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Fractured Atlas-Displacement

250 tenants of 475 Kent Avenue were vacated by the Fire Department on January 20th, with 6 hours notice. It was the coldest day of the year and tenants stood in clusters outside the building with whatever they could pack in 6 hours. Many had no-where to go. Everyone was dazed. The reason for the Vacate was a Matzoh bakery and grain silo in the basement, an empty stand pipe, and structural cracks in the adjoining Yeshiva on Division Avenue. The Fire Department was concerned that the grain silo could explode and blow up the building.

Several of us had been through this before at 223 Water Street in Dumbo, owned by the notorious Josh Gutman. We thought that past experience would have prepared us for this one, but looking back I think this strangely political scene was very different. Our landlord also owned the building where the rooky fireman had died in July the year before. He is Hassidic: he doesn't read or write English and he pretty much ignores New York laws and regulations. The City has never made any attempt to make the Hassidic community conversant in NYC Building code and that has largely developed the kind of situation we faced on this cold January 20th: It wasn't just the Police, Fire, and Buildings Departments that we faced, but also Emergency Management and the Mayor's Office CAU. There was no central command center but rather many officials wandered around giving conflicting directions. The Emergency Management truck was directly across the street from the building where it would have been demolished if our building had actually exploded.

This chaos continued for the 1st 4 weeks of the Vacate. As tenants, we knew that we had to press the landlord into action, but the Mayor's Office would never tell us (or him) exactly what to do. We floundered in confusion with rumors guiding the day. We expected to be able to formulate a work-plan and then have the City let us back in when the work had begun, maybe after a week. Instead, it was over a month before we even got the list and no-one agreed on exactly what needed to be done. The only clear thing was that the City needed leverage over the landlord and we were the leverage. Keeping us out was helping their political cause. What that mission was, was unclear.

Tenants dedicated themselves to tasks that could be accomplished: we removed tons of debris from fire stairwells, put up emergency lights and exit signs, removed all rubbish from hallways, put up carbon monoxide detectors, and removed 12 floors of old sprinkler pipes. Architect-tenants made accurate building plans and sprinkler plans and entered them into "CAD" files on the computer. We had a giant press conference, got lots of press, and met with all of our politicians. But every agency-official was in a protect-your-ass mode as a result of the Deutsche Bank fire, and it wasn't possible to get declarative statements from them, like "replace the sprinkler system, encase all the gas pipes, and hardwire fire-alarms and we'll let you back in." After 9 weeks, we still didn't know what it would take to get us back in.

This has taken an extreme toll on the tenants. The post-office told us that they had 152 permanent change-of-address requests from our building. 35 people became Fire Guards which allowed us to be in the building during daylight hours, but we were supposed to patrol the building looking for dangers, not do our own work. We were often inspected by the fire chiefs to make sure we're on duty.

Chief Polska confided that he thought a friend of Mayor Bloomberg, a real-estate developer, was trying to destabilize the building, create an atmosphere of attrition where tenants would leave, start fighting, and begin lawsuits against the landlord thereby magnifying his financial burden. That would create an opening for a cheap building purchase by the developer. He bravely outted this plan by writing a letter to the mayor and the FD.

Whether the takeover plan is true or not, we still have no idea. We do know, however, that this mayor made no attempt to bring the thousands of loft tenants in Brooklyn under the Loft Law. He has not reached out to the artist community with legal studio spaces for rent in any of the communities we live in. In the beginning days of the vacate, we each received a letter from the Mayor's Office suggesting rental properties in the Bronx , in Sunset Park, and in East New York. I guess those communities also need gentrifying.