Tenements in NYC

Core 390 – Paper 2

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Housing is definitely a major topic when it comes to New York City. With so many buildings and people it is crazy to even think the amount of people the live there. It is an enormous city who occupies hundreds and thousands of people. As further back as 1850 though there was a definite different type of living then there is now. The impact that is has had on housing today is from the need for change as well as the evolution of knowledge of better living conditions. We had gone from these tenement buildings to the big city we have today.

Between 1850 and 1920, New York City was believed to have offered its poor citizens the worst housing conditions than many other cities in the world. Factors like extreme crowding because of increased population related to immigration led to rooms being completely filled to the maximum capacity making it terribly impossible to live comfortably. They idea of such overcrowding was from the ability to have tenement houses packed together to maximize land use (Montgomery, 2003). These living conditions only worsened as people became unsanitary and over these tenements were very unsafe. They were dark, disease ridden tenements. Some with no windows and no light access it would become unbearable to remain in these tenements for long periods of time. But that was only a few of the problems (Montgomery, 2003).

Fire hazards and the topics like water, hygiene and diseases came about and erupted into a big problem for the people living in these tenements. These tenements were long, narrow residential buildings who at the time where usually three to five stories high. After the Civil War especially these tenements were especially needed because of the large immigrant population that had come from Europe (Montgomery, 2003). With as many as thirty people occupying these rooms these bad conditions seen would look one hundred times worse than anyone could imagine. Windows in many tenement rooms opened into an air shaft instead of directly into fresh air which made the rooms dark and very damp (Krieger, 2002). This would make living conditions unbearable because of hot and cold weather throughout the year. The only heat would be fire places but that would increase the risk of fires which was not something that did occur rarely. This was one major problem which cost many lives of those living in the tenement houses.

The bathroom and sewage situation was another major problem as well. With so many people in one building and no running water nor working sewage system it was probably one of the worst situations to endure in these tenement houses (Montgomery, 2003). Residents would have to go outside or make their own ways of washing themselves as well as going to the bathroom. The smells and also risk of infections and diseases only increase day by day which made living at these buildings unbearable. The lower-income population was spending their lives striving to survive such conditions while the upper class would never go through such conditions.

The Tenement Museum on 97 Orchard Street is a preserved tenement house that is now toured by many who are curious to actually see how these low-income residents lived. Built on Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1863, this tenement apartment was home to nearly 7000 working class immigrants. It allows people to see how these immigrants lived and the conditions that most tenements were like at the time (About the Tenement Museum, (n.d.)). In contrast a Merchant House belonging to the Tredwell family built in 1832 is an example of how the high-class population lived. This is a three story house that is totally different from the living conditions at these tenement houses. This family had maids, water and clothes and also other things that other where unfortunate to not have (Wright, 2008). The floor plan although a bit narrow to most houses today is spacious compared to those at tenements. There were also not as many people living there solely because it was the family’s home. But seeing how different these two living conditions were was a good start to making improvements and changing the way people saw NYC. Not as a crowded city but as an organized and industrial city.

It was time to revolutionize the building techniques that were being used. Since most did not want to expand in width but it would be in height that things would then change NYC. Due to steel-frame construction and fire-restraint technologies and also the idea of making these buildings higher was when things got better (Montgomery, 2003). Today we see skyscrapers and apartment complexes getting higher and higher each year. Building with hundreds of apartments and also houses in these cities make the city a better place to live at.

As you walk through the city we can see the different techniques and the modern style that buildings have evolved from. These tenement buildings, although not the best places to live, where the start of this enormous city we called New York City. From tenement houses whose living conditions came close to unbearable to now having luxurious apartments, much has changed since the 1860’s.

References

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