

Liz Burghart

Int. Seminar 2

Bridge 4 Draft 3

Observing the Lower East Side

The Lower East Side of Manhattan is historically an immigrant, working class neighborhood, with deep roots in Dutch, German, and Jewish culture. One of the specialties that draws people here is the authentic food that has come out of the immigrant background. And perhaps because of its impoverished history or the new wave artists who flock here, it is also home to some of the city's finest thrift stores. This neighborhood has something for everyone. While the Lower East Side has no official boundaries, most New Yorkers define it as the area roughly between the Bowery and the East River, and Canal Street and Houston Street.

The Lower East Side is one of New York's first neighborhoods. Before the American Revolution, Dutch farmed on the land. One of the most popular farmers was James Delancey. Both Delancey and Orchard Street were named after he and his farms. After the Dutch transformed the land to farms, the Germans became the first large group to immigrate to the area. The Lower East Side became known as Little Germany. During the late eighteenth century, the German population in the area began to shrink. After the German population decreased, many Jews immigrated to the Lower East Side. The Jews who settled during the nineteenth century lived in very unhealthy conditions and were constantly subject to stereotypes and prejudice. Jewish immigrants lived in overpacked tenement housing. The tenement homes of the LES were

much more crowded than they are today. “For example, in 1910, 66 people lived on the four residential floors of 94 Orchard Street. Today, the building houses 15 people.” (2) Soon after they immigrated, however, the culture became more embraced in the area as kosher food marketplaces and synagogues were made.

During the twentieth century, the Lower East Side suffered terribly from chronic poverty. Demographics began to change during the 1960s, as more wealthy artists and musicians in high rise buildings replaced the struggling immigrants in tenement apartments. Due to of all this change, the National Trust for Historic Preservation named the Lower East Side one of “America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places” in 2008.

Poverty has long been a part of the everyday life of the Lower East Side’s residents. Schools in the area are segregated based on income and in turn, race. As with most parts of Manhattan, there is a lack of affordable housing in the Lower East Side. Large apartment complexes are being built in areas that have historically strict zoning laws, despite it going against the laws. Large corporations are buying out the politicians in order to gain approval to ignore the zoning laws and build skyscrapers regardless.

From the walks I have taken so far, I have noticed a huge change within the neighborhood from one side to another. There are so many different clusters within the Lower East Side. As I walk towards Chinatown, I see men on ladders cleaning bank signs 20 feet off the ground. Similarly to the fruit cart men I see in Murray Hill (where I live), there are Chinese men with fish carts along the sidewalks. There are elders walking with canes with seemingly nowhere to go. They smile and laugh with familiar faces on the streets. I can tell they are the characters of

this area. In the more southern part, I find park-dwellers to be just as important. The other actors are the residents, skaters, bike delivery men, market owners, businessmen, and artists. It is a strange mix in the Lower East Side.