

## Finding Home: Legwork, a Lottery, and Luck



Upper West Side view. "I felt I was living in a treehouse." Photographs by Vivian Conan.

**By Vivian Conan**

Until the pandemic, I never thought of moving from the sunny one-bedroom apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side that had been my home for five decades. It was rent-stabilized, a three-flight walkup in a charming brownstone, level with the treetop just feet from my window. Mornings, lying in bed, I would listen to the birds call and glimpse them flitting through the leaves. I felt I was living in a treehouse.

When I moved in, at 29, the area was rife with drugs. During my first ten years, several apartments in my building were robbed. Mine, with four serious locks on my door, was not, but I was mugged in the lobby while getting my mail. By 2020, when COVID hit, the Upper West Side had long been gentrified, a neighborhood I wouldn't have been able to afford if I had to pay market rate.



Hers is the center building.

As a native New Yorker—I arrived in Manhattan by way of Brooklyn and the Bronx—I was not typical in my building. Most tenants were from out of town, here for an internship or to jumpstart a career, and moved on after a few years. I wasn't friends with my neighbors in the sense that we did things

socially, but we picked up one another's mail during vacations, commiserated when the boiler broke, and had copies of one another's keys in case of emergency.

Then came the pandemic lockdown. Six of the eight tenants moved out. The only one who remained besides me decamped to her brother's house, and the psychotherapy office on the ground floor, which ordinarily had considerable foot traffic, closed. For more than a year, I was the sole person in the building. Everything still worked—heat and hot water, electricity—but building noises I had been used to before now sounded sinister. I could die behind my door, three flights up, and no one would be around to report the odor.

With everything else that gave me a sense of connection also shut down—my part-time librarian job, choir rehearsals, writing workshop, gym, even my hair salon—I patched together substitutes. One was an arrangement with my brother, in lockdown with his family 30 miles away: I emailed him a few words every morning to let him know I was OK, and he emailed back to let me know he got it. Another was Dorot, an organization that helps seniors “age in place.” Through Dorot, I attended Zoom book talks, concerts, exercise classes, and even had virtual visits with middle-school students. Still another was Facebook. Every day I would don a mask, slip a few alcohol wipes into my pocket, and take a no-destination walk, phone camera in hand. In the evening, I posted about what I'd seen: normally congested roadways now empty; the barber who set up shop outdoors, near the lake in Central Park, but who wouldn't cut women's hair because he didn't “do layers”; the face mask on the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt in Riverside Park; out-of-date performing arts posters at Lincoln Center; historic landmarks I had never noticed before, because I'd always been hurrying to get someplace. Relatives and friends, some local, some from across the country, responded with “likes” and comments.

Though these virtual connections helped, they weren't enough. I longed to live in a building that not only had other residents in it, but where there was

a structured community, even something as simple as a building-wide book group, a need I'd never felt before. Ideally, this place would be on the Upper West Side, where the cashiers in Fairway Market knew me, as did the owners of the laundromat, the employees of the sustainable butcher shop, and the doorman in the apartment house on my corner. I searched the Internet but came up empty. On the scale that defines income—low, moderate, middle, upper—I would be considered moderate. The waiting lists for places I could afford anywhere in Manhattan were either closed or I was ineligible because my income was too high.

I tried a search that disregarded finances. Two prohibitively high-end assisted living facilities came up, both local. I didn't particularly want or need assisted living, but I contacted their marketing departments, went on tours, and liked what I saw. They asked for my decision. Rather than admit I was there under false pretenses, I said, "Right now I'm only doing research. I'll be ready to move in about two years." Both said they'd touch base with me every few months. I told myself I wasn't leading them on. The memoir I had recently published just might become a bestseller. Improbable, but not impossible. I took a picture of the buildings from the outside and studied them at home to determine which floor had windows level with the nearest treetop. When I next spoke to each facility, I asked that my floor request be added to my file.

While I waited to become a millionaire, I kept walking and posting on Facebook, ignoring the escalating discomfort in my right foot, until one day I found myself with three very painful torn ligaments. Suddenly grounded, I needed to move tomorrow. The heck with community. An elevator would suffice. I called friends familiar with the real estate market and discovered there is no way you can move tomorrow—or even next month.



With the help of splints and physical therapy, I was soon able to hobble up and down the stairs, but this had been a wake-up call. If I didn't want to eventually become a prisoner in my own apartment, I'd have to be more diligent—and realistic—about finding a new home. To that end, I signed up for Dorot's six-week Zoom workshop called "Aging Solo." It was in a breakout session of the housing module, several weeks in, that I heard someone say, "There's one week left to enter the lottery to get onto the James Lenox House waiting list."

Back to the Internet, where I learned the James Lenox House, near the Frick Collection on Manhattan's Upper East Side, contained 99 units—88 efficiency and 11 one-bedroom—all subsidized rentals for moderate-middle income seniors. There were also shared spaces: a library, a craft room, a living room with a grand piano, another large room for programs, and a backyard patio. It hadn't turned up in my earlier searches because the waiting list, closed for ten years, had just opened for this lottery and would close again once it was over.

My research also yielded information about James Lenox, the man. He was a philanthropist who lived in the 1800s and owned a farm in what is now the

Lenox Hill section of the Upper East Side. He built housing for Civil War widows and was an avid art and book collector. In 1895, after his death, his library was combined with another library, the Astor, to form what would eventually become the New York Public Library. This last piece of information electrified me. My first job as a librarian, in 1970, had been with the New York Public Library. Despite rarely winning raffles, I convinced myself I had a good chance of getting onto the James Lenox House waiting list.

On May 12, 2022, I filled out the online lottery entry. The drawing was to be live-streamed on June 13. I meant to watch but didn't remember until five days later. Heart pounding, I checked the website. It took a while to figure out the chart, but once I did I could hardly believe my luck. Not only was I on the list, but I had a relatively low number. Fifteen. The next day, Sunday, I walked through Central Park with a friend to have a look at the building that I hoped would one day be my home.

The Upper East Side neighborhood was old-money genteel, not one I associated with subsidized rentals, yet the twelve-story brick building with white trim didn't seem out of place. There was a doorman, something I'd never had before. I introduced myself and asked whether he knew how long the wait would be. He said he didn't and advised me to call the office on Monday. When I asked for the phone number, he went inside and returned with a pamphlet about the James Lenox House and its history.



The James Lenox House, 49 East 73 Street.

One of the residents was standing in the street. How did she like living there, I asked. It was OK, she said, but there were cliques—some people still went out to work and others didn't. Also, there were no nearby supermarkets. All that sounded good. She hadn't said there was no heat or hot water. She hadn't said there were rats. With 99 apartments, I was sure to find people I was sympatico with. And while I was used to a two-minute walk to Fairway, I could get used to walking 15 or 20 minutes for groceries.

“We generally say three to five years,” the office said when I called on Monday, “but because you have a low number, it's more like two to three.”

That sounded good, too. By now, I was largely back to my pre-pandemic life. New tenants had moved into my building. My library job, choir, writing workshop, gym, and hair salon were up and running. My foot was still somewhat sore, but I could manage the stairs and was able to go grocery shopping and take public transportation to work. While I still wanted to

move, I was in less of a hurry and was glad for the time to downsize leisurely—I'd be going from a one-bedroom to a studio.

Decisions about keeping or ditching clothing, housewares, and furniture would be easy. Not so the many boxes filled with financial records, photographs, family history, writings, and journals that were stacked under my dining table. Some were mine, and some I'd retrieved when I cleaned out my mother's house 13 years earlier. I'd have to consider each item individually, scan what I wanted to keep, and file it in some logical place on my computer. Time enough to begin in six months. More pressing at the moment was preparing for three upcoming talks about my book, the last of which involved a trip to Florida in February 2023.

An email from the James Lenox House in November, 2022, upended my plans.

I was to bring proof of my eligibility—income tax return and New York State ID—to a December meeting with the admissions committee. My documents approved, I was informed that several apartments now being renovated would be ready in early 2023. One of them, unspecified as yet, would be offered to me. I would be invited to view it. If I accepted it, a move-in date would be set. If I turned it down, I would go to the end of the list. If I declined a second offer, I would be removed from the list.

Whatever it was, I was not going to turn it down.

In January, I was shown a studio on the 12th floor. It had freshly-varnished parquet floors and new kitchen and bathroom appliances. However it faced the back—I would have preferred the front—and was too high up to see the treetop in the backyard, or any vegetation at all. My view could have been the set of a sci-fi movie where humanity has been obliterated and all that remains are dull gray and brown rooftops.

“I'll take it,” I said.





In deference to my upcoming Florida trip, we agreed my lease would begin in March—less than a year after I entered the lottery.(I later learned the reason for the accelerated timing. They ordinarily averaged six vacancies a year and filled them as they came up. But during the pandemic, while the vacancy rate remained constant, they hadn't brought in any new tenants, so now there were more than the usual number of available apartments.)

Somehow, I got it all done, most of it squeezed into the month after I returned from Florida. Multiple trips to Housing Works to donate vases, linens, books, and framed artwork. A rummage sale for my family where everything was free—blankets, scarves, coats, kitchenware, furniture, more

artwork. Phone calls to movers and Internet providers. As for the boxed papers, I managed to scan a few items, but mostly I made painful triage decisions and discarded much of what I had originally hoped to preserve.

While administrative-me was busy being efficient, the more emotional inside-me was coming to terms with leaving my home of 52 years. I would miss it terribly, not only the fireplace, the plants hanging in my windows, and the tree outside, but the feeling of being nurtured by the very walls. So much had happened since I moved here at 29, freshly out of a halfway house for recovering mental patients. At the time, I had no idea I'd be here so long. I thought I would soon meet someone, marry, and have children. That never happened, but a lot else did.



The old living room (notice the boxes under the table).

This apartment was where I baked chocolate chip cookies with my pre-school nephews, now grown men. During the time I lived here, I had five jobs, five therapists, four boyfriends, and one abortion. I had two careers—librarian and I.T. systems analyst—and got a second masters degree. I had dinner parties. I gave sanctuary to two friends who needed a place to camp for a few months while they looked for apartments. Perhaps most important, this was where I evolved—very slowly—from someone who was suicidal much of the time, to someone who has a full life and is glad to be alive. The apartment mirrored my journey as it went from neat and organized, to messy-bordering-on-hoarding, to homey and charming.

I was also looking ahead. Whenever I grocery-shopped, administrative-me calculated: will I use this in a few weeks, or should I wait to buy it until after the move? At the same time, inside-me was becoming acutely conscious of my mortality. Whenever I turned my key in the lock of what used to feel like my permanent home, I was aware that it was merely a way station on the road to the James Lenox House, which would be the next way station on the road to my ultimate destination. “Don’t think that way!” a friend admonished. I explained that to me, this was not morbid but empowering. I was 81 and wanted, as much as possible, to have control over how my inevitable end played out. For one, I was doing the downsizing myself, not leaving it to my relatives to do after I was gone. For another, I was moving to a place where I would be able to remain independent longer.

And then, in the proverbial blink of an eye, it was done. On the morning of March 15, 2023, I was an Upper West Sider living in a three-flight walkup. That afternoon, I was an Upper East Sider in a building with an elevator. The two halves of the day were separated by an Uber ride from old apartment to new, shared with a cousin who came to help. Once the moving van arrived at my eastside building, quicker than you could put together a Lego kit, my new apartment was assembled, complete with toothbrush in its cup in the bathroom.



The new living (and only) room.

I felt at home in my new building immediately. An orientation committee welcomed me and gave me tips. I joined the library committee and signed up for a chorus that was just being formed. I attended a building-wide barbecue. I did not feel any cliquishness.

The neighborhood, however, took longer to adjust to. It wasn't only that I had to take a different subway line to my library job, or walk farther for groceries, or that, as a fellow resident said, "The stores are so expensive, I can't even afford to window-shop." It was the cultural vibe. There's a saying, most often attributed to George Bernard Shaw, that England and the United States are two countries divided by a common language. The same might be said about the Upper West and Upper East Sides, separated not by an ocean, but a park.

I missed the vibrancy of the West Side, the musicians on street corners, the wider sidewalks that made it fun to walk around, the colorful and casual dress. At first the East Side seemed dull and like a chore to navigate. But after a few months, I stopped comparing it to my old neighborhood and began to appreciate what was unique about it. I joined the Central Park Zoo, the Frick Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the 92nd Street Y

and the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House. I tried some of the many ethnic restaurants. Because I had to walk farther for groceries, or any affordable stores for that matter, I discovered that the Upper East Side is not a monolith. When I'm in need of action—restaurants, stores, people—I'm best on Lexington, Third, Second, and First Avenues. When it's quietness and gentility I'm after, I'm best on Park, Madison, and Fifth.



New view.

Even the view from my window improved. To my surprise, when spring came, many of the dull rooftops started blossoming. Who knew there were trees and gardens so high off the ground, a whole penthouse culture, complete with greenhouses and lounge chairs. The trees are too far away for me to see the birds or hear them call, but I feel lucky to have them, even at a distance—I walked past my old brownstone a month ago and saw that “my” tree had been cut down.

Thanks to James Lenox, whose housing for Civil War widows is now the James Lenox House for seniors of any sex, I am a very happy camper. I hope to remain at my new waystation for many years before slipping gently into my final destination.



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