

A REPORTER AT LARGE

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THE MAKING OF BOERUM HILL

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AROUND 1964, the name Boerum Hill began to appear on maps of Brooklyn's old brownstone neighborhoods. The name, announcing a new residential area in downtown Brooklyn, was to be seen not on all maps but chiefly on those that had been drawn up in Boerum Hill itself. People living in such nearby areas as Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, and Park Slope—the establishment, so to speak, of Brooklyn's brownstone neighborhoods—had never heard of a place called Boerum Hill. And later, when they had had more frequent occasion to notice the name, they still did not want to acknowledge it on the neighborhood maps that they drew. They had discovered by then that Boerum Hill was a made-up name, and that the area it stood for did not truly belong in the family of brownstone neighborhoods like their own. The frosty reception these neighborhoods accorded the parvenu Boerum Hill put a few people in mind of something John Lomas and Alfred S. Peace said in their book "The Wealthy Men and Women of Brooklyn and Williamsburgh," which was published in 1847: "Persons who move in society with borrowed plumes, and others who assume high positions from fictitious capital and merely ostensible possessions, have felt alarm lest their

real situations be made apparent." This criticism could not, however, be broadly applied to Boerum Hill. That it was indeed wearing the borrowed plumes of a refined-sounding name not even its most faithful partisans would deny. But most of the people living there at that time could pretend neither to capital nor to much in the way of possessions. The only imposture of which they stood rightfully accused, then, was that of taking on a higher-sounding name than their circumstances justified. Still, it was their intention, as time went on, to live up to the name they had adopted—to raise themselves to the status it implied.

The unkindest cut of all had come from within Boerum Hill itself. The name had been coined so recently, and by such a small number of the residents, that people who had been living in the area all their lives had never heard of Boerum Hill and hadn't the slightest idea where it was. Moreover, those among them who were poor—which in 1964 meant almost everybody—did not care what their neighborhood was called. The handful of people who had coined the name Boerum Hill should not have been surprised by the reactions it evoked, or failed to evoke. They should have realized the difficulty of the task they had

assigned themselves—to lift out of obscurity a community that had been relatively anonymous even in the days when its standing as a residential area was higher, and that in more recent decades had deteriorated into one of the most desolate slums in Brooklyn.

The neighborhood in question occupies a rectangle of something over thirty blocks adjacent to the business district of downtown Brooklyn. It is enclosed by Schermerhorn Street on the north, Wyckoff Street on the south, Fourth Avenue on the east, Court Street on the west, and one block of Warren Street between Bond and Nevins. Crisscrossing within the area are Smith, Hoyt, Bond, Nevins, State, Pacific, Dean, and Bergen Streets, Boerum Place, and Third and Atlantic Avenues. Up until the early nineteen-sixties, this community had no formal boundaries. It had simply blended, or bled, into the areas surrounding it—especially the business district and a large community to the south called Gowanus. If Court Street, to the west, had always been regarded by some people as an informal boundary, it was because lying on the other side of it were the well-known and highly esteemed brownstone neighborhoods of Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights. As late as the end of the nineteen-fifties,

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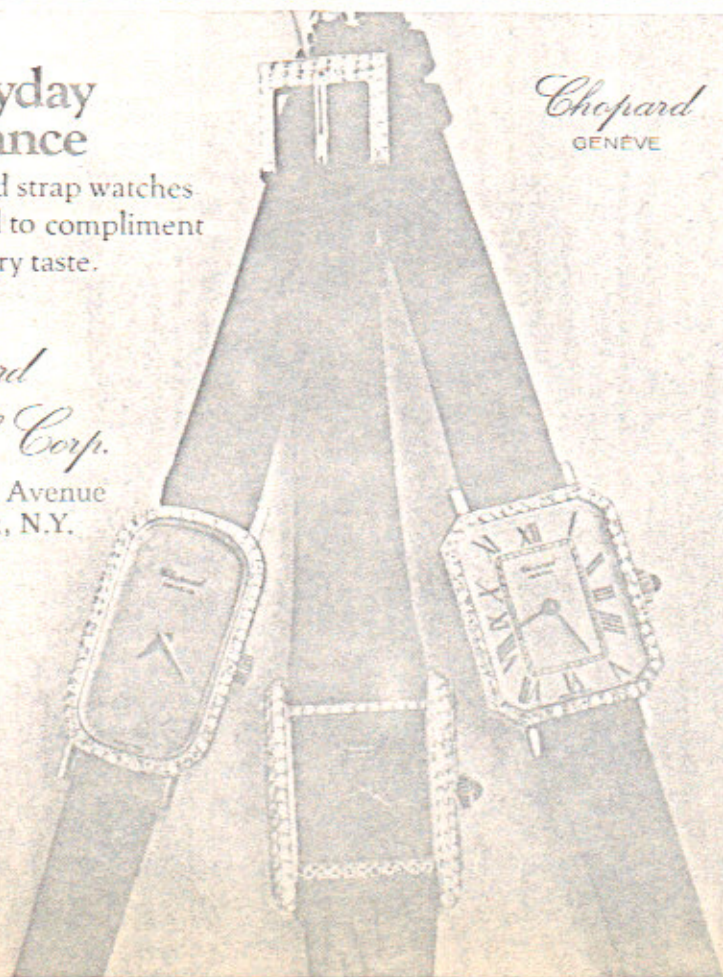
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if one had asked residents of Boerum Hill where they lived some would have said Borough Hall, which is not far away, and most would have said downtown Brooklyn, which is a convenient catchall. But the official name of the area was North Gowanus.

To the middle-class professionals who began moving there in the mid-sixties, Borough Hall and downtown Brooklyn were bad enough as names, for they suggested little more than political activity and the noise of commerce. But North Gowanus was worse, for whenever strangers heard the name all they could think of was the Gowanus Canal, which lies a short distance away. And by then the Gowanus Canal had been a dumping place for so many pollutants—largely industrial wastes—that it had become possibly the most unsightly and smelly body of water in all of New York City. So it is not hard to see why the middle-class families, mostly from Manhattan, who were moving into North Gowanus in the mid-sixties—investing futures and savings in a shabby, dilapidated area—felt the need for a different name. One of them, a fiction writer, remarked a decade later, "You don't believe that the middle class is going to start a new neighborhood and call it North Gowanus, do you? Who wants to live in North Gowanus, for God's sake?"

DESPITE the jokes that Manhattanites often make about Brooklyn, that borough has been for more than a hundred and fifty years a sort of haven for refugees from across the East River. What it offered middle- and upper-income Manhattanites in the old days was a chance to live in spacious houses of their own, and the opportunity to satisfy their hunger for a sedate residential atmosphere. With only brief interruptions, this tradition has persisted. Today, most of the people who own brownstones in Boerum Hill, as in other old neighborhoods of Brooklyn, moved there at one time or another from Manhattan.

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, Brooklyn has had more living space, more brownstones, and more fine brownstone neighborhoods than any other borough of New York City. In the early years of the nineteenth century, while Brooklyn was gradually developing into a city—which it became in 1834—its leaders and men of affairs must have ruled out any attempt at emulating Manhattan as a center of great financial enterprise and cultural attainments. The kind of city they chose to build was one in which busi-

ness and industry could flourish on a modest scale along with modes of domesticity and tranquillity that were not so plentiful in Manhattan. And they appear to have succeeded so well, and so early, in what they set out to do that by about 1890 the proudest boasts heard in Brooklyn were that it was the city of churches and the community of homes.

When city people said "homes" in the nineteenth century, they did not mean apartment buildings, however superior their apartment buildings were to much of what is being put up these days. They meant row houses or town houses—those charming antiques that survive in Brooklyn and Manhattan today as reminders of the Federal (1780s-1830s), Greek Revival (1820s-40s), Italianate (1840s-70s), and Gothic Revival (1840s-50s) periods in American architecture. In other words, they were talking about "brownstones"—the term under which all these houses are lumped today, whether they are in fact brownstones (those whose façades are covered with a thin layer of brown sandstone), or have facings of gray limestone, or are red-brick fronts with marble or brownstone trim. At any rate, during the eighteenthundreds more of these houses were put up in Brooklyn than anywhere else in what is now New York City, which is why Brooklyn also came to possess the largest number of elegant brownstone neighborhoods.

The earliest and the most elegant of these neighborhoods was Brooklyn Heights, which had been a wooded bluff looking out across New York Harbor and commanding a dramatic view of lower Manhattan. Its establishment as a residential community began soon after 1814—the year Manhattan and Brooklyn were first linked by a steam ferry. Wealthy merchants from across the East River began building mansions on the bluff, and in a few years they had transformed it into Manhattan's first suburb. Writing more than a century later, Harold C. Syrett, a Columbia University historian, observed:

The residents of Brooklyn Heights gazed from their solid perches with disdain on the "vigorous, voluble, somewhat less respectable population" which surrounded, but even today, has not been able to storm this citadel of gentility.... The Kings County version of Back Bay was peopled by gentlemen "of solid respectability and well lined simplicity," who left their offices shortly after three; returned from Manhattan on the Wall Street Ferry; dined at four; and then during the long spring twilights went on a sedate drive to the outskirts of the city.

... Like members of any other aristocracy, residents on the Heights were convinced that they possessed inherent qualities not shared by those in the lower castes.... Their children were forbidden to associate with the offspring of the less elevated sections of Brooklyn.

The development of Brooklyn Heights was followed by that of the slightly less elegant Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, Fort Greene, Clinton Hill, and Park Slope. This building movement crept gradually inland from the waterfront, up a gentle slope that begins in downtown Brooklyn and ends in the vicinity of Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Public Library. What conferred prestige upon these neighborhoods was not just the stately brownstones that lined the streets or the prosperous class to which most of the residents belonged but also the fashionable names that the neighborhoods bore. Who wouldn't have wanted to live in a neighborhood with a name like Brooklyn Heights or Clinton Hill or Park Slope?

These were not, of course, the only brownstone neighborhoods established as the building movement spread gradually from downtown Brooklyn up to Prospect Park. They were simply the most stately and genteel, the ones most worth speaking of. A number of others, especially those built after the eighteenthforties, were occupied chiefly by small businessmen, ward politicians, industrious tradesmen, and moderately successful professionals. All these neighborhoods remained relatively stable until well into this century, though the wealthier residents had been moving away for some time—especially when, with the inception of the public-transit system, Brooklyn started becoming more and more accessible to the lower-middle and working classes of Manhattan. During the Depression, however, the exodus of old families accelerated, and the neighborhoods started running down. This trend continued until the end of the Second World War, by which time many of the once stately brownstones had been converted into apartment houses for the middle class or rooming houses for the working class and the poor.

According to Joy and Paul Wilkes, the authors of the book "You Don't Have to Be Rich to Own a Brownstone," many of the old families "moved to the suburbs instead of trying to cope with coal-burning stoves, gaslight fixtures, ailing toilets, jungles of lead pipe in the cellar, and peeling wallpaper." The authors continue, "The homes became mainly rooming houses with old people and transients

as their new occupants. There were almost no children, and young people were moving out in droves. The area was deteriorating so rapidly that slumdom seemed only a few years away." This was not uniformly true of all the neighborhoods. For instance, slumdom descended more heavily and more rapidly upon Clinton Hill, Fort Greene, and North Gowanus than upon Brooklyn Heights. Even in those places, moreover, not all the longtime residents decided to move away. And of those who did move away, not all did so because of headaches with coal stoves and the like. Some left because their children had grown up and gone, and others because, with the gradual invasion of the lower classes, it no longer meant what it once had to live in an exclusive brownstone neighborhood. By the nineteen-fifties, one did not in fact have to be rich to own a brownstone. Many of the old residential neighborhoods in Brooklyn—though by no means in Brooklyn alone, or in New York City alone, for that matter—were so run-down, and some of the houses were being offered for sale at such low prices, that almost anybody of modest means could afford the down payment on a brownstone. It was an astonishing reversal of the impressive circumstances in which these brownstones and these neighborhoods had come into being more than a hundred years before.

This deterioration led to one of the remarkable urban developments in recent times—the brownstone-renovation movement. Couples, a few with children, and mostly from Manhattan, began going to Brooklyn, buying brownstones at prices ranging from twelve thousand dollars to thirty thousand, fixing them up, living in them, and refurbishing the neighborhoods around them. Many of these people were middle-income professionals and artists, who needed more living and working space than they could afford to rent in Manhattan. They became known as brownstone renovators, and they did not mind answering to that quite accurate description. But since, as educated people, they were taken with Victorian ambience—conscious of the residential tradition they were attempting to restore—they much preferred the stylish term "brownstoners." It implied that they were not just repairing and living in brownstones—ignorant, like so many ordinary tenants, of the cultural and historical background of these old dwellings—but that they were qualified by imagination and taste to appreciate what they once

stood for. It also implied that in saving the houses from collapse they deserved to be commended for being protectors of one of New York City's rich but neglected historical treasures. Perhaps their feeling that they were among the last custodians of an architectural past that was in danger of disappearing was what made them so aggressively fussy over the minutiae of Victorian decorative detail. It is doubtful whether the nineteenth-century people who built the houses in the first place had such a feeling for roof brackets and cornices, parquet and wide-plank floors, panelled dressing rooms, carved mahogany woodwork, elaborate ceiling centerpieces, stained-glass doors, wooden shutters, and cast-iron fences—which is not to say that the original residents took no aesthetic pleasure in such things. Finally, the term "brownstoners" implied a certain neo-pioneer heroism. Many of the new owners felt that in helping to arrest the decay of certain areas of New York City they were affirming, against the direst predictions, a belief in the city's future—showing that it *can* be a livable place for everyone.

The renovators, or brownstoners, were mostly white, with some blacks and Puerto Ricans and a scattering of Chinese and Japanese. They were generally liberal in political attitude. A survey conducted some time ago by an organization of brownstone neighborhoods in Brooklyn found that Brooklyn brownstoners were mostly in their twenties, thirties, and forties; were mostly married (eighty-seven per cent); had an average of 1.5 children; earned from ten thousand to thirty thousand dollars a year; were highly educated (ninety-one per cent had college degrees); and tended to send their children to private schools. To quote from a leaflet prepared by a group called Today's Consumer, Ltd., the brownstoners were "pioneers in inner city housing." The leaflet continues:

While creating agreeable living space for themselves, they often bring together the best of the traditional and the contemporary in architecture and interior design. They are inventive, creative, and dogged about making something special out of the (frequently) derelict house they buy. They have a strong sense of community; are collectors (i.e., scavengers); tree and animal people; and have a lot to do with building or rebuilding the neighborhood where they have come to live.

Today, these people have totally restored Brooklyn Heights, where the renovation movement in Brooklyn began. They have virtually finished restoring Cobble Hill. Park Slope and

Clinton Hill are in advanced stages of renovation. Carroll Gardens had less need for revival than most of the other neighborhoods, because it was one of the few whose population had remained relatively stable since at least the early decades of this century. And Fort Greene is now passing through some of the early phases of revival.

THE brownstones in what is now called Boerum Hill were built between the late eighteen-forties and the middle eighteen-seventies, and are mostly Greek Revival and Italianate in architecture. They are nowhere near as stately as many of the houses in Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill, or as lavish in their exterior and interior details as some of those in Clinton Hill and Park Slope. They are on the plain and unostentatious side, but they met the need of their early owners—the ward politicians, the small businessmen, the successful tradesmen—for a modest respectability. In fact, the “A.I.A. Guide to New York City” claims that North Gowanus was “a fashionable district” in the nineteenth century, that visitors to the area “included Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant,” and that “Sidney Lanier lived briefly at 195 Dean Street.”

At different times between the eighteen-forties and the nineteen-forties, the population of the area was made up largely of Scandinavians, Dutch, Germans, Lithuanians, Poles, Irish, Italians, and a small community of itinerant Indians—the Caughnawagas—from Quebec. It began losing most of its old families in the nineteen-thirties, when homeowners started selling out and moving elsewhere. By the end of the Second World War, the majority of them had gone. They were succeeded chiefly by rent speculators and absentee landlords, who bought up the brownstones and turned them into low-income apartment houses and rooming houses. After a few years, Puerto Ricans made up the largest ethnic group in the neighborhood, followed by blacks, plus a handful of working-class Irish and Italians and a few of the original home-owning families who had stayed.

People who remember what the neighborhood looked like in the late nineteen-fifties say that to walk through most of it then was to make one's way past loose garbage scattered or piled up in front of buildings; broken furniture littering sidewalks and vacant lots; gangs of young toughs hanging out on street corners; and

ratty-looking tenements with broken doors and windows. By 1960, it was virtually a slum, and the City of New York had designated it a prime area for demolition and high-rise urban-renewal housing projects. It was into these surroundings that Helen Buckler, a writer and public-relations woman from Manhattan, chose to move in 1962—a decision that opened a new chapter in the history of North Gowanus and added an absorbing one to the story of the brownstone-revival movement in Brooklyn.

Today, at eighty-three, Miss Buckler lives in her own renovated four-story brownstone on Dean Street, between Nevins and Bond. She occupies the garden and parlor floors (she has always rented out the rest), and moves among her nineteenth-century furnishings with the help of a cane, having suffered a hip infection some years ago. Until the autumn of 1974, when she entered the hospital to have cataracts removed, her eyesight had also been failing for some time. Miss Buckler, who is a Quaker, attends an old Friends meetinghouse in the neighborhood. She says she has always lived in brownstones, ever since coming to New York in 1922, immediately after graduating from the University of Illinois, in Urbana. Among the things she loves best about brownstones are the fireplaces. “I’ve always had a fireplace,” she said one day not long ago. “I counted at one time, before I moved here, and discovered that I had opened up something like eight fireplaces in New York. You see, when you move into some of these buildings you find that the fireplaces have been closed for years.” The total number she has opened up is now twelve, including the four in her present house on Dean Street.

A few days after Miss Buckler came to New York, she was hired by *The Nation* as a secretary. The magazine was then being edited by Oswald Garrison Villard and had offices on Vesey Street. “Carl Van Doren, who introduced me to Villard, had just left as literary editor,” she recalls. “And my nominal job was to be secretary to John Macy, who took over from Van Doren as literary editor. Macy was then separated from his wife, Anne Sullivan, who taught Helen Keller. Even as a secretary, I wrote short editorial items for *The Nation*. I got an apartment in Brooklyn Heights, on the top floor of a brownstone on Garden Place that was owned by Tracy Mygatt and Frances Witherspoon, two liberal ladies of the time. And that was

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where I opened my first fireplace. After about a year and a half, I went to Paris, where I worked on a paper for two years, and when I came back I found an apartment in a brownstone in the Village. And I opened my next fireplace there. When I moved out of the Village, in 1927, I went up to East End Avenue. And I opened up a fireplace there. I remember that I almost burned the house down with cannel coal. After that, I lived on East Fifty-sixth Street. And I opened up a beautiful fireplace there. Then I moved to West Forty-ninth Street, into one of the last brownstones left on the site where Radio City now stands. It was a lovely brownstone, and when they tore it down I found an apartment on the top floor of a brownstone on East Eighteenth Street, where I proceeded to open up yet another fireplace.”

Miss Buckler was getting on in years by then, and, although she was essentially a writer, she had done “all sorts of work, including politics.” Around 1958, contemplating her advancing years, she asked herself, “What is to become of *you*?” She had no savings to speak of. She had been in the habit of going off to Paris “every chance I got,” which meant as often as she had put aside enough to pay for a trip. One day in 1960, she was talking with a friend who owned a town house in Georgetown, and the friend said, “You know, with five thousand dollars you could buy your own home.” Of course, the friend was referring only to the down payment, but Miss Buckler replied that even that was then impossible.

As soon as Miss Buckler was able to save the suggested amount, she started looking around in Manhattan for a brownstone. She could find nothing priced lower than forty thousand dollars—which meant a much larger down payment than the five thousand she then had. She was looking through the *Times* one Sunday morning when she noticed an ad for a four-story brownstone in what was described as “the Borough Hall section” of Brooklyn, which was really the area some people called North Gowanus. The asking price was eighteen thousand five hundred dollars, and, considering what brownstones were going for in Manhattan, Miss Buckler found it hard to believe. “Why is a brownstone going so cheaply?” she asked the agent when she called up. Well, the agent said, it was because the house was in a mixed neighborhood. Since she was not alarmed at the prospect of living in a mixed neighborhood, she went over to Brooklyn, looked at the house, and de-

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cided to buy. It was the house on Dean Street where she now lives.

Miss Buckler's friends were shocked to hear that she had bought a house in North Gowanus. To them, living in such an area was unthinkable. Nor was her confidence strengthened when some of the older residents told her that except for the rooming-house speculators she was the first "outside person" in years to buy a house in the community. She herself could not help noticing how shabby the area was, that there were "gaps in some of the blocks, like teeth missing in a face," that "there were a lot of noisy people" on the streets, who "were always fighting." But she reminded herself that those conditions could be found in many other sections of New York. Besides, it was the best opportunity she had had to live in a brownstone of her own, and to open up fireplaces of her own. The house was also within easy walking distance of every major subway line to Manhattan, and was only a few blocks from the Friends meetinghouse.

In August of 1962, Miss Buckler moved in. "I had made up my mind that I might lose my five thousand," she said later. "And, in fact, I had a bad scramble for a while. The boiler broke, the roof leaked, and all sorts of things happened. During this time, I became ill and had to go into the hospital. So I had to negotiate a lot of these problems from my bed. I had to renovate the upper floors first, so that I could rent them and get an income from them. There were problems there, too. For instance, the city wanted me to take out one of the bathrooms upstairs, because they were afraid my tenants would cook in it. I said no, I wouldn't do it. I asked them why they were so concerned with how many bathrooms poor people or middle-in-

come people had. I told them that if I were living on Park Avenue they wouldn't be trying to tell me how many bathrooms I could have in my house. Anyway, I finally got my certificate of occupancy, and I rented to my first tenants in August of 1963. They were a young couple from Manhattan, and they had a three-year lease. After that, I rented to Hilton Kramer, the art critic of the *Times*. He and his wife lived here for three years, and then they bought a house in Westport.

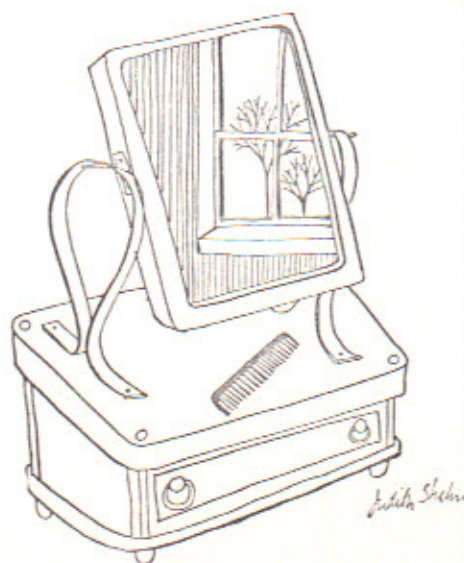
"The parlor floor was the last part of the house I renovated. I had had to live in it for a while with the old faded green walls and the paint peeling off everything. Nothing had been painted for years. But except for the upper floors, which had been converted into a rooming house, the house had lovely appointments. The woman I bought it from had lived on the parlor floor herself. The house would have been in impossible shape if she had not been living here. She had bought it from a Polish family that had lived here for forty years. So when I got around to fixing up the parlor I changed things as little as possible. I was lucky to find all the original etched-glass doors intact. I found the round over-mantle mirror gathering dust in the cellar. The house had elaborate moldings, and the mirrors had gilt frames. The original chandeliers had been taken out, and something Edwardian—with chains hanging down—had been put in. I wasn't able to find a chandelier that was in keeping with the period of the house. I did see one in an antique shop once, and it had the right style, but it was too small for the parlor. Then, of course, there were the fireplaces. There are a lot of people who buy these houses and don't want to spend the money to fix the chimneys. And if they don't fix the chimneys, why, they can't use their fireplaces. But, since fireplaces are my passion, the chimney was the first thing I did. And now I have four good working fireplaces."

THE problems Miss Buckler had in trying to restore her brownstone were nothing compared with those she encountered in trying to attract a new middle-income population to the neighborhood. Hardly any real-estate brokers would consider advertising houses in that neighborhood. "They wouldn't touch this area with a ten-foot pole," she said. "They considered it low class and dubious as to gentility and whatnot. They couldn't imagine the white middle class wanting to move into a neighborhood like this." What little gentility North

Gowanus once possessed had vanished from everything but the memories of the few old families that had continued living there. These survivors were like the occasional little flowers one sometimes sees still blooming in an abandoned garden, overgrown with weeds. And the presence of these old families strengthened Miss Buckler in the hope that something of the past could be revived in the community.

One block down from Miss Buckler's brownstone on Dean Street was the home of William Müller and his wife, Frances. A polished, soft-spoken lawyer in his sixties, with an understated wit and a self-mocking sparkle in his eyes, Müller still lives in the house where he was born, in 1909. His feeling for the neighborhood is evidently strong enough to have kept him there through the years of its decline. What he never did like was the name. When he was a student at Columbia, he used to be embarrassed when any of his classmates asked him where he lived. Recalling the experience recently, he said he wished he could have told them he lived in a place like Brooklyn Heights or Park Slope—because whenever he told them he was from downtown Brooklyn (since not everyone called it North Gowanus) he got nothing but odd looks. The Müllers' house was built in 1859, and William Müller's father, a plumbing contractor, bought it in 1902. It retains its original ornamentation and much of the furniture that was owned by Müller's parents. Frances McGoldrick Müller is as blunt and outspoken as her husband is oblique and understated. She evidently carries a good deal of the neighborhood's past in her head, cherishes it, and sees no reason to be silent about it. "This is *not* a renovated house," she announces to visitors right away. "The young people who are going in for Victorian houses now like to come in here and look around, to see how people lived in such houses in the old days." Like her husband, she was born and brought up on the block—in a house that her grandmother bought in 1884, and in which her own mother was brought up. "When my mother was growing up, people over here didn't even bother to think about places like Cobble Hill," Frances Müller says. "They didn't think they were that inferior. She told me that young gentlemen used to go calling on the ladies over here on Easter and New Year's Day. The men wore top hats, and they used to arrive in what was called a coach-and-two—a carriage with two horses."

Also living on Dean Street were a



few people the Müllers had known for decades. One was Gertrude Mahoney, who had moved there as a child, in 1908; her parents, who had bought the house, became well-known undertakers in the area. Anne Chivvis was another who had continued to live in the house where she was born. She is a granddaughter of Lawrence J. Tormey, a prominent Democratic politician in Brooklyn during the eighteenthies, who once represented the Third Ward in the State Assembly. And over on Bergen Street there was Ida Olliffe, whose brother, the late Lewis Olliffe, had been a State Supreme Court Justice and, before that, a member of the State Assembly.

It was to people like these that Helen Buckler turned in her efforts to begin a restoration movement in her new purlieus. Late in 1963, real-estate agents were still not showing much interest in advertising houses in the area. And, to judge from the garbage that was still piling up in the streets, and the high rate of crime, neither the Sanitation Department nor the Police Department considered the community worthy of serious attention. To Miss Buckler, there seemed to be no alternative but to organize. She called a meeting in her parlor—it was attended by seven or eight representatives of the old home-owning families—and by the end of the meeting they had agreed to form a neighborhood association.

One thing the people at the meeting were not able to agree on was what name to give their new association. They could not imagine hoisting a fresh neighborhood flag under the stale and shabby auspices of "North Gowanus" or "Downtown Brooklyn." They were quite clear in their minds, however, about what they wanted the new association to do: badger the city into improving sanitation and police services; keep pressuring real-estate agencies to advertise houses in the community; and publicize as widely as possible their vision of a rehabilitated middle-class residential neighborhood.

The temporary lack of a name for their association proved to be a more serious drawback than Miss Buckler and her followers had imagined. Almost no one was impressed by demands coming from a residential section that did not even have a name to call itself by. The answer began to emerge one day early in 1964, when Miss Buckler received a visitor from Manhattan, an old friend who had once worked with her when they were copywriters for the J. Walter Thompson agency. Miss Buckler mentioned the trouble she was

having in finding a name for the new association of which she was president. A while later, both were standing by a window and admiring an old sycamore tree that then stood by Miss Buckler's gate, and her visitor suggested that it might not be a bad idea to call the neighborhood Sycamore Hill—a suggestion Miss Buckler found instantly appealing. A hill North Gowanus certainly was not. Lying at the bottom of the slope that rises from downtown Brooklyn to Prospect Park, it was, if anything, a valley. But the term "Hill" had an irresistible appeal. It was highly favored among refined residential areas, and it could not help conferring some badly needed prestige upon her neighborhood.

Miss Buckler's enthusiasm for the name Sycamore inexplicably did not last, however, and soon after the visit, she journeyed over to the Long Island Historical Society, on Pierrepont Street, in Brooklyn Heights, in search of further advice. The curator there told her that he himself would not recommend the policy of naming neighborhoods after flowers, shrubs, or trees. He said that a historical name was always preferable—one commemorating either an event or a person. Sitting her at a table, he went away and returned with a few eighteenth-century maps of downtown Brooklyn. The maps showed many of the Dutch farms and homesteads that were in the North Gowanus area before it was divided up into streets and avenues. Looking over the names of the old farmers, Miss Buckler found herself drawn to the name Boerum, which was already the name of a street in the neighborhood. The most famous member of that family was Simon Boerum, who, historians say, would have been one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence if he had not died in 1775, for Boerum represented Kings County in the Assembly of what was then the Colony of New York, and was one of New York's delegates to the Second Continental Congress, in Philadelphia. Franklin Burdge, one of Boerum's biographers, wrote in 1876:

Not long after the year 1755 he bought in that part of Brooklyn called Gowanus, a farm of 80 acres... Brooklyn at that time was a pleasant agricultural town of about 700 white and 200 black inhabitants, the latter almost all slaves.

Burdge also wrote, of Boerum's service in the New York Assembly:

He voted Yes to every motion condemning the acts of the British Parliament and No to every resolution by which the loyalists sought to pledge the Colony

of New York to support the more moderate measures of British oppression.

When Miss Buckler returned to North Gowanus, she called a meeting of her colleagues and convinced them that the name of the neighborhood and its association should be Boerum Hill. She then launched a campaign to publicize the neighborhood and its new name. But in areas like Cobble Hill and Brooklyn Heights, and even in the renamed neighborhood itself, the campaign faltered in the face of a firm conviction that Boerum Hill existed only in the heads of the people who had thought it up. One of the first positive responses to Miss Buckler's campaign was a story in the Brooklyn section of the *World-Telegram & Sun* on March 26, 1964. Under the headline "RESCUE OPERATION ON 'BOERUM HILL,'" the story reported that Helen Buckler, "who likes old brownstones with a fireplace in every room, is spearheading a campaign to win public acceptance of a new name, 'Boerum Hill,' for a rundown section of downtown Brooklyn."

ROBERT and Patricia Snyder do not remember today whether they read that story. But if they did, their spirits must have received a great lift, because only a month or so earlier they had moved into an old brownstone on Dean Street—the first middle-class home buyers to follow Miss Buckler into the neighborhood. Their arrival proved to be of invaluable importance to the future of Boerum Hill. Where Miss Buckler may be said to have done her job by planting the flag of middle-class revival in the community, it fell to the Snyders to lead the most difficult phase of the struggle to bring that revival about. Nothing had been farther from their minds when they moved to the neighborhood. Whatever their opinions may have been about keeping New York livable for the middle class, at no time had they dreamed of casting themselves in the role of activists in behalf of the idea. They had come to Boerum Hill in search of one thing only—space that they could buy cheaply. It had not mattered to them what the area looked like. If living in a nice brownstone neighborhood had originally been part of their intention, that disappeared after they had looked around in Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill and discovered that there was nothing in those neighborhoods that they could afford. Boerum Hill may have been lacking in elegance, but it probably had more cheap brownstones—if one was willing to undertake the time and expense to

restore them—than any other area of its type in New York.

The Snyders were in their early thirties, and recently married. Robert, who grew up in New York and attended Columbia, is a labor lawyer, and his legal background, combined with a certain doggedness of character, became extremely useful later on, when he found himself leading the revival movement in Boerum Hill. A man of medium height and build, who now, in his middle forties, has flecks of gray in his hair, he speaks rapidly and intensely, tends to avoid small talk, and reacts more readily to what strikes him as good sense than to what may strike others as humorous or disarming. His wife, Patricia, is an artist, who paints under the name of Patricia Stegman. She is a Midwesterner, and was trained at the Art Students League in New York, under the late Morris Kantor. She is tall, attractive, and mild-tempered, and she speaks with great fluency and earnestness—and, like her husband, crisply and to the point. The Snyders, who had lived in Philadelphia for the first three years of their marriage, had met in New York, where Robert lived in Greenwich Village and Patricia had been doing her painting in a small loft on Hester Street. When his work brought them back to New York and they realized that in Manhattan they could never find the space they wanted—which included a studio for Patricia—at the price they could pay, they went over to Brooklyn looking for an old brownstone to buy.

The house they found on Dean Street was only a few doors from Miss Buckler's. It was built in the eighteenth-fifties and had been occupied continuously by the same family until 1962, when the last surviving member died, at the age of ninety. Having no heirs,

the owner had bequeathed the house to the Salvation Army, along with the furniture that had passed down through the family for a century. The Salvation Army, not realizing that it had inherited a brownstone filled with fine old furniture, put the house up for sale at twelve thousand five hundred dollars. Toward the end of 1963, the Snyders passed by and fell in love with it. Recalling this recently, Mrs. Snyder said, "I said to Bob, 'Look at that fantastic house.' The front of it looked like it had leprosy, and there were many layers of paint stripping away. But it had the original green shutters outside and the wrought-iron balcony across the front. And it was the only block we had seen that had trees on it." The Snyders signed a contract to buy. It took several months to obtain a mortgage, however. And before they could close the transaction on the house, the Salvation Army woke up to the fact that it was on the verge of giving away a brownstoneful of valuable nineteenth-century artifacts. One day, shortly before the Snyders finally obtained a mortgage—and after giving them a chance to buy a few of the old pieces—the Salvation Army sent a truck around and cleaned out the old furniture. To the Snyders, however, the house was still a wonderful find. "We probably would have bought it even if it had been in the middle of the Sahara," Mrs. Snyder said. "It was absolutely original, absolutely unchanged." Every mirror, every doorknob was in place, and every fireplace was working. The double parlor was still separated by sliding glass doors, and there were still the original ceiling rosettes, gas chandeliers, cast-iron stove, and marble washstands. "It gave me the feeling of the Civil War," Mrs. Snyder went on. "As far as I could tell, there was nothing in it that was later than 1930. Of course, mechanically it was in bad shape. The only thing in working order was the heating. The house needed replumbing and rewiring. Windowpanes were broken. The walls hadn't been painted in ages. Some of the rooms had layers and layers of wallpaper that were brown with age. And the place was dark and dingy. Otherwise, it was like a museum. We wish we could have bought more of the furniture from the Salvation Army. It's a pity. We lost a lot of history that way. And not just the furniture. There were lots of old photographs, boxes and boxes of old papers and stuff.

"Everybody said we were clever or lucky to get our hands on a house like this. We were lucky, not clever. We

only wanted a lot of space cheap. The neighborhood looked seedy, but all we cared about was the house. I always wanted to live where I could find enough space for my grand piano and my studio, and this answered the purpose. But we didn't think when we came here that such a tremendous amount of work would be involved. And I don't mean only on the house. I mean the work in the neighborhood, and the time it took from our personal lives—the meetings we had to organize and attend, the fight we had to make to turn this neighborhood around."

The work and the fight began in November of 1964, when Robert Snyder took over from Helen Buckler as president of the Boerum Hill Association. As the latest additions to the handful of middle-class homeowners in the area, and as the youngest members of the association, the Snyders symbolized the sort of new community that Miss Buckler and her colleagues had envisioned for Boerum Hill. The older members of the association—almost all of whom were in their sixties and seventies—may well have felt that the fight to renovate the community and generate new life in it was more appropriately a fight for the young, who would probably be living there for years and years to come.

One of Snyder's first decisions as president of the association was to narrow its immediate objectives—to concentrate on getting new home buyers in the community. Only after many more brownstone renovators came in—with all the organizable concern for property and investment that such people always bring—would Boerum Hill be in a strong enough position to demand better police, sanitation, and other services. But Snyder quickly ran up against the same old problem that had been defeating Miss Buckler: Hardly any real-estate agencies wished to advertise houses in Boerum Hill—despite its new name. A few weeks after Snyder took office, Miss Buckler put a daring idea in his head—daring both in the reach of its inventiveness and in the bold intrusion upon the Snyders' lives that it entailed. The idea was this: Since Snyder was already a lawyer and would have no difficulty obtaining a real-estate license, why didn't he become a part-time broker and advertise houses for sale in Boerum Hill? Snyder's reply recognized both the merit and the drawback of the proposal. He said that the idea itself was wonderful but that as a lawyer he already had more than enough to do. Mrs. Snyder, who, according to the plan, would work



as her husband's assistant, made a similar response. "Fine," she said. "But I'm a painter, and I didn't buy a house in Boerum Hill to go into real estate."

Still, the Snyders were trapped. The idea was indeed good. But why should they be the ones to carry it out? It was here that they were forced to examine some of the opinions they harbored concerning the future of the city. In doing so they realized that it was not just the availability of cheap space that had made them decide to settle in Boerum Hill. They also believed that New York City would gradually become unavailable to middle-income residents like them unless such people were willing to move into rotting neighborhoods and help to restore them. Recalling what their thinking was at the time, Patricia Snyder said recently, "One keeps reading about the exodus of the middle class. But if the cities are to make it, then somebody from the middle class has to live in them. And it is much more realistic to expect a strong city if it is ethnically and economically mixed, as it traditionally has been. Just because you are in the middle class doesn't mean that New York is no longer a place where you can live." Thus, back in 1964, the Snyders knew that it was only a matter of time before they would capitulate to what Miss Buckler had suggested. Within a few months, Snyder obtained a license as a real-estate broker, and Patricia agreed to be his assistant.

After working hours, and in any other spare time they had, the Snyders became Boerum Hill Realty. They walked through the neighborhood looking at shabby rooming houses and brownstone tenements and soliciting them for sale. As the weeks passed, they got an occasional owner to agree to sell—partly, perhaps, because they initially asked no commission for their services. They were careful not to sell to speculators, who they feared would simply hold the houses off the market in order to run the prices up. They sold to no one who did not intend to occupy the building he bought. At the end of two years, the Snyders had sold about twelve brownstones. Several others had been sold by full-time real-estate agents, who, hearing of the success that the Snyders were having, had started advertising houses in Boerum Hill. Lawyers, teachers, artists, writers, actors, young stockbrokers, and other professionals were moving into the area and renovating brownstones. But it was the Snyders who had made the breakthrough, and apparently only people like them could have done it. One of

the young professionals told Snyder later, "Nobody could have sold me a house in an area like this except somebody who was already living here. It was easier to come in when I saw that you were living in the neighborhood." After those two years, the Snyders had had enough of selling houses. Being voluntary realtors for the neighborhood was consuming more of their personal lives and careers than they could spare. "The job became much too difficult," Mrs. Snyder said later. "It was taking over our lives. I couldn't do my painting. So we finally told ourselves that the neighborhood was not going to fall down if we stopped selling houses. And we stopped. By then, though, other people had started selling houses, so it didn't make such a terrible lot of difference."

Selling houses was not all that Snyder had been doing to attract new people to Boerum Hill. He had also been functioning as a sort of ambassador-at-large. Whenever other brownstone-neighborhood associations held meetings, he showed up and sought permission to address their memberships on the change that he and a few others were trying to bring about in Boerum Hill. He prepared film shows on urban restoration—one of the films was based on Lewis Mumford's "The City in History"—and, through ads in papers like the *Village Voice*, invited residents of other areas to come over to Boerum Hill to view the screenings and look at the neighborhood. He wrote tirelessly to neighborhood newspapers, city agencies, and influential figures in New York calling attention to the rebuilding of Boerum Hill as a middle-class residential community. One of those letters, to Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture writer of the *Times*, informed her of "an area like this, which is being saved from what no doubt would have been complete razing—by a determined band of pioneers who are devoted to urban living."

Mrs. Snyder, whose devotion to the revival of Boerum Hill was as deep as her husband's, was also an indefatigable letter writer for the cause. One of her letters went to Jane Jacobs, the author of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," who is regarded by brownstone renovators as the inspirational genius of the neighborhood-restoration movement. In what sounded as much like an expression of faith as a plea for a blessing, Mrs. Snyder wrote:

My husband and I live in the section of Brooklyn called Boerum Hill, having

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moved there just a bit over two years ago after falling in love with an ancient and decayed house there, which we have since been restoring... We are presuming to write to you because we have used your book as our "bible" in our efforts to help our area; we have quoted you and used your arguments to bolster ours in presenting our case to the banks; in convincing people to buy houses and join us in our fight to stay in the city rather than run away to the suburbs.

The letter concluded, "I knew that I loved New York City; until I read your book I really never knew why!"

THE Snyders' experience with banks was probably the toughest part of their fight for their neighborhood. Despite the energy with which the two had pressed their campaign for a new Boerum Hill, and despite the slow but steady trickle of middle-income home buyers into the area, most banks still refused to grant mortgages and home-improvement loans, and their refusal reared up as an obstacle on which the entire renovation effort might founder. When the Snyders bought their brownstone, it had taken them four months to find a bank that was willing to grant them a mortgage. Virtually every renovator who moved into Boerum Hill went through a similar experience. And for every renovator who stuck out the long fight to obtain a mortgage, there were probably three who gave up the whole idea.

Whatever else can be said about it—whatever failure of vision or of nerve it signified—the banks' refusal to lend money in Boerum Hill was not hard to understand. "The banks had pre-ordained the character of the neighborhood," Snyder said recently. "They weren't going to lend money in a slum community, on houses that were falling down. They would have been happier to finance demolition, because slum clearance had been the wave of the nineteen-fifties, and because they knew that Boerum Hill had in fact been designated by the city as a prime demolition area. They were also influenced by the fact that federal policies favored suburban growth and sprawl. Therefore, they preferred to lend money in the suburbs. There wasn't even an office of the Federal Housing Administration in downtown Brooklyn. Where could you find its offices? In places like Hempstead. That's where the action was. And that's where the banks were putting their money. Two of the biggest banks in downtown Brooklyn—Dime Savings and Williamsburgh—were making virtually no investments in Boerum Hill, even though it lies in

the shadow of both. My wife and I applied to more than twenty lending institutions before we realized that the area was on what Jane Jacobs calls a 'credit blacklist.' The banks told us, in effect, 'Sorry, we're not interested in that house. Nothing wrong with your personal qualifications, you understand—it's just that your house is in a bad area.' When we told them that our house was only a few blocks from the border of Brooklyn Heights, they said, 'Yes, but you're not in Brooklyn Heights. Brooklyn Heights is an exception.' The problem was almost insoluble. But finally we found a bank, way outside this neighborhood, that was willing to give us a small mortgage—and by that time we were surprised to find that there *was* a bank willing to give us a mortgage. It must have been sheer luck. I don't know whether they ever gave another mortgage in this area, because when we went back to refinance our mortgage they turned us down."

On the morning of Sunday, March 20, 1966, residents of Boerum Hill who opened their *Times* to the real-estate section came across an article headlined "MORTGAGES ARE MAIN HURDLE IN HISTORIC BROOKLYN AREA," which revealed further reasons that banks were in no hurry to underwrite renovation in Boerum Hill. The article said, in part:

A group of young homeowners and would-be owners who are trying to reclaim and restore a deteriorated but historic section of downtown Brooklyn have accused neighborhood banks of thwarting their efforts by refusing to grant mortgages. . . . The banks acknowledge that they seldom lend there, but contend that the section is only an oasis in a vast desert of hopeless blight that is downtown Brooklyn. Extensive slum clearance and renewal, the banks argue, is the cure. . . . "Sure one particular house may be good, but we have to consider if it will lose in value from the neighborhood," said Frederick L. Kriete, assistant vice-president of the Williamsburgh. "Is a financial institution justified in putting money into something that is going to be degraded by what's next door?" Calling the Boerum Hill situation an isolated "odd case," Mr. Kriete said he "just doesn't understand" why this "hardy band of people" would want to move into the area, with all its crime and poverty. "Generally, they're cultivated, artistic people, with an appreciation for antiques and art—they're a class all to themselves," he said. "I admire and appreciate their taste, but you wonder if the bank should get involved."

Gradually, however, some of the bigger banks overcame their reluctance and began making loans in Boerum Hill. It is not clear what led to this change, but it came after members of

the Boerum Hill Association had started discussing the possibility of boycotting all the banks that refused them loans, and after certain mortgage officers had visited the area and had been impressed by the quality of renovation they saw being done.

Snyder's term as president of the Boerum Hill Association expired in the fall of 1966. Shortly after leaving office, he served as one of the leaders of a delegation that appeared before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission to request, unsuccessfully, that Boerum Hill be designated a historic-landmark district. Part of what he said to the commission can stand as an account of how far Boerum Hill had come since 1962, when Miss Buckler moved there—and as a record of his own stewardship as well.

"The first year was very difficult," Snyder told the commission. "However, slowly, very slowly, we got our first half-dozen pioneers. They purchased their homes, even though they had the same struggle obtaining mortgages that we had had. Very slowly, also, we were able to convince a few courageous banks to give us mortgage money. Since then, the pace has accelerated tremendously. The following figures will give you some idea of that acceleration. In 1962, one house was purchased for renovation. In 1963, two more houses. In 1964, three houses were purchased. . . . Then, in 1965, seven houses. This year, 1966, thirty-five houses have been purchased. . . .

"The growth in members of the Boerum Hill Association has also reflected this change, because by no means is the strength of the area in its new residents alone. There is a resurgence of pride and hope among people who have lived here for many years. From a group of less than a dozen founding members, the Boerum



Hill Association now has one hundred and thirty-four dues-paying members. . . . We feel it absolutely essential to convey to you something of the enthusiasm—and it is really not too strong a word to call it a passion—and something of the dedication and devotion which we who live in Boerum Hill feel. We are dedicated, above all, to urban living—to life in the city—in this city, which, for all its difficulties, is, we feel, ultimately the most rewarding. It is in the success, or failure, of neighborhoods like our own that the success, or failure, of New York City itself will ultimately be determined. And not only New York City, but all American cities, because we all face the same problems."

NEW brownstoners fall roughly into three categories: those who do not think of themselves as renovators but prefer to buy and occupy houses that need no repairs; those who can afford to hire draftsmen and contractors to remodel the old houses they acquire; and those—the more heroic ones—who move right away into the run-down structures they buy, and spend years doing the restoration themselves. In Boerum Hill during the sixties, most brownstoners belonged to the third category. They restored their dream houses bit by bit: a room at a time or a floor at a time; bathroom this winter, kitchen next summer; roof now, basement later, back courtyard someday. Work on a room sometimes stopped where the money ran out—leaving a stark record of raw masonry, unpainted woodwork, loose wires hanging from the ceiling, or exposed pipes. It was impossible to spend any time in some of these houses without feeling that their restoration was proceeding upon the tightest of budgets, and that their completion—if that ever occurred—would demand of their owners an extreme frugality.

Most of the renovators were fanatics about nineteenth-century detail. They so hated modern interior design that they spent an unconscionable amount of time scrounging for Victorian bric-a-brac to install in their houses. They were to be seen combing antique shops and ransacking the debris of recently demolished brownstones, searching painstakingly for such items as marble mantels, wooden shutters, fireplace fronts and grates, newel posts and banisters, doorknobs and door brass, stained glass, wrought-iron work, wide-plank floorboards, marble washbasins, etched glass, paneled doors, cornices, and interior brackets. *The Brownston-*

er, published bimonthly by the Brownstone Revival Committee—which was founded in 1968 to gather and disseminate information about brownstone neighborhoods—sometimes carried an ad for the United House Wrecking Company, in Stamford, Connecticut. In the ad, the company called itself “the junkyard with a personality” and claimed to stock “5 Acres of Relics & Nostalgia.” Renovators from Boerum Hill and elsewhere often made their way up to Stamford and bore away not only doors and mantels, brass and copper fixtures, but statuary, old books, clocks, nautical antiques, trunks, chandeliers, and even discarded church pews.

Despite all this free or cheap booty, the problem of money never went away, for renovation is one of the most costly of urban middle-class undertakings. There are brownstones in Boerum Hill that were bought in the late sixties and in which renovation is still slowly going on. One renovator in the area said recently, “Restoration costs can run to about ten thousand dollars a floor, especially if you bought the house as a shell. In Chelsea, in Manhattan, they go as high as twenty thousand or thirty thousand dollars a floor. But those people have more money than we have over here. By comparison, Boerum Hill is a sort of poor man’s paradise.”

At the time Carol Donner, a young medical illustrator working in Manhattan, moved into her brownstone, on Pacific Street, in 1968, it was “in terrible shape,” she recalls. “It was little better than a shell. When we turned on the plumbing upstairs, the water just poured down through the floors. Nothing worked. Everything had to go. So my husband and I learned the hard way how to renovate. I don’t think many renovators knew how to pound a nail when they started. We learned to do things on the house by making mistakes, and by talking with our neighbors. It would have been nice if we could have called in a contractor to do the whole thing, but who has that kind of money? We probably would not have done as well as we did if we had not had neighbors who were also renovators. We all sort of had our wagons in a circle—all of us renovators. We felt that we were in the same boat, and that we had to help each other in order to survive. There was once a fire in our house, and after the firemen left, my neighbors came in with buckets and mops. One even came with an orange. Whenever a renovator moved onto a block, we passed on the

old hot plate. We had a hot plate that had been in virtually every renovated house on the block. You could always go over to a neighbor’s for a shower, too, until you got your bathroom fixed. I also went into many a neighbor’s house with bloody fingers, to have them bandaged up. And there were lots of evenings when fellow-renovators took us in for dinner.”

Brownstone renovation can also be tough on marriages. Carol Donner’s marriage ended before the house was fully restored, and she remained in the brownstone, becoming what she calls “a single-lady renovator”—one of the few who were on Pacific Street around that time. “I happen to know that there have been a lot of problems with married renovators,” she says today. “Buying a house is like having a child when the marriage is on the rocks. Both parties think it might work out after the child arrives, but it rarely does. I’d be interested to know the statistics on marriages that have broken up over renovating. The problem usually occurs when one party is not so interested in the house and the other one wants to go on with it as a joint project. Most married people don’t have any great joint projects except raising children—and a lot of them don’t even have that. So renovating is often a real test of marriage.”

Another renovator whose marriage did not survive the restoration of a brownstone is Nat Hendricks, a young Quaker from Vermont who, after earning a master’s degree in American history at Columbia University, bought a house on State Street in 1966. He said, some time ago, “My house cost sixteen thousand five hundred dollars, which was reasonable. But my wife and I were scared stiff when we moved in. We didn’t know whether next day the city was going to walk in and condemn every building on the block for demolition, and we didn’t know whether there was any hope of the neighborhood’s ever changing. We couldn’t even sleep nights after we moved in. Parties going on in the streets, beer bottles being broken, fights. We’d run into a neighbor, and he’d say, ‘You know, a guy got knifed on the block yesterday.’ One morning, we woke up and there was a trail of blood down the street. It was a rough neighborhood. Eventually, we parted, and she’s living in Cobble Hill now.”

Another “single-lady renovator” in Boerum Hill in the late sixties was Susan Benson, who bought a brownstone on Bergen Street in 1968. Her status changed, however, in January

of 1972, when she married Dennis Holt, a public-relations executive at Union Carbide, who is a recent president of the Boerum Hill Association. “I came here because my rent in Manhattan went up a hundred per cent,” Mrs. Holt told a visitor not long ago. “But it was awful when I first came here. There wasn’t even a tree on the block. And every house, as far up and down the street as you could see, had a rusty, broken-down fire escape in front. Then, I was always alone in the house, with no real security. During the first year, I was just camping out here, surrounded by dirt and renovation rubble. There was no washbasin in the bathroom and no stove in the kitchen. I was cooking on charcoal. And just try cooking eggs on charcoal sometime—it’s quite a trick. But I had always dreamed of living in an old house of my own. I couldn’t see myself living in the suburbs. I grew up in Brooklyn, in an old house in Flatbush, so I had developed a taste for it. My idea of a house is one with stairs in it. When I first went to Manhattan, I used to walk up and down the East Side looking at town houses. And, boy, that’s the way I wanted to live. Before Dennis and I got married, he was living in the suburbs. I was afraid he was going to want us to move out there—out to all that green grass and trees and stuff. So you can imagine how glad I was when he turned out to be even more excited about the house than I was. We got married after all the junk and piles of old brick and concrete from the house had been hauled out into the street. So he was lucky. He didn’t have much to do when he got here except paint.”

DENNIS HOLT became president of the Boerum Hill Association in the spring of 1973 and served until the spring of 1975, when he was succeeded by Howard Lewis. Although Holt arrived in Boerum Hill much too late to be counted among the real pioneers, he did get there early enough to observe, and to be amazed by, some of the traits that mark the brownstone-revival subculture. Toward the end of his second term as president of the neighborhood association, he told a guest, “We’ve had parties in this house made up mostly of neighborhood renovators, along with a few friends from outside the area, and before the evening is half over the renovators are doing nothing but swapping tales of how they fixed this fireplace, this floor, that roof, that pipe. As you move through the room, you hear questions like ‘What do you

do with a roof that leaks through the new plastering?" and "Have you tried Uncle Fred's No. 2 paint remover?" Everybody is recommending a favorite floor scraper, a favorite plumber, a favorite this, a favorite that. The few non-renovators stand around listening to this insane talk, and they are obviously bored to death. Poor things, they thought they were coming to an ordinary party. No one had told them that parties among renovators are never parties but merely house forums. I have seen violent arguments erupt over methods of cleaning floors. At these parties, even love affairs and divorces pale in comparison to the problem of paint removers. And things that normally sustain people's lives—religion, politics, the arts—all take a back seat to the subject of renovating."

L. J. Davis, a real pioneer renovator—he began restoring his brownstone on Dean Street in 1965—had himself been frequently struck by what he calls the "insane" behavior of these renovators whenever they got together. After observing them for almost a decade, Davis said recently, "They are the most house-proud people you could ever hope to meet. To start with, most of them were doing their own renovation, so they became obsessed. There were many times when I wanted to yell at them, 'Can't you ever talk about anything but houses?'" The obsession was such that when renovators were not retailing experiences or dispensing advice at cocktail parties they were diligently passing it along through the pages of the Boerum Hill Association newsletter. An issue sent out in the spring of 1971 contained this information:

If you're planning a brick terrace, here are a few words from sad experience: DON'T use ordinary brick—even what's fallen off your house during the winter. When it's exposed to water it tends to absorb it, and when the temperature drops below freezing, it either disintegrates or—more dramatically—explodes. Regular facing brick won't work, so tell your building supply yard what you want it for and make him guarantee it. If he won't, go somewhere else.

Davis, who is thirty-seven years old, is a writer, an actor, and a teacher. He comes from Boise, Idaho, and he and his wife lived on the lower East Side of Manhattan for three years before moving to Boerum Hill. Since they arrived there, four of his novels have been published: "Whence All But He Had Fled" (1968), "Cowboys Don't Cry" (1969), "A Meaningful Life" (1971), and "Walking Small" (1974). Davis is regarded in the com-

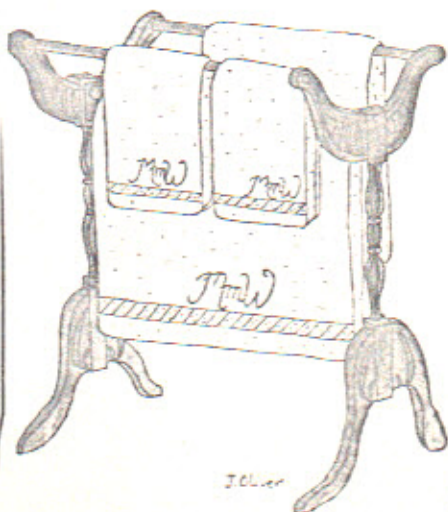
munity as one of its two resident historians—the other being Tom Butson, a writer and editor on the Sunday Times, who is now the president of the Boerum Hill Association. Davis has researched the history of his own brownstone and has found that it was built in 1869. "We even know the name of the man who first owned it," he said a while back. "His name was Malachi Murray, and he was a stonemason. Murray lost the house in the financial crash of 1873, and it was bought by a couple of greengrocers, Hugh and William Hutcheon. The Hutcheons lived here from 1873 to 1906. The house then changed hands again, and was turned into a rooming house for Irish working-class families. It changed hands twice more between 1906 and 1926, when it was taken over by a woman who held it for almost forty years—until we bought it, in 1965. Ours was among the early houses to be bought and renovated after Boerum Hill started. And it was pretty expensive for the time—a big deal at eighteen thousand five hundred. Still, I was extraordinarily lucky to get it. Nowhere today can you find the space I have at the price I paid. And, speaking of space, can you imagine a couple of greengrocers living in this style today? I don't believe that members of the American middle class have lived in such spacious quarters since the turn of the century."

TRANSFORMING an old slum neighborhood like Boerum Hill meant more than just changing its name and fixing up the old houses. The brownstones that the middle class were buying and refurbishing were concentrated on the blocks that make up the core of the community. The surrounding blocks, which still looked quite ragged, contained many of the run-down tenements and rooming houses that had been almost everywhere when the renovators started moving in. This meant that the problem of crime continued to plague Boerum Hill. The neighborhood would not be truly transformed until that problem had been attacked and controlled. Crime consisted mainly of prostitution, drug traffic, and burglary. While the first two types of crime had entered Boerum Hill during the nineteen-forties, when rooming houses started proliferating there, burglary had become more common in the neighborhood after the renovators began to arrive. According to Davis, "When Boerum Hill was all poor and run-down, people used to sit outside on the stoops all the time. They provided

what Jane Jacobs calls 'eyes on the streets.' And everybody knows that there is no harder neighborhood to rob than one where everybody is sitting out front. The kinds of burglaries we've been having since the 'eyes on the streets' started disappearing in our area are the boldest kinds—with guys pulling up in trucks, getting out with axes, and attacking the front door. Still, I don't believe there is as much burglary in Boerum Hill as some people say. Migrants from Manhattan tend to exaggerate the problem—they have special fantasies about crime. A family on my block put up a huge wrought-iron gate over their front door. Well, I just couldn't live like that. I just couldn't live in a cage."

Carol Donner says, "Everybody used to get burglarized. The first burglary would usually occur right after you moved in, before you'd had a chance to establish a sense of security. Then, when I was president of the neighborhood association, in 1971, the area was still overrun with prostitutes. I came to be known around here as the madam of Boerum Hill, because I got to know all the prostitutes and all the police. The girls made the neighborhood impossible to live in during the summertime. They congregated on the corner of Third and Pacific and blocked traffic, and many times they attacked people. On our way home from the Boerum Hill meetings, we had to wade through this incredible Forty-second Street-type traffic."

"It was the problem with the prostitutes that led to the first really strong demand made in Boerum Hill for better police protection. But nothing happened until Mabelle Lundahl, the parish worker of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church, at Pacific and Third, where the Boerum Hill Association meets, was attacked by a prostitute. Miss Lundahl was trying to enter the



church, and the girls sitting on the stoop wouldn't let her through. When she asked them to move, one of them grabbed her and began choking her. Patricia Snyder saw from across the street what was happening and ran and tried to help Miss Lundahl. They attacked her, too, and she had to be taken to the hospital. This gave us a strong talking point with the police. They hadn't taken us seriously. They'd thought we would go away. But after the Lundahl attack they realized that we weren't going to go away. They swarmed through the neighborhood and started hauling the prostitutes off in paddy wagons. They told the girls, 'You better go somewhere else. This community is getting hot.' As it turned out, all we had managed to do was to squeeze the prostitutes off onto Park Slope, which, in turn, squeezed them off onto Prospect Park."

There was at least one other struggle to be waged before the neighborhood could be considered safe for renovation. That was the struggle against demolition. Soon after the renovators began arriving, in the late sixties, they discovered that much of the community had been designated as a demolition area by the New York City government. Most of the old brownstones were to be torn down to make way for high-rise apartment buildings and business offices. For instance, in March of 1967 the relatively few renovators then living in Boerum Hill read in the *Times*:

Fortified by an infusion of Federal funds for building demolition, the Lindsay administration has mapped out 12 areas in the city for intensified removal of deteriorating structures in sections due for major housing and renewal improvements. . . . The administration considers the demolition program urgent because the rundown buildings involved, mostly vacant, are structurally unsafe and become firetraps and gathering places for neighborhood gangs, narcotics addicts and criminals. . . . A 100-block section [in Brooklyn] covers a portion of the borough's downtown area southwest of the Flatbush Avenue Terminal of the Long Island Rail Road.

As every renovator recognized instantly, Boerum Hill was part of this hundred-block section. And it was only after the most strenuous opposition at City Hall by the new residents that the plan was eventually abandoned.

But in 1970, while they were still resisting the city's plans for demolition, the Boerum Hill renovators got wind of the fact that the New York State Legislature was preparing an equally disastrous assault upon their neighborhood. A bill to create an Atlantic Ave-

nue Development Authority had just been passed in the State Senate and was on its way to the Assembly for consideration. According to a report in the *Times*, the proposed Authority would exercise "exclusive control over demolition, construction, rehabilitation and transportation access in a five-mile swath across Brooklyn from New York Harbor to the Interboro Parkway." The report continued, "Among the Authority's prerogatives as originally proposed were powers to condemn any building, purchase any property, or relocate any public facility it desired in the designated area." In effect, the construction of the transportation access—a multiple-lane expressway—would require the condemnation and demolition of all structures that stood in its way, whether or not these structures were recently renovated brownstones. And although other brownstone neighborhoods in downtown Brooklyn would be somewhat affected, no other was as seriously threatened as Boerum Hill, which stood directly in the path of the planned expressway.

In what a Boerum Hill renovator has described as "the worst week of our lives," the community organized a series of protests that culminated in a march on Albany. After several busloads of residents had converged upon the state capital to lobby against the proposed authority, the bill was withdrawn in the Assembly. "From then on," one of the homeowners said later, "we realized that we couldn't just sit in our houses and renovate and worry about ceilings, fireplaces, and plasterwork. We had to worry about what was going on around us. We had to worry about the outsides of our houses. You see, one reason we were nearly wiped out by that plan in Albany is that the people who sponsored the bill had driven through our neighborhood, conducting what we call 'windshield surveys.' They had looked at our houses—and some of the houses really looked awful—and they had concluded that we were only a little better than a slum. Some of us hadn't done much along the block fronts except plant trees—and a little two-year-old tree doesn't really look like much. So we decided we'd have to get more people to beautify the exterior of their houses. And we organized all sorts of activities to weld our community together."

A DECADE or so after Helen Buckler moved to the area and pioneered in its revival, the old, abandoned garden of North Gowanus was clearly sprouting again. True, the re-

surgence was spotty. Most of it was still to be seen within a two-or-three-block walk from Miss Buckler's brownstone, on Dean Street—on those blocks which constitute the heart of the neighborhood. Nor had all the old problems been solved. Today the problems of prostitution and burglary have declined considerably; but, says a man who lives in the western section of Boerum Hill, the drug traffic is worse than ever. Still, a visitor returning to the area recently—one who had fled its blight and collapse in the nineteen-fifties, say, and had since received no news of it—would have been astonished at what the renovators had made of the old slum. More than three hundred brownstones had been bought and restored. Several hundred trees had been planted. The sidewalks were hosed and scrubbed. Garbage pickups were regular. Brick and brownstone fronts had been given bright colors. Looking up or down a block, a visitor's eyes would glide along a row of façades painted alternately red, green, white, blue, lime, pink, ochre, black-and-white, brown, cream, yellow, and purple. This carnival of bold colors did not comport with the quiet, self-assured gentility one normally associates with old brownstone neighborhoods, but, in its liveliness and display, it seemed a fitting celebration of the fresh energy and new blood that had been transfused into a once dying area.

The streets with the greatest concentration of renovated brownstones are Dean and Bergen between Nevins and Smith; Pacific and Wyckoff between Nevins and Hoyt; State between Flatbush and Smith; and the Bond and Hoyt blocks in between. Otherwise, Boerum Hill as the renovators envision it is still an unfinished community. On some blocks, no renovation at all has been done, and on others one or two freshly restored brownstones abut on dingy-looking tenements or rooming houses. A number of the houses are boarded up. Refuse and broken glass still mat some of the sidewalks. Here and there, open lots wait ominously, as though for some modern structure—like a gas station—that would be sure to incur the wrath of the Boerum Hill Association. And what a Brooklyn vest-pocket study by the City Planning Board found in 1969 is still true: "In terms of moving traffic, the community has a greater than average volume of traffic and trucks passing through the area. . . . The Bergen Street bus travels west on Bergen Street and east on Dean Street, creating heavy usage on these narrow streets. The residents of

both blocks have complained that the vibration created by the bus traffic loosens cornices and decorative moldings."

Four years ago, Boerum Hill, unlike other brownstone neighborhoods, had few of the cultural or consumer attractions usually found in middle-class communities. Despite the considerable number of artists, professionals, and sundry other intellectuals who lived in the neighborhood, there were hardly any restaurants or bookshops. A few antique shops were to be found on Atlantic Avenue, but Atlantic Avenue was not yet an attractive street for shopping. The Brooklyn Academy of Music borders on Boerum Hill and Fort Greene, but it was and still is claimed with greater pride and passion by the residents of Fort Greene. There were hardly any supermarkets, meat markets, fish markets, hand laundries, shoe-repair shops, jewellers, or dry cleaners. An artist living there said recently, "I don't know how I would have managed if I hadn't had a car. My shoemaker was over in Carroll Gardens. And I had to travel over to Cobble Hill and the Heights to do my meat and supermarket shopping." Today, many of these things are available on Atlantic Avenue. The section of the avenue that passes through Boerum Hill has been rezoned to prevent the destruction of old buildings and storefronts, and to provide for the rehabilitation of the area. And it now has art galleries, restaurants, cafés, specialty shops, food markets, bookshops, and other cultural and business conveniences. An article in a recent issue of *The Phoenix*, downtown Brooklyn's chief neighborhood newspaper, had this to say: "Whatever the individual vision, the eventual outcome, if recent trends... are any indication Atlantic Avenue will most certainly be ringed with the rosy hue of dreams made real." The revival of this portion of Atlantic Avenue has been one of the great achievements of the renovation movement in Boerum Hill.

The Bergen Street Trolley, at the corner of Bergen and Hoyt, is still the only saloon of any distinction in Boerum Hill—at least, in the estimation of the renovators. Originally the King's Pawn Inn, it is one of the landmarks of old North Gowanus, with a charming Victorian façade and with antique interior wood panelling and moldings. Before the new people started moving into Boerum Hill, the inn had become a hangout for junkies and prostitutes. When the renovation movement began, however, it was carefully and

tastefully restored, under new ownership. Before the name was changed. Davis, the novelist, said, "On any given night, the talk at the King's Pawn is very good. And as the evening wears on, the talk gets progressively more clever. It is now a true neighborhood pub."

The transformation of Boerum Hill was clearly evident by 1973, but the pace of renovation had slowed. Fewer and fewer houses were being bought by outsiders. There were two reasons for this. One had to do with climbing interest rates on mortgages, and the other with the fact that it was no longer possible to buy cheap houses in Boerum Hill. Run-down structures, in need of considerable renovation, such as had sold in the early sixties for between twelve thousand and eighteen thousand dollars, could not be acquired in 1973 for less than thirty thousand. And it now took from seventy thousand to a hundred thousand dollars to obtain an already renovated brownstone, or even a well-preserved one.

Charles Michaelson, the associate editor of the New York State United Teachers' weekly newspaper, bought an unrenovated house on Bergen Street in 1970 at what he considered a bargain price. He received a delayed shock the day he moved in. "That afternoon," he recalls, "I went to a little grocery shop nearby to pick up the makings of a sandwich, and the guy who owns the store said to me, 'You bought the house down the street?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'What'd you pay?' Well, I like to give the appearance of being relatively open, and I told him what I'd paid, which was forty thousand dollars. He said, 'Forty thousand! I could have bought that house last year for twenty-seven.' So here I am buying a dollar's worth of salami from this guy, and he is standing there telling me what a big jerk I am. That day, I didn't need it."

"There is no doubt that the brownstone-renovation movement—a term that has taken on a sort of semi-religious overtone for us—has slowed down," says Holt, who is one of Michaelson's neighbors. "The steal is over. Even a crummy shell will now go for twice as much as it did seven years ago. There used to be a risk involved when you bought a house in Boerum Hill. For instance, I've used the word 'steal,' but it wasn't even a pleasant steal when middle-income people started buying up old houses over here. Back then, it was really a high-risk venture. The people who came in here were nuts or visionaries or gamblers, or a

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combination of the three. There's no longer a risk involved. Today, it is simply a matter of counting up the dollars and cents and seeing whether you can afford to buy. The movement will continue, I'm sure, but at a much slower pace. It can't be reversed now."

BROWNSTONE renovation not only faces problems from outside but also creates its own difficulties. By far the most sensitive of these is the social friction that occurs between the incoming middle class (predominantly white) and the poorer people (predominantly black and Puerto Rican) already living there. It represents the painful social and economic contradiction that is inherent in the brownstone-revival movement. On the one hand, brownstone renovators are praised for rescuing old neighborhoods from decay; for preserving the nineteenth-century houses that symbolize New York's historical and architectural continuity; and for retaining for the city—by their decision to "unslum" and live in these neighborhoods—a middle-class tax base, without which the city would have difficulty sustaining itself. On the other hand, they are accused of displacing poor and lower-income families, and of creating what have been called "upper-middle-class enclaves" and "high-rent rarities."

The charge is a serious one, and many renovators are troubled by it. For one thing, it is estimated that renovation in Boerum Hill replaced low-income residents in a ratio of three to eight; that is, eight low-income tenants were displaced for every three renovators who moved in, the reason being that a renovator tends to occupy a large portion of the house he or she has restored, and to accept only a very few tenants in the space remaining. According to Davis, the thirty brownstones on his block housed about six hundred and thirty-five people in 1960. Today, he claims, there are about a hundred people living in them. "I would say that about six thousand people have been displaced in Boerum Hill since the renovation movement started over here, and another six thousand could go in the next ten years," he says. One result is that the remaining low-income residents now resent the renovators as a group of rich newcomers—or "foreigners"—who have come into the neighborhood to push them out and take over.

It should be said that most renovators in Boerum Hill—unlike brownstoners in some other neighborhoods—not only are troubled by the effect their

arrival has had upon the low-income residents but also do not really wish to see Boerum Hill become an exclusively middle-class enclave. Listening to some of them, one forms the impression that in no residential neighborhood in downtown Brooklyn is there a stronger desire to retain ethnic and economic diversity. "This thing about renovating an old house sounds very esoteric," Patricia Snyder says. "But it often goes together with a commitment to living in an area that is mixed in every way. It takes a certain kind of person to enjoy that. And these, for the most part, are the people who are in Boerum Hill. We have much more diversity than Cobble Hill or Brooklyn Heights. Everybody shouldn't be the same, with two-point-four children and an income of x dollars."

L. J. Davis: "I myself don't need to live around people who all look like me. If I wanted to do that, I would not have come to New York City. I would have stayed in Boise, Idaho, where everybody looks just like me. There is no question, however, that renovation has hurt the poor over here. This neighborhood has tipped in the direction of the middle class—and that includes a few black and Puerto Rican renovators. It is not going to tip back toward the working class and the poor. I think now that we should have linked renovation to a serious effort to fight for housing for the poor. They didn't want to leave this neighborhood. They had lived here for years. All their friends were here. And all of a sudden they were told, in effect, that they were going to have to fish or cut bait. I don't think that most renovators were deliberately callous or were smug and evil. Some of them are my friends. They are white and black. They are decent, upstanding people. But they displayed a consistent indifference to the consequences of their actions. I believe that all of us will have to be more responsive to the consequences of having turned this area into a renovated district."

But the person in Boerum Hill who speaks the most eloquently about the social and aesthetic conflicts inherent in the brownstone-renovation movement is Mary Jane Melish, the wife of the Reverend William Howard Melish. She and her husband have been living in Boerum Hill since 1964, when they moved there because it was close to her work at a youth center on Atlantic Avenue. Mr. Melish, who is now rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Corona, was then working for the Southern Conference Educational

Fund and—when he was not traveling—did his work at home. Mrs. Melish grew up in Cincinnati, is a graduate of Wellesley, and was the director of the youth center for twenty-five years. She is a short, somewhat plump woman in her sixties, with a rosy complexion, a friendly smile, and a serene expression. She is also coolly and incisively articulate—a tough opponent, one would guess, on any issue she defends. In her brownstone, on Dean Street, one Sunday morning some time ago, she delivered an indictment of Boerum Hill renovators such as is seldom heard elsewhere in the community, except among the low-income population.

"I think everyone would agree that the preservation of the houses in Boerum Hill and the refurbishing of the neighborhood have been good things," Mrs. Melish said. "The neighborhood has become very attractive, and everybody is a part of that. But the attitude of some of the renovators toward the poorer people—those who still live in the run-down apartments or over storefronts—is very negative. The renovators are resented by these people, who feel that the community belongs to them as much as it belongs to the newcomers. They don't like being looked down upon, they don't like being excluded, and they don't like being pushed out. Many of the young people who have come into the community have found much satisfaction in being neighbors with the people who were living here before. They are the ones who are more fascinated by people than by houses. I myself—I like houses and good architecture, but I believe that houses are things to be used. They are not museums. And it seems to me that to a lot of the renovators houses come first and people come later. I identify with all the different ethnic and economic groups in Boerum Hill as well as with those renovators who are interested in living together with them and sharing their lives. But I have no sympathy with people who want to come here and keep it a strictly middle-class neighborhood. I think there's so much richness in our variety, so much we can learn from one another. I'm not saying there's anything undesirable about a renovation movement. But I think a renovation movement can beautify a neighborhood and still not succeed in beautifying the spirit of a neighborhood. That has happened in a lot of other places, especially some near here. And I would not like to see that happen in Boerum Hill. It is one thing to increase the value of real es-

tate, but I don't believe that that is anything great in itself."

IN November of 1973, some seven years after Robert Snyder first appeared before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, a six-block area at the center of Boerum Hill—together with several houses on State Street—was designated a historic district. The Commission cited the area as "a pleasant residential neighborhood of low building heights, uniform roof-lines, and continuous iron railings at street level." It was a recognition that put the final seal on the community's struggle for a respectability similar to that enjoyed by Park Slope, Cobble Hill, and Brooklyn Heights—which had been designated historic districts much earlier.

In February of 1974, when the designation was approved by the New York City Board of Estimate—a mere formality—the Boerum Hill Association rejoiced. Holt, who was then the president, and Heloise Gruneberg, the recording secretary, passed the news around, using phrases like "at long last." Snyder, who had carried the neighborhood's fight in the early days, welcomed the news as "a good thing." But, remaining true to his practical and low-key style, he expressed regret that the designation had been so slow in coming. "It did not come when we needed it most," he said. "We needed it to stop the city and the speculators from tearing down the old brownstones. If we had sat around waiting for landmarks designation, the neighborhood would have been torn down a long time ago." His wife was merely relieved. "When we first came here, it was like starting a rumor that Boerum Hill existed," Patricia Snyder said. "But we kept working at it. And now Boerum Hill is not a rumor anymore. It exists." —JERVIS ANDERSON