

Trying to Undo a Lower East Side Diaspora

360 View

By RONDA KAYSEN DEC. 9, 2016



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Beatriz Torres Guzmán was about 6 years old in 1967, when her family was uprooted from their Clinton Street one-bedroom so the city could bulldoze their tenement, part of an ill-fated urban renewal effort that displaced around 2,000 families in the Lower East Side, many of them poor and Puerto Rican.

The Guzmáns were told they could return once the city rebuilt the six blocks. No one imagined it would take half a century.

But redevelopment of the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area — bounded by Essex, Grand, Willett and Delancey Streets — lagged for decades. [Politicians blocked efforts](#) to rebuild, mainly because wealthier, and mostly white, owners of nearby co-ops did not want low-income housing built there. As the

ground lay fallow, families moved on with their lives, settling elsewhere, growing up and growing old. All the time, many of them waited to return.

Now the site is finally being rebuilt, the result of a 2012 agreement reached between the city and the various factions. Named Essex Crossing, the 1.9-million-square-foot project will deliver shops, restaurants, a movie theater, a museum and 1,000 units of housing, half of them permanently affordable.

With the first affordable housing lotteries scheduled to begin this summer, Ms. Guzmán says it is time to come home. So she and local activists have been searching for neighbors from long ago. But finding people after a decades-old diaspora is difficult — people die, or forget childhood addresses. Lives take unexpected turns.

“You may not want to come back if you’ve lived in the [Bronx](#) for the last 40 years or you live in [Florida](#),” said Harvey Epstein, a lawyer who has advised some of the site’s former tenants.

But Ms. Guzmán, now 55 and living in Campos Plaza, a public housing complex in the East Village, does want to come back. Because she lives on \$15,300 a year in disability income, though, she does not meet the income requirements. Essex Crossing’s affordable apartments are available to New Yorkers earning from 37 percent to 165 percent of the area median income — or \$23,495 to \$104,775 a year for a single person. Ms. Guzmán argues that the city has a special obligation to her, regardless of her income. “I just feel that they should accommodate us,” she said.

A few weeks ago, I met with her in the East Village. In her hands, she held a yellowed letter from the city, dated July 1978. The typed words were faded, but their meaning was clear. Her mother, Carmen Guzmán Torres, “should have a priority to return to the area,” the letter read.

“I know she wanted to come back. She wouldn’t have saved this letter if she didn’t,” said Ms. Guzmán, whose mother died in 2009. “It makes me sad.”

Ms. Guzmán describes leaving the neighborhood as “traumatic” and “one of the most difficult moves of my childhood.” Her family bounced from [New Jersey](#) to East New York in [Brooklyn](#) and, later, to Sunset Park in Brooklyn, “where we found some semblance of stability,” she said.

Former tenants of the razed buildings, including those who were children at the time, will be given preference for an apartment in the housing lotteries. They must provide government-issued identification as proof of residency and meet income and eligibility requirements. An informational sheet for former tenants is available on the website of [Essex Crossing](#), which is being developed by Delancey Street Associates.

James Yolles, a spokesman for Delancey Street Associates, said in a statement that the developer is working “to develop a list of those who identify themselves as former site tenants.”

The city, however, is not trying to locate former tenants, nor will it provide housing subsidies for them should their income not meet the minimum requirement. “We are not actively seeking residents,” said Juliet Pierre-Antoine, a spokeswoman for the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. Instead, “We are going to have them come to us.”

So the task of finding people falls on the shoulders of people like Harriet Cohen, the chairwoman of the Seward Park Area Redevelopment Coalition, a community group commonly referred to as Sparc. “It feels like we’re the guardians of the site tenants,” Ms. Cohen said.

Sparc has held vigils, distributed postcards and set up a [Facebook page](#) to locate people. But 50 years is a long time and “there are a lot of José Ramírezes,” Ms. Cohen said. The group has compiled a list of some 200 former tenants.

Edward Delgado, a member of Sparc whose family was displaced from the site when he was 15, found a childhood friend from the neighborhood on Facebook. But she lives in Alaska. Now 64 and nearly blind, Mr. Delgado doesn’t live far from his old home, but he misses long-demolished shops. There was the bodega on Clinton Street where he worked as a delivery boy and met the girl who would one day become his wife. “It wasn’t like we lost our apartment,” he said. “It was like we lost our home, our community.”

After all this time, what obligation does the city have to these tenants above other New Yorkers who also need affordable housing? In city lotteries, tens of thousands of applicants often vie for a few hundred apartments. Last year, hundreds of people turned out for an Essex Crossing informational session, packing a [Grand Street Settlement](#) meeting room and spilling out onto the street. The forum descended into chaos, according to people who attended it and the [Lo-Down](#), a local blog. “It was like a stampede to get fliers,” Mr. Delgado said.

He might apply for an apartment in Essex Crossing — he struggles to climb the stairs to the fifth-floor walk-up he shares with his wife, Maureen Kelly Pyne. “I would love to go back,” he said.

Advocates for the former tenants argue that the city owes a special debt to them, despite a citywide hunger for affordable housing. “Their commitment to those tenants didn’t expire,” Mr. Epstein said.

At one point in the early 1970s, Ms. Guzmán’s mother received word from the city that the family could soon return to the Lower East Side. “We packed our

furniture and were happy to move back," Ms. Guzmán said. "For a whole year, we lived out of boxes" waiting for final word. But it never came.