

SKY's the Limit!!

City-wide harassment takes its toll

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The scene at 8 St. Mark's Place this past Tuesday:

The new landlord's henchman bang on tenants' doors yelling, "What 's wrong with these f**king people? They are all being evicted anyway."

Just another day in the embattled lives of the half dozen or so remaining residents in the history-stoked tenement building -- where currently occupied units are either rent stabilized or rent controlled -- and the vacated units are being warehoused and renovated.

The resident superintendent was forced out mere weeks after Sky Management took control of the property. And of the building's seven occupied units, legal proceedings were initiated against four of them within the first six months of Sky's management.

Tuesday March 4th was to be the day for a systematic replacement of the building's 4-year old intercom network. But this turned out to be a red herring: to gain entry to tenants' apartments (where, in other Sky buildings, the landlord himself has been known to pull out a video camera to film the contents of -- and any renovations to -- the apartment) and rack up additional expenses which could then be tacked on to summer rent hikes as a "major capital improvement"). And so, at the eleventh hour the tenants (who joined together to form a building wide tenants' association shortly after they became acquainted with their new landlord) FAXed a consensus statement to the East 54th St. head office announcing that workers would not be admitted.

"The work being done on the building is for the benefit of the landlord and not the current tenants," the letter stated. "The need for a new intercom system is necessitated solely by the elective construction being undertaken by the landlord."

Tenant Association founding president Suzanne Schropp explained, "The East Village is one of the last neighborhood neighborhoods left in Manhattan. We feel it is important to at least try to help preserve what affordable housing is left in this city." Schropp said that, after getting nowhere with DHCR and DOB, they were planning a letter writing campaign to contact city council Speaker Gifford Millers' as well as attorney general Elliott Spitzer's offices in hope that they might secure an ally in their fight.

But the St. Mark's group is not the only New York City apartment building to suffer under the heavy hand of Jon Shalom and Sky Management (incomplete list available upon request).

Just a few blocks up 3rd Avenue the owner of Beauty Bar, a late-night neighborhood haunt, is into her 3rd month of a self-initiated rent strike against Shalom for his failure to make necessary repairs. City inspectors have shut down an entire section of the club as a result. Residential tenants of the building (231 East 14th Street) have also found that banding together is their only chance to head off the Shalom onslaught (see attached note by one resident at 231 E14th).

A resident in one of Sky Management's Washington Square area buildings (where remaining residents are currently fighting the recent commercial conversion of residential space for the restaurant, "Mama's Food Shop") has sought the legal advice of legendary anti-slumlord crusader Samuel Himmelstein. He says he's racked up some \$10,000 in legal fees over the past several years -- in an attempt to keep his "closet-sized" apartment.

Another Shalom building on East 62nd Street made headlines two years ago when the residents there went out on strike after a gas leak was discovered and their gas turned off for over 70 days.

"What we really need is stronger rent laws," the Shalom-fighting tenant (who prefers anonymity for fear of retaliation) in that building volunteered.

While a bill was recently passed in the State Assembly (A.2716-A) that would strengthen New York City rent laws by, among other things, getting rid of high rent decontrol, it will still need to pass the Senate and be signed by Governor Pataki.

Back at St. Mark's, the dozen or so residents there are gearing up for their own rent stoppage, pending results of lease renewals which are expected to arrive within a few weeks. (All tenants' leases are on the same cycle and expire in June 2003.) In addition to the MCI increases, Shalom has already made it clear that he intends to raise rents by what amounts to nearly 50% -- via an obscure nuance between the current tenants' "preferred" rent and what Shalom claims is the legal rent for those apartments.

By New York law, once the rents cross the \$2,000/month mark, rent stabilization regulations are no longer applicable. So the landlord's goal is to get them up to that mark as quickly as possible. After that, the sky's the limit.