

## Tenement Life

The Jewish immigrants that flocked to New York City's Lower East Side in the early twentieth century were greeted with appalling living conditions. The mass influx of primarily European immigrants spawned the construction of cheaply made, densely packed housing structures called tenements. They were built on lots that measured 25 feet by 100 feet. Noted New York architect Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) believed that, "The greatest evil which ever befell New York City was the division of the blocks into lots of 25 x 100 feet . . . for from this division has arisen the New York system of tenement-houses, the worst curse which ever afflicted any great community."

Four to six stories in height, tenements contained four separate apartments on each floor, measuring 300 to 400 square feet. Apartments contained just three rooms; a windowless bedroom, a kitchen and a front room with windows. A contemporary magazine described tenements as, "great prison-like structures of brick, with narrow doors and windows, cramped passages and steep rickety stairs. . . . In case of fire they would be perfect death-traps, for it would be impossible for the occupants of the crowded rooms to escape by the narrow stairways." Tenement buildings had adjoining walls so interior rooms could not receive natural light or ventilation. Expensive modern conveniences like indoor plumbing and elevators were not included in the cheaply built tenements. Hallway lighting was rare, forcing tenants to climb up flights of stairs in the dark, or climb down in the dark to reach the outdoor toilets located in the back of the lot.

The deteriorating conditions of the apartments were described in 1902 by newly arrived immigrant Emma Beckerman: "The furnishings were worn and shabby. Four rickety chairs, a scarred wooden table, a leaky icebox, and a rusty coal stove greeted us. The bedroom contained a sagging double bed and a broken-down bureau." The space was so small that people slept on whatever they could find – rugs and even orange crates doubled as beds. During the hot summer months, the fire escapes that clung to the fronts of the buildings were used a place to sleep. Additionally, the Tenement House Department reported in 1903 that,



[Tenement \(mural study, Depart. Of Justice Building, Washington, D.C.\)](#) 1935, George Biddle, tempera on fiberboard, Smithsonian American Art Museum

“often at night, when the small rooms opening upon the air shaft are so close and ill-ventilated that sleep is impossible, mattresses are dragged upon the floor of the parlor and there the family sleeps altogether in one room. In summer the small bedrooms are so hot and stifling that a large part of the tenement house population sleep on the roofs, sidewalk and fire escapes.”

To make matters worse, tenements were severely overcrowded. At the turn of the century the Lower East Side, populated mostly by Eastern European Jews, reached density levels of 350,000 people per square mile. In other words by 1900, approximately 43,000 New York City tenement buildings housed 1.6 million of the city’s total 2 million person population. The Jewish population alone was 700,000 in 1905. Several factors contributed to the accumulation of Jews in the Lower East Side. Residing in an ethnic enclave was vital because of close access to other European Jews. Immigrants that did not speak English felt comfortable settling close to others that spoke the same language, had the same customs and practiced the same religion. The garment industry, which provided a majority of Jews with jobs, was within walking distance to their homes on the Lower East Side. There was little opportunity for them to venture out of the Lower East Side.

In 1879 a new law imposed requirements for tenements. The Tenement Reform Law of 1879 enacted minimum requirements for light and air. As a result of this law “dumbbell” tenements were constructed, so-called because of the shape of their perimeter. The dumbbell shape allowed for air shafts between tenements. Unfortunately the 1879 law did not alleviate the overcrowding and filthy conditions of the tenements as many of the older style of tenements were still in use. Additionally, the air shafts that had been installed to provide ventilation were often used to dump refuse.

The streets of the Lower East Side were filthy, filled with sewage and droppings from transport horses that was regularly dumped on the sides of the streets. The *New York Times* wrote of the conditions, “It is in the downtown East Side district that this present offense to the eye and prospective stench to the nostrils exist to an extent that warrants alarm. Hester Street, Forsyth Street, Stanton Street, Essex Street, and other streets in the neighborhood which is largely populated by Russian and Polish Jews, Bohemians, Slavs, etc., the most unclean population which the city has, are really in a terrible condition. Every pile of snow is garnished with rubbish and decaying matter, and even the sidewalks are not clear of it.”

The **Tenement House Act of 1901** hoped to improve conditions for tenement tenants. The law required the removal of outhouses and the installation of indoor plumbing and lighting. These improvements proved costly, and many landlords resisted making the necessary changes. To offset the cost, landlords increased the rent of their tenements. For those who could not meet

their rent, they were swiftly evicted from their homes, their belongings unceremoniously dumped onto the sidewalks. This led to “rent wars” between landlords and tenants who protested the increase in rent.

## **Glossary**

**Tenement House Act of 1901:** a New York State Progressive Era law which outlawed the construction of the dumbbell-shaped style tenement housing and set minimum size requirements for tenement housing. It also mandated the installation of lighting, better ventilation, and indoor bathrooms.