Who lived in your dorm before it was a dorm?

A couple weeks ago, David Hanzal had a bout of déjà vu. Someone came into People Against Landlord Abuse and Tenant Exploitation, the West Harlem nonprofit better known as P.A.’L.A.N.T.E., asking for advice—someone like Hanzal, four years ago. “He walks in, he says, ‘I’ve organized my building, I’ve done 311, I don’t know what to do, the landlord’s doing this.’” The client lives right near Columbia’s 17-acre Manhattanville expansion, in the neighborhood of the same name. “He’s got a long road ahead of him. You know, he’s where I was in 2014.”

Hanzal found himself thrown into tenants’ rights activism when his building, at Broadway and Tiemann Place, was sold to a landlord bent on getting rid of his rent-stabilized tenants through aggressive construction and disrepair. Hanzal formed a tenants association, though unfortunately not until after...
many of his neighbors had been pressured into leaving. Soon, Hanzal became embroiled in a legal battle over the rent stabilization status of his own apartment—which he eventually lost. “Out by March,” he says, not painfully, but not at peace with the outcome, either. These days, Hanzal puts in 10 to 40 hours a week as a community organizing volunteer at P.A.’L.A.N.T.E., an organization that, in recent years, has made a serious name for itself in Harlem-area housing activism.

But Hanzal is caught in a tangled web of history that goes back much further than 2014. It goes back to a time when P.A.’L.A.N.T.E. wasn’t the only prominent tenants’ rights activism group in the area. It predates the West Harlem Development Corporation, the eminent domain lawsuits, and even the Manhattanville expansion plans themselves. It is the story of the real estate decisions made by huge academic and religious institutions, of the consequences for their residential neighbors, and of a fundamental disagreement as to what the institutions owe their neighborhood. Not only has housing activism fundamentally changed the physical landscape of Morningside Heights over the last half-century, it has also been a defining force in the evolution of the University’s relationship with the neighborhood as a whole.

For many decades, Columbia bought up buildings left and right. But the University’s policy on purchasing property has changed over the course of the last century—since the purchase of the Manhattanville campus, Columbia has avoided buying out other buildings. Housing activism on the part of the community both catalyzed that change, and underwent an evolution of its own. And like so much of Columbia’s modern history, the patterns of today’s housing activism first began to play out in the 1960s.
Even before Gym Crow—the University’s infamous plan to build a gym in Morningside Park with separate entrances for neighborhood residents and Columbia affiliates, which was a catalyst for the student protests of 1968—Columbia was criticized as a segregative force in West Harlem throughout the 20th century.

Rewind a decade before the ’68 protests, and the University’s direct displacement of residents begins in a neighborhood with rapidly shifting demographics. In the 1950s, uptown Manhattan (Morningside Heights included) was newly becoming characterized by its cultural bustle and ethnic diversity: Harlem as a whole had gone from 12.4 percent to 58.1 percent residents of color between 1920 and 1950 alone. A vibrant web of subcommunities living alongside one another made up a familiar collective of permanent residents; as Tom Kappner, Columbia College class of 1966, tells it, there was a more tightly knit group of permanent residents than exists today. He worked the night shift for the United Parcel Service, and when he got home to his building “in the early morning hours, there was always somebody sitting on the stoop on the street, and they knew me.”

But the University did not integrate easily with its surroundings. Robert Roistacher, a Columbia College 1968 alum and longtime Morningside Heights resident and organizer, calls the foundational philosophy of the University’s response to Morningside Heights’ demographics “The cordon sanitaire.” Those words, which date back to medieval France, refer to a public health practice of cordonning off populations suffering from an epidemic, so that no one could carry the disease out. In Columbia’s case, Roistacher says, it is a question of cordonning itself off from the rest of the neighborhood. A formerly
confidential report written in 1958 by a coalition (originally called Morningside Heights, Inc., and known today as the Morningside Area Alliance) of the neighborhood’s most powerful institutions, including Columbia, cited “redevelopment” and the acquisition of local buildings as a manner of “securing the future” of the neighborhood. Acquiring nearby residential buildings, the report prescribes, would alleviate crime and social decay by “remov[ing] foci of infection.”

But what were these “foci of infection” that the coalition was buying up? For the most part, Columbia purchased rent-stabilized buildings—identified in the report as “the worst buildings in remaining slum blocks”—and single-room occupancy buildings (buildings which rent out single furnished rooms to individual parties, who then share bathrooms and kitchens, for a short period, also known as SROs). Larry Wood, a member of the SRO Law Project at Goddard Riverside Community Center, tells me that the residents of SROs in particular tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, often people with chronic mental or physical illnesses. And in Morningside Heights, they also tended to be people of color, according to a 1959 “summary report of conditions” prepared by Morningside Heights, Inc. In 1961, according to the Morningside Heights Core Area Study, there were 33 SROs in the neighborhood with 5,487 rooms total; six years later, there were only 13 SROs with 2,146 rooms between them.

Today, Columbia and Barnard together own 24 of the 33 SROs that operated in Morningside Heights in 1961—which now serve as housing options for many undergraduate and graduate students. In short, the University subsumed a significant portion of the affordable housing in Morningside Heights.

“From the early 1960s on, Columbia was aggressively, aggressively expanding in the neighborhood,” Kappner recounts, “and the neighborhood that I described to you before was being transformed.” In 1967, his building received a notice from its recent purchaser, Teachers College: Be out in six months. TC wanted to build two high-rise towers at the ends of the blocks on either side of 121st Street, displacing the residents who already lived there, which the Kappners were not happy about. They were prepared to fight back, however: Tom and his wife Gussie, Columbia and Barnard alumni respectively, had bussed south together in 1964 to participate in the Freedom Summer, and the tactics from that came in handy. They formed a block association, canvassed, put up fliers, and “swore a blood oath that we would not move unless they carried us out horizontally.”

The student protests of 1968 seemed, to Kappner, to be a “gamechanger”; the University became willing to negotiate with his block association. Later, Columbia itself bought the buildings from TC, and when the University sought to evict tenants to provide for housing for its students, the block association once more reached an agreement with the institution to stop eviction. Lynne and Harry Schwartz, too, dealt with the University as landlord in 1983, when two fires ravaged their Columbia-owned apartment building, which housed both affiliate and non-affiliate tenants. The University told tenants to find another place to live; the Schwartzes and their neighbors sued to keep their apartments, and won. Kenneth Schaeffer, who worked as a lawyer for former assemblyman Ed Sullivan during the ’80’s, argued their case.
Today, the Kappners still live in the same apartment at West 121st Street and Amsterdam Avenue, and the Schwartzes’ daughter lives in their apartment at 547 Riverside Drive. But there’s a morbid caveat: “When we die or when we move out—well, we won’t move out, so when we die,” Tom says, their apartment will no longer be rent-stabilized, and will instead be the University’s to do with the unit as it sees fit. The law that keeps the Kappners in their place of residence applies to only tenants who lived in their unit prior to acquisition by the University—not to the unit itself. Tom isn’t thrilled about that. He would much prefer that the apartment remain rent-stabilized for “a young family” or someone similar, rather than turn into housing for Columbia students. The Schwartzes’ daughter is in the same situation.

Dave Robinson, a member of the executive committee of the Morningside Heights Community Coalition and retired housing lawyer, explains that students aren’t great residents for maintaining the connectedness of a community; they’re so temporary that they don’t really contribute to an actual community fabric.

When it comes to maintaining community fabric, Hanzal feels he was behind from the start. “We lost a lot of tenants because we were unaware” of how displacement worked, he says. “And developers—they knew. They had their system in place long before they bought our building. So we're playing catch-up the entire time.”

Columbia’s environmental impact statement forecasted “significant adverse indirect residential displacement” as a result of the Manhattanville expansion—approximately 1,131 units associated with University affiliates in the primary and secondary study areas of the statement, which include...
Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, and Hamilton Heights collectively. Hanzal wishes that Columbia had “been more informative to the community” and taken a stand that clearly supported tenant activists, “empowering those people and aligning with them,” as opposed to ignoring or fighting them.

In the ’70s, another group entered the housing activism scene. Tom DeMott, Columbia College class of 1980 and longtime area activist, says he would go to the Columbia Tenants Union when he had issues with his landlord, and they helped him organize. The CTU sparked a lot of drama in Morningside Heights, DeMott remembers: The group was led by a man named Bruce Bailey, who, in addition to organizing protests and rent strikes among thousands of tenants, “made a lot of enemies.” The people I speak to question the underlying morality of CTU’s tactics, which seem to have been generally aggressive and at one point highly anti-Semitic. In Kappner’s opinion, this prevented some people who could have benefited from the tenants rights’ movement from getting involved. (The story of CTU ends dramatically as well, when Bailey was abducted off the streets of Morningside Heights and brutally killed in 1989; a New York Times article covering the still-unsolved murder quotes a detective: “Bruce has been annoying people for 20 years; why now have they decided to kill him?”

Kenneth Schaeffer holding a copy of Columbia Daily Spectator from March 24, 1983—which reads “Fire victims can return home, repairs ordered”

Housing activism has a strange position in the history of Morningside Heights. In some ways, it is the history of Morningside Heights—of continual complex demographic change over time, of the powers that be and the rules they bend, of a University that is inextricably, sometimes painfully tangled up in its
neighbors, and vice versa. As Kappner succinctly puts it, Columbia “exists in the neighborhood.” On the other hand, the history of Morningside Heights’ housing struggles sometimes fall to the wayside when we think about the legacy of local activism; housing activism has been neither wholly a University-related issue—it is easy to completely overlook it as a student—nor wholly separate; its key moments often involved University policy and student mobilization. Indeed, the climactic points of West Harlem activism synchronized with and incorporated tactics from student activism: the civil rights movement of the ’60s, the South African apartheid divestment movement of the ’80s.

Hanzal isn’t aware of the tenant activists who came before him: He found, as he puts it, “no real handbook” for how to proceed if you face eviction. DeMott makes a point to remind me that tenant activists are often hard to find—many of them end up displaced—and that displacement is more than just physical. They’re removed from their connections in the community. If you want to talk to someone who came before you, you’d better hope that they won their fight, or they’re not going to be easy to track down. Hanzal saw this happen a lot when he was first starting out: “I would find people online with a lot of those organizations, and they would help me for one week, and then the next week they would be gone.”

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Kenneth Schaeffer has lots of paper on his hands. He spreads some of the many artifacts—most from his time working as a tenant lawyer in Sullivan’s office in the 1980s—out for me on the table in Tom’s Restaurant. It is an act of historic parallel: Many of the people and headlines and lawsuits captured on the page in grainy black and white have been here before. Back when he worked as an organizer and lawyer for Sullivan, “we would drive press releases down to the Daily News and the New York Times at midnight, and then go to Tom’s for a cheeseburger.”

Schaeffer describes his legacy as less “legal” work and more “civil disobedience in a suit and tie.” Sure enough, there are photos of him from over the years in just that position: sitting on Alma Mater’s lap, speaking with students at a “shantytown” protest organized on Low Steps, posing outside a building whose tenants he represented in court. Most of the people I interview who were involved in housing rights in the second half of the 20th century advise me with some variation of “you should be talking to Kenny”—and for good reason: He spent nearly a decade in Sullivan’s office, representing a variety of tenants dealing with the University.

On a Sunday afternoon in late September, Schaeffer meets up with his former boss, Sullivan, in the lobby of 600 West 113th Street, known to most Columbia undergraduates as Nussbaum—which was an SRO until Columbia bought it. Schaeffer and Sullivan flip through the permanent tenants listed in the lobby’s directory, recalling the people behind each set of half-inch block letters. In addition to the permanent tenants and some graduate students, this building is now the temporary home of 199
Columbia undergraduates—who may be surprised to learn that it was previously embroiled in two lawsuits.

“Columbia has no interest for anyone that’s not in their own little club,” longtime housing activist Marie Runyon told Spectator in 1987, speaking about the protests involving the building that would become Nuss. Her words speak to a fundamental dispute of principle between the community and the law about what Columbia owes to whom. As a not-for-profit educational institution, the University doesn’t operate under the same set of laws that your average landlord does—a phenomenon that sparked the two Nussbaum lawsuits. The University sought to evict Runyon after it bought her building at 130 Morningside Drive. In the process of fighting that action, she made a name for herself as a housing activist in Morningside Heights, quite literally: Today, the building she fought Columbia over from 1962 to 2000 is named after her.

Runyon’s personal files are accessible in the Columbia University archives as of this August, and they depict a woman who lived and breathed her activism. In one folder are her daughter Louise’s wedding vows; in the next, plans for her two campaigns for assemblywoman, the first of which she won and the second of which she lost to Ed Sullivan; in the next, the original pre-photocopy version of a flier she apparently created for the Black Panthers. Most of the many boxes of paper, though, are dedicated to her decades-long legal battle with Columbia. There are polite but direct letters she wrote to her superintendent listing building issues, myriad clippings of op-eds she wrote for Spectator, and legal
briefs that summarize the opposition’s arguments. ("Lie," “lie,” “false,” notes green-pen cursive in the margin, next to the underlined allegation it seeks to contest.)

There is also flier after flier after hand-drawn flier: “A Community DEAD or ALIVE? The home you save may be your own.”

Marie Runyon passed away four days before this article was published, at 103 years old. Runyon was known for being a tenant who fought a colossal institution and won. She was a tenant who exemplified the kind of personal, tireless spirit that is so characteristic of housing activism. When the University boarded up the windows of the empty apartments in her building, her daughter recalls, Runyon planted petunias in a window box. Even that was an act of protest, making it clear to passersby that the building “was not in fact empty. It was not a done deal.”

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Columbia is not blind to its own track record. The University’s Manhattanville campus website says the expansion plan is “an intentional break from the longtime practice of urban universities—including
Columbia—expanding from a traditional cloistered core in an ad hoc way based on available real estate in the surrounding area.” The policy is clear: Columbia seeks to purchase no more buildings. But this doesn’t mean the expansion is fully innocuous when it comes to housing issues. Indirect displacement of thousands of people, a consequence foretold in the 2007 Environmental Impact Statement, is unavoidable with the expansion. So what is the University left to do?

There are provisions to ameliorate displacement outlined in the Community Benefits Agreement, a set of financial and land-use commitments from the University to the community that are carried out under the auspices of the independent WHDC. These provisions include $20 million dedicated to an affordable housing fund, “to develop or preserve affordable housing” in Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, and Hamilton Heights. But as of last spring, little of that money had been dispersed—and regardless of how much money is thrown at the problem, Hanzal and Kappner both have their doubts about how effective or genuine this purely financial strategy is. In Hanzal’s view, although P.A.’L.A.N.T.E. receives some WHDC money, the University itself still needs to take a concrete stance in support of tenants’ rights.

After all, these tenant activists tend to be the people being displaced themselves. When Kappner says he “became an activist of necessity,” he isn’t alone. The same is true of Runyon, of the Schwartzes, of DeMott, of Hanzal. The same is going to be true, probably, of the man who came into Hanzal’s office not too long ago.