We live in Boerum Hill, a Brooklyn neighborhood composed largely of 19th-century brownstones. On an early spring day, an abundance of urban possibility lies just beyond our windows. I can walk out the kitchen door onto a deck overlooking budding lilac and rose bushes, presided over by a red maple taller than our three-story house.

BY WENDY SMITH • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHEAL MCLAUGHLIN
Or I can take my two-and-a-half-year-old son by the hand and head for one of the five playgrounds within walking distance, strolling along tree-lined blocks whose architectural character has changed remarkably little since the 1880s. We could stop at any number of houses on the way, since we know most of the other families with young kids in the area. We’ll certainly pause to say hello to Sabrina, a white-haired Puerto Rican woman familiarly dubbed “the mayor of Boerum Hill,” who in warm weather sits in her yard greening passers-by most of her first name.

If I can persuade Luca to sit in his stroller, I might do some shopping. Our local supermarket has a better-than-average produce department, thanks to the Korean management, and the largest selection of Goya products I’ve ever seen, demanded by its Hispanic clientele. For morcilla, I hit the Italian stores in nearby Carroll Gardens, where I have bought coffee beans still warm from the 70-year-old roaster at the front of D’Amico Foods. My favorite olives and the cheapest basmati rice in town come from the Oriental Purvey and Coopers, run by Arabs who always hand Luca a breadcrumb, even though he hasn’t eaten one in months. It’s one of many Middle Eastern shops and restaurants on Atlantic Avenue, which also boasts French and Cajun cuisine as well as blocks of antiquies stores ranging from the very Tony to the what-we-found-in-the-basement variety. On our way to the playground, we pass Los Paisanos Carneiceria Hispana, Luca always stops to point at the pigs’ heads hanging in the butcher shop’s window.

When I’m feeling energetic, I walk a little farther to Brooklyn Heights and visit the Promenade. This waterfront esplanade provides a panorama of the Manhattan skyline. Looking at the downtown skyscrapers shimmering in the slanting rays of late-afternoon sun that almost makes the East River seem blue, I catch a glimpse of the romantic metropolitan outsiders think of when they say, “New York City,” that is, if they’re not thinking of a crime-ridden war zone in which every person takes drugs and carries a gun.

Neither of those images says New York to me. I was born here; I live 10 blocks from the house I grew up in. The city for me is a place of family, of familiar street and favorite walks, of shopkeepers who know my name, of strangers who pause on the sidewalk to put their son on the head. It is not Main Street, USA—at least, not the theme-park version. My neighbor in Boerum Hill are old and new Americans of all classes and colors. Some of them live in the housing project whose gates can see from my back yard. The laundromat on my corner is run by immigrants. My polling place is a Baptist church with a predominantly black congregation. On warm nights, when another church, the Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal, leaves its doors open. I’ve seen people speaking in tongues and fainting in the aisles. Boerum Hill was designated a historic district in 1973, but it is not a museum.

Walking among its brownstones—many beautifully restored, others with peeling facades and cracked stoops—and seeing the street-level store signs in English, Spanish, and Arabic, I feel the graciousness of Edith Wharton’s Old New York infused with the vigor of critic Randolph Bourne’s “Transnational America.” On this perfect spring afternoon, I can’t imagine why anyone would live anywhere else.

I OWE MY BELIEF AND PLEASURE in city life to a pioneering generation of “brownstoners” (as they called themselves) that included my parents. When my mother and father tucked their six-month-old daughter into a stroller and headed to Brooklyn Heights in the fall of 1956, they were part of a movement that over the course of the next two decades transformed America’s attitude toward urban preservation. Indeed, in 1956 that term was practically an oxymoron. Urban renewal was the phrase on city planners’ lips, and that meant tearing down block after block of historic houses to replace them with high-rises and highways.

Just three years before my parents bought a five-story brownstone at 28 Willow Street, New York City had razed the Heights’ northwest corner to make way for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. (The Promenade I stroll with my son was built with the help of 1930s uitfraged homeowners’ sight.) The northeast corner of Brooklyn Heights had been designated for clearance as part of the Cadman Plaza Project, a plan to build several towers of efficiency apartments, presumably on the assumption that no one with a family would want to live in the city. New York banks shared this attitude; the only way to get a mortgage, my parents discovered, was to cough up 10 percent of the purchase price as a down payment—at a time when a veteran could finance 100 percent of the cost of his house in Levittown, Long Island.

You couldn’t entirely blame the banks. Brooklyn Heights had fallen a long way from its 19th-century heyday, when New York’s merchant princes and shipping magnates viewed their Manhattan empires from the Heights’ grand Federal and Greek Revival townhouses. The opening of the subway in 1940 brought the working masses across the river, and the artichokes fled. Their mansions were subdivided into apartment and row houses. Although the area’s peaceful streets (and low rents) attracted Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe, John Dos Passos, and other writers, they didn’t halt the Heights’ slow decline into poverty, a decline worsened by the Great Depression. Landlords saw no reason to maintain antiquated plumbing and electrical systems for tenants whose rents barely covered the taxes, and once-proud buildings grew shabbier and shabbier. To make it all new, the minds of post-World War II America, tearing them all down and starting over seemed the obvious solution.

Not to my parents and their peers. These young professional people still saw New York City in the glamorous light of a Cole Porter song or an F. Scott Fitzgerald short story. Fitzgerald was having a big revival on college campuses in the 1950s. They loved the sense of past grandeur that emanated from the Heights’ sturdy brownstones, and they set about repairing cornices, refinishing floors, reopening long- unused fireplaces, repainting decaying facades, and replastering walls to restore their new homes to their former elegance. They considered themselves urban pioneers, proclaiming the vitality of city life and the pleasure of living within history at a time when many Americans looked only to the future, through the picture window of a suburban ranch house.

A stroll through Brooklyn (from far left): Fruit vendors on Smith Street, the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, shops on Atlantic Avenue, the Gomer Grocery Store, and a house of one’s own.
The year my brother was born, 1958, also saw the birth of an organization that spearheaded the fight to preserve Brooklyn Heights's distinctive architecture and character. The Community Conservation and Improvement Council was founded by a group of recent Heights arrivals dismayed by the destruction of five adjacent townhouses to make way for an ugly apartment building, and by the news that the Jehovah's Witnesses (whose world headquarters lies at the foot of the Heights) intended to tear down several more houses to build a residential hall. It was clear that the pace of demolition would only increase if nothing was done, and in 1959 the council declared as its goal the enactment of legislation making the Heights a historic district.

The council's activities assiduously distinguished themselves from their suburban contemporaries, but they shared with them the boundless self-confidence of the postwar generation who had come of age in a booming economy. The council pushed older organizations like the Brooklyn Heights Association and the Municipal Art Society toward greater militancy. It forged links with influential, well-connected architectural historians who publicized its efforts and helped mold the emerging public consensus that historic preservation was a necessity, not a luxury. Its members were scarcely older than many voters bolting the '60s for the East, and it had never been a slum. North Gowanus was Garbage piled up in the streets; teenage gangs hung out on the corners; the crime rate was high. Banks openly refused to lend money on houses there, arguing that "extensive slum clearance and renewal" were the only cures for the area's "hopeless plight." The city demolished more blocks and opened a second high-rise project, Wyckoff Gardens, in 1966.

Two years earlier, the Brownstoners had rechristened the neighborhood. Boerum for a Dutch family that farmed there during colonial times and produced one of its Victorian developers, Hill, because it had a desirable ring to it. (The area lies on the slope between the East River and Prospect Park, but it is not noticeably hilly.) But the new name didn't immediately improve the district's reputation. By the early 1970s, when I was in high school, Boerum Hill was still considered a very dicey neighborhood. The Heights' once-reasonable townhouses were now out of reach to all but the rich, and neighboring Cobble Hill (declared a historic district in 1966) was rapidly going by the same way. Young people hesitated before crossing Court Street to buy houses in Boerum Hill.

Crime was one reason. A friend who lived on Pacific Street between Bond and Nevins, in a gorgeous brownstone house, told me that only the police officers called the Heights into his home, convinced him in a hushed voice that hookers piled their trade at the end of his block. I might dismiss this comment now as a teenage boy's overheated imagination, but a magazine article from the 1970s noted that prostitutes were ubiquitous and aggressive; they had been known to attack people on the street. Burglaries were common and muggings a concern. When I visited another friend, on Warren Street, he routinely walked me home after dark, something no one ever bothered to do in the Heights.

Of course, crime was hardly unknown in the Heights. My parents' house had been broken into half-a-dozen times during the 1960s, and an acquaintance was held up at knife point on Willow Street. By the late '70s, the pressure from the brownstoners had prompted improved maintenance by the Sanitation Department and more vigilant police patrols in Boerum Hill, whose streets became cleaner and safer than they had been in decades. So crime alone was not the problem. The real issues complicating the neighborhood's revitalization, although they were seldom articulated, were race and class. Boerum Hill's two housing projects were not going to disappear: the social service facilities throughout the neighborhood that assisted its residents and other needy people. All of these factors made Boerum Hill's early brownstoners a privileged breed than their earlier counterparts in Brooklyn Heights.

In the 1980s, as skyrocketing prices pushed younger members of the middle class out of the most prestigious brownstone districts and articles about Boerum Hill began turning up in _The New York Times_, its residents made a point of stressing their neighborhood's racial and economic diversity. There were black and Hispanic homeowners as well as white professionals, they pointed out. Black and Hispanic associations welcomed tenants as well as buyers. Implicitly in public and explicitly in private conversation, Boerum Hill's residents identified themselves as committed believers in the urban model, better neighbors than the renovators who had made over the Heights in their own affluent image.
This view was not quite fair. The trailblazing
Brooklyn Heights brownstones of the 1950s affirmed the cultural value of Brooklyn's historic neighborhoods at a time of national and governmental indifference. They imprinted the idea of urban architectural preservation on the modern American consciousness. It wasn't entirely their fault that they didn't formate the economic and social consequences. Still, it can't be denied that the boarded-up row houses and impoverished families they supplanted were largely invisible to my parents and their peers. Class conflict was not much discussed in the 50s.
People on both sides of the gentrification divide were less naive by the time I graduated from college. The preservation battle had been won: Five more Brooklyn districts with notable 19th-century architecture had gained landmark status by 1968, ensuring that Fort Greene's Queen Anne row houses and the Romanesque Revival jewels of Park Slope would survive to usher in future generations of New Yorkers. But which New Yorkers? Fort Greene had been Brooklyn's largest African American section since the 1870s; a hilarious scene in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing (1989) accurately depicted the locals' reaction to white home owners riding expensive bikes and wearing Boston Celtics T-shirts. Park Slope's working-class Irish residents had already seen their relatives squatter out of Cobble Hill; they were not anxious to have their neighborhood become another upper-middle-class enclave.
Boerum Hill's brownstones didn't want that kind of neighborhood either. Despite some apprehension, they supported the establishment of the Bergen Street Residence for homeless men and women and breathed a sigh of relief when it proved to be an extremely well-run, secure facility. By 1997 the Boerum Hill Association newsletter was railing the Lutheran Social Services' decision to take over the rundown Nevins Hotel and turn it into housing for low-income residents, the elderly, and mentally ill people. Most neighborhood associations in brownstone Brooklyn run house tours to raise money; not many would include, as the Boerum Hill Association did, the modern Center for Geriatric Care, praised in the tour brochure for the harmony of its brick facade with the local Victorian architecture.
I knew none of this when I came back to New York from college; my impressions of Boerum Hill had been formed in the early 70s, and they hadn't changed. My husband-to-be and I moved to Carroll Gardens, another of northern Brooklyn's half-dozen landmark areas, which in the early 80s was still largely inhabited by the Italian families who had made it their home since the turn of the century. It radiated the sense of serenity I remembered from my youth in the Heights (which I could no longer afford), and I wasn't the only displaced child of the brownstone movement who found it appealing. By the time we were in a position to think about buying a house, in 1996, we realized with dismay that Carroll Gardens had succumbed to the iron law of urban economics. Too many people pursuing too few beautiful old houses had pushed prices beyond our reach. Month after depressing month, we viewed buildings that were either prohibitively expensive or needed such major renovations that they would ultimately cost just as much.
We desperately wanted to stay in brownstone Brooklyn: we'd grown addicted to the spacious sweep of 19th-century interiors and the charm of quiet, shady streets. Our real-estate broker urged us to look in Boerum Hill, but I refused. "Too trendy," I said. "We have a child, we're not pioneers." I finally let her show me a brownstone on Bergen Street whose asking price was just what we could afford—a third less than anything we'd seen in Carroll Gardens—and I had to admit it was lovely. The kitchen was huge, the double parlor retained all its original architectural details (including sliding pocket doors, which rarely survive), and the three bedrooms had pressed- tin ceilings. When I took my husband to see it, he turned to me and said, "This is our dream house."
But was it our dream neighborhood? As we began to explore Boerum Hill, we realized that our view of it was outdated. It turned out that three women I knew from the playground lived on Bergen Street, all three mentioned that the local public elementary school was one of the most progressive in the city. My mother reminded me that the doctor who delivered Lucia was a long-time Boerum Hill resident; it seemed unlikely that a female obstetrician, who inevitably came home at odd hours, would remain in a high-crime area. I phoned her and had the first of many conversations with people who think Boerum Hill is the best spot in Brooklyn, perhaps in all of New York. A great neighborhood, she told me; so much more diversity than in the Heights; some of my neighbors have lived here their whole lives; it's a real community. "Diversity" and "community" were words I heard frequently from people in Boerum Hill. Those words mean a lot to my husband and me, and they seemed truthful as we walked around the area at different times of the day and night. We saw white, black, and Hispanic families of obviously varying levels of affluence sitting on their stoops, exchanging salutations with nearly everyone who stopped by; we saw young people who could name the neighborhood's history in the 17th century to their blackboard, clad in the inevitable head-to-toe black, smoking cigarettes outside a bar so hip it didn't even have a sign announcing its name. (Its patrons also included the most truculently gay population west of anywhere outside the West Village.) We saw legion of dog walkers but no material evidence on the sidewalk of their passing. We saw people sweeping the sidewalks in front of immaculately restored brownstones and in front of buildings that needed extensive repairs. We saw vacant lots transformed into gardens with handcrafted benches announcing the date of the next cleanup session. We saw a community we wanted to be part of.
When the movers began unloading our belongings into our new home on Nov. 1, 1996, the fact that the day was cold, dark, and rainy didn't deter our neighbors on either side from coming out to introduce themselves. When the mailman stopped and said, "Hi, I'm Stanley," I knew we'd come to the right place.
I have felt at home in Boerum Hill from the moment we arrived. It never was like Brooklyn Heights, and I hope it never will be. The evolution of brownstone Brooklyn over the four decades of my life demonstrates that preservation doesn't take place in a social vacuum, and I believe our efforts here to nurture an urban balance (another favorite Boerum Hill phrase) are as important as restoring fluted cornice brackets. Different though these two neighborhoods are, however, I also believe I'm giving my son a childhood rich in the same delights and challenges of city life that my parents claimed for me when they crossed the East River in 1956.
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