenants also.

When Target Realty bought the five-story apartment building 8 Saint Marks Place in the East Village it was only two years before 19 of its 20 tenants had fled. The heat and hot water was cut off, the cooking gas was shut off for nearly a year, rats infested the building, and repair requests were ignored, say tenants.

Susi Schropp, a graphic designer who put her job on hold to fight the new owner in court, was the only resident to persevere. Construction workers on the building broke through her wall and ceiling, she said. There were leaks, and “insane” amounts of dust. Some nights she slept at a friend’s house.

“I can’t even describe how stressful the situation was,” said Schropp. “Until you experience it you cannot imagine.”

Target Realty is owned by Jon Shalom, a member of a family that owns more than 100 buildings throughout the city. Residents of those buildings, who formed the Shalom Tenants Alliance in 2003, accuse the family of waging a campaign of abuse to drive them out of their apartments and clear the way for higher paying tenants. In March the alliance filed a harassment complaint against Shalom companies with the state.

“I feel like I’m a serf living in their little serfdom,” said Cassie Carter, a tenant in a Shalom-owned building on the Upper East Side. Tenants at the 48-unit apartment building, 188 East 93rd St., fled in droves after Ben Shalom took over the building in 2003. Garbage was dumped in the courtyard, repair requests were ignored, and landlord “inspectors” would show up at tenants’ doors unannounced, said Carter.

“We might as well be cattle,” she said.

For Shalom’s part, when asked to remark on complaints from tenants that they are unresponsive, a lawyer for the family, Alan Vinegrad, declined to comment.

Worst Of The Worst

Last year, the watchdog group Fix It Now identified landlords, listed below, with among the worst reputations for ignoring repairs and harassing tenants. To compile the list, the group examined records of violations with city agencies, interviewed tenants and inspected buildings.

Aaron Parnes
Moshe Piller
Emmanuel Ku
David Somerstein
Hank Freid
Nicholas Haros
Belmax (Chaim Wachsmann & Moishe Beilush)
Frank Palazzolo
Barry Singer
Eshel Management (Zvi Kaufman)

—By Mike McPhate