

The Brooklyn Ink

A House Dies And a Block Sinks

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1136 Bushwick Avenue has been empty for years

It's just an ordinary house. Three floors. White wooden walls. Nine bedrooms and three bathrooms. Small front yard. Boarded windows.

1136 Bushwick Avenue, right in between Madison Street and Putman Avenue. There is a church across the street and a shop on the corner. A subway stop is three blocks away. It's a nice location. But nobody wants to live here. This home has been empty for years. And it doesn't look like there is much of a future for this home.

This is a story of the birth and death of one house. And in a way, about the rise and fall of one Brooklyn neighborhood.

“Vacant properties are often not maintained properly and show signs of physical distress,” said Josiah Madar, NYU’s expert on real estate. “That itself causes property values to go down – and then the area becomes less attractive for residents.”

That’s the case of this home.

The house was built in 1910, the same year as the old Pennsylvania Station. At that time, Bushwick was a growing blue-collar neighborhood. There was the Bushwick Chemical Works, the first factory producing high quality acids. And the great Bushwick Glass Company, which manufactured bottles and jars. And to fill those famous bottles, Bushwick soon became a “beer capital of the Northeast.” At the turn of the century, a 14-block area in Bushwick was home to 14 breweries.

The wealth of the neighborhood was growing and so was the need for affordable family housing. And that’s when 1136 Bushwick Ave was built. It was home to three families, whose names are long lost, just like the name of the builder.

The first owner listed in New York City Housing Department archives is Katie Rimmer. She owned the home in 1940, when a new heating system was installed. Until March of that year, the house had wood-fueled heaters and each family had to take care of its own heating. But Katie Rimmer, who lived in the house, paid for central oil-fueled heating, located in the cellar. It was a milestone in the house’s history – by then, oil heating was very modern and expensive.

At that time, Bushwick was still a booming German-populated industrial neighborhood. But soon after the end of the World War II, most of the Germans

left the area, leaving the neighborhood to the Italians. The first Italian parish, St. Joseph, was opened in 1923 when the first immigrants from Sicily came to Bushwick, only to find that they were not welcomed in St. Leonards, a local German Catholic Parish. The numbers of Italians in the neighborhood grew with the demand for factory workers and according to the 1950 U.S. census, the neighborhood became mostly Italian.

It might be a coincidence, but 1136 Bushwick Ave. was an example of this shift. Rimmer, a common German name that means “saddle maker”, was replaced by Amice and later Spadafina in the property records.

It was Michael Spadafina, who had to repair the house in September 1957, another important date in the 1136’s history. To comply with building regulations, he had to replace old wooden steps with new brick ones. Those have been there until now, even though nobody walks up and down anymore.

In fact, by the 1950s, the city housing authority had already listed 1136 as “old.”

The 1960 s and 1970s were dark years for Bushwick. Most of the factories were closed down and the brewing tradition vanished. The economy of Bushwick was dead. And Bushwick itself was dying. By mid 1970s, half of the population in the neighborhood was on public assistance, and the crime rate spiked by 50 percent, according to Steven Malanga, a senior fellow at Manhattan Institute.

The demographics of the neighborhood changed too. The U.S. Census data show that in 1910, the block of 1136 Bushwick Ave was 100 percent white. By 1970, roughly third of the population was Black, third Hispanic and third White.

The Brooklyn Historical Society historian John A. Dereszewski wrote in the society’s publication Up From Flames that the rapid shift in the demographics was caused by different mentality of the old and new. While the working class Black Bushwick residents were poorer than their White neighbors, the idea of owning their own homes was much more appealing to them. By buying houses in large numbers, they quickly gained the influence.

But with the unemployment rising, Bushwick soon became a ghetto. And the biggest problems were yet to come.

The worst moment in the neighborhood history was the night of July 13, 1977. That night, most of New York City blacked out. And Bushwick, Malanga said, made the national headlines for the first time in the history.

That night, looters and arsonists took over. Five days later, fires took seven entire blocks from Bushwick, historian Adam J. Schwartz wrote. And even though the fires were extinguished, the reputation of Bushwick stayed bad for decades.

1136 Bushwick Ave survived the fires and looting, but it seemed to become an unfortunate investment choice. Since 1987, the house changed its owners almost every other year.

The last owner was Kudirat Butler. Talking about the home makes her angry. “The bank took it,” she said. The house was foreclosed three years ago. By that time, Butler didn’t have any tenants and could not afford the mortgage payments.

“I’m not ready to talk about it. It’s bad memories for me,” she said.

Butler left the building to Deutsche Bank and now lives in Staten Island. Meanwhile the house stood and decayed.

It’s now no longer on the market. Whoever buys it, is likely to tear it down. The land without the house is worth more. In 2007, the market price of this home was more than \$750,000. Now, it’s worth less than \$400,000.

“It’s scary, nobody lived there when I moved in a few years ago” said Kashanda Jones, who lives next door to 1136. “We had homeless people living there. There are rats.”

This is a common story in Bushwick, a neighborhood that is amongst the worst affected by the housing crisis. Last year, Brooklyn was the only New York borough with foreclosure numbers rising. While the crisis is ebbing elsewhere, in Brooklyn the foreclosure rate rose by nearly 13 percent, according to the Center for New York City Neighborhoods, a city agency.

Just walking through the neighborhood shows how big the problem is. There is at least one empty house almost on every block. The real estate agents Experts from NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy have described the debilitating effects. The crime rates go up. Local businesses suffer. Schools are losing pupils. The risk of fire accidents increases.

“The properties may sit vacant, potentially attracting vandalism and crime, and more generally signaling that the neighborhood is not stable,” researchers

from Furman Center wrote in their article about the impacts of foreclosures on neighborhood.

For large banks, mortgage companies and trusts, one building means nothing in terms of investment. And so they rarely care about maintenance. The burden lies on the neighborhood.