

# A glittering, yet unequal city

NEW YORK

Letter From New York

**R**eading and wandering about the city these past few months, I soak up a mix of positive and negative facts and experiences. One encouraging fact I learned is that New York City is getting older, but at a much slower rate than the state and the country as a whole. It's what I intuitively feel sitting down in cafes and restaurants, and walking through its streets. It's good that the young continue to come here in large numbers, bringing creative energy and hopefully raising families and settling down in the city rather than fleeing to the suburbs. I see their migration as an optimistic sign that the city will avoid stagnation, and continue to renew itself in the future.

Another upbeat news item is that work on the last stretch of the High Line — the one and half mile elevated rail freight line, converted into a park that runs between West 30th Street and 34th Street — has just begun in Manhattan. Given how popular, well-run and beautifully conceived the High Line has been, the new section will only add to its attractiveness for both the deluge of visiting camera- and map-carrying tourists, and New Yorkers.

The High Line's charm had already been successfully sustained by its second section, which extends from 20th St. to 30th St. I decided to explore that stretch again on a damp, humid autumn day. I walk past new apartment towers' balconies and windows so close to the High Line that they turn me into a voyeur, unable to fully avoid peering into the lives of the buildings' residents. Still, this narrow part of the High Line looks like an elegant urban canyon or alley with plantings on either side. Looking on one side between the buildings you can see streets filled with major galleries like Pace, Marlborough, and Gagosian wending their way to the Hudson, and on the other side, views of the Chrysler and Empire State buildings shimmering in the distance.

As I walk towards the end of this second stretch, construction sites abound, part of the \$2 billion in private investment, for better or worse that the High Line has brought to the area. The construction has replaced dilapidated small buildings, auto-body shops, and gas stations. Yes, its cleaner and glossier, and clearly more attractive, but it means one more Manhattan neighborhood has been taken over by big money.

The fact is that in Manhattan income disparity has gotten even starker. The lowest fifth of Manhattanites made \$9,681 in 2011, while the highest took home \$391,022 — making more than 40 times what the lowest fifth reported, and nearly 1.7 million city residents are classified as poor.

When you look at the city's parks the same disparity exists. For example, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens may be generally flat and featureless (it was once a swamp

and an ash dump), but it is home to immigrants that include Chinese, Latin Americans, Greeks, and Pakistani playing soccer and cricket and holding family barbecues. It also contains the National Tennis Center, a zoo and an art museum. It's well-used by people without much money or power, and the Bloomberg administration wants to "improve" it by building a soccer stadium that would displace the people playing soccer, and also add a 1.4 million square-foot shopping mall at the park's edge, something Bloomberg would never dare propose for Central Park.

The plan has been condemned by many neighborhood residents, and in *The New York Times* by the Gotham columnist, Michael Powell who trenchantly wrote that the city's parks are divided in "upstairs/downstairs" terms between parks that serve tourists and the well-heeled like Central, Brooklyn Bridge Park and the High Line, and parks that serve immigrants and the poor like Flushing Meadows. The former parks gleam with the help of corporate money, while many of the outer borough ones are in disrepair with only the inadequately budgeted city Parks Dept to maintain them.

There are other signs of this profound disjunction in New York life. Average monthly rent in Manhattan in August was \$3,461, and in some cases real estate development sites are trading for close to, and even exceeding, the levels they hit just before the 2008 financial crisis. While the current homeless shelter census is the highest ever, and the homeless population has jumped sharply over the last year forcing the city government to open nine more shelters. ■

Finally, there is the opening of the corporate dominated Barclays Center in downtown Brooklyn, a multi-purpose indoor arena that will serve as the home of the Brooklyn Nets. It was initially proposed in 2004, but lawsuits, tenant opposition, and financial difficulties delayed its completion. A number of the developer's promises — "jobs, housing, and hoops" — have already been broken. The office jobs have disappeared, construction jobs have been reduced, and it will take a number of years before we see any affordable housing. Brooklyn residents may attend events there, but developer Forest City Ratner and the retail chains will reap the profits.

I can't deny that the triumph of big money often makes the city look more seductive, and helps create an abundance of first-rate culture offerings. But the city would be airless, sterile, and unjust without room for a working class, immigrants, or the young with ambition and imagination.

They are essential to preserving its unique character.

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