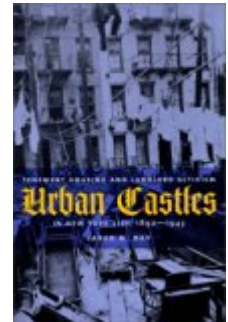


**Jared N. Day.** *Urban Castles: Tenement Housing and Landlord Activism in New York City 1890-1943.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 315 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 0-231-11402-8, \$18.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-11403-5.



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The story of housing in New York City is a fascinating one. It reveals, often in extreme form, all of the conflicts, innovations, interest groups, leaders, reforms and reform attempts, possibilities and limits of what can be done in the sector, generally a generation or so ahead of what develops in other cities. Day's study picks up a piece of that story that has not been explored in such detail before: the role of landlords (more broadly, the direct housing supply sector) and their organizations, in the ongoing conflict with tenants and their organizations, in the period from the end of the last century to the second World War. While that part of the history has been touched on in a number of other scholarly volumes over the last twenty or so years, some more comprehensive like Richard Plunz's monumental *History of Housing in New York City*, some broader, like Anthony Jackson's overview, *A Place Called Home*, and some narrower, like Ronald Lawson's (with Mark Naisson) *The Tenant Movement in New York City* chief among them, none have chosen the specific focus that Day's careful and detailed history presents. Its title is a reflection for tenement housing of what Matthew Edel and Elliott Sclar took as

the title for their study of single family home ownership in Boston, *Shaky Palaces*, even though the sociology of living in tenements and the image of the tenement house as a *Castle manqué*, presumably the ironic intent, is not developed in the book. While it is the expansion of a doctoral dissertation that focused on the Lower East Side, it is well written, frequently steps back to attempt broad syntheses of the material, and touches (sometimes frustratingly) on important themes, such as ethnic relations or the economics of housing, that influence the story in major ways.

The story that comes through is quite clear in its broad outlines. Before the 1890s, tenement housing, multi-family housing in general, was considered the province of the lower classes only; it did not attract major players in real estate or finance, and its actors were predominantly small, largely of the same class and the same ethnicity as their tenants. They were often former tenants themselves who had accumulated a little capital and invested it in housing similar to that to which they were already accustomed as tenants-typically petty bourgeois in class terms. Their organiza-

tions reflected this: somewhat chaotic, splintered, unruly, and fluctuating in activity and organization, as general challenges to their positions, or opportunities for development presented themselves. Day is particularly good at separating out the different economic interests in the period before the end of the First World War: loan operators, builders, building leaseholders (leasers), managers, lenders and investors and entrepreneurs of various backgrounds, different niches in the small housing industry being developed, specialized, occupied by different talents and interests, as the extent of tenement housing construction increased. Only a few large operators were on the scene, Trinity Church most prominent among them. And Day traces the differences in attitude and political position and relationships with tenants of each of these disparate components of the "landlord" sector.

With the housing crisis at the end of the war, the picture changed significantly. Small landlords lost their pre-eminence in the field; larger owners displaced them politically, tactics vis-a-vis tenants became more sophisticated, lobbying became a more specialized function, and the tough tactics of the organizers of small landlords gave way to the more polished leadership of better funded and more stable groups. Two factors explained these developments: the housing crisis, and the impact of that crisis in bringing middle class tenants to join the working class residents of tenement houses in opposition to many landlord approaches. Day gives perhaps too short shrift to the militant tenant movements of 1904 and the 1907 waves of strikes and confrontations; here the Lawson/Naison volume provides more detail and a more nuanced treatment. But Day's general conclusion holds up: that "tenants" do not form a homogeneous class and that the differences between the working class and the middle class explain a great deal about the tactics adopted and their relative failures and success. While that conclusion builds on a wider history, his account of the evolution of landlord organizations with, if not class differenti-

ation, at least significant differences by strata, resources, and professionalization, is much newer and a real contribution.

From the point of view of understanding contemporary housing policy debates and housing conflicts, the history is provocative. The class differentiation among tenants continues past the time Day's account ends and explains much of the tension within the New York City tenants' movement after the Second World War. The abandonment Day describes in the early 1930s, under the impact of the "over-building" of the late 1920s and then the Depression, on the other hand, appears quite different from that of the 1960s and 1970s; the former might indeed be considered the result of a filtering process within the normal parameters of a functioning market (not enough detail is provided to be certain; see below), while the latter had much more to do with changing income structures and the advantages of milking properties in the face of threats of foreclosure for non-payment of taxes. The policy implications of the process, which Langdon Post, for instance, tried to use to the advantage of public housing in the early days of the LaGuardia administration, are not explored by Day, but are beyond the scope of his study.

Indeed, while an author can hardly be criticized for defining the subject of the work he is undertaking, there are frustrations that arise from the narrow focus Day has adopted. Even within it, the economics of housing supply are barely touched on: its organizational, class, and to some extent ethnic implications are touched on, but we find no real examination of the profitability of housing at different times, just general references to how it is seen in the real estate publications of the time. Whether landlord boasts or landlord complaints are in fact justified, we are left to conclude for ourselves. The ethnicity issues, prominent in the early discussion of the Lower East Side, largely disappear in subsequent discussions, and even in the early review the focus on the

Lower East Side is not necessarily representative of the market as a whole. Neither the particular position of African Americans, nor of immigrants, is treated in the post-World War I period, neither among landlords nor among tenants. Judging by names at least, the more professional Real Estate Board of New York was much more a waspish organization than the organizations of small property owners, and the traditional "reformers" similarly seem to have both different ethnicity and (plausibly) different class backgrounds from the militant tenant leaders. What Day does bring out, consistently with some prior studies, Joel Schwartz's for instance, is the extent to which there were differences between the traditional reformers, such as Clarence Stein and Edith Elmer Wood, on the one hand, and tenant leaders on the other, around the issue of landlord-tenants relations: the reformers, for instance, consistently were not among the supporters of rent regulation, even applauding the ending of the emergency rent control laws in the late 1920's, while they pressed for the (in this context) more conservative programs of housing construction and incentives to developers.

Many of the issues Day discusses remain alive today; for this reason, the book should be of interest to those concerned with housing policy today as well as to urban historians. The trade-off between housing quality and housing cost, for instance, plagued tenant leaders then as now; class differences among landlords and among tenants remain sources of difficulty for any, on either side, seeking unity of approach; the tension between advocacy and service provision, again on both sides, persists; the argument about whether small is better among landlords (George Sternlieb's conclusion) continues today, as new small landlords emerge from recent waves of immigration; speculation in tenement buildings today would strike many as echoes of the "curb markets" in buildings Day describes. Plus ça change...

The book is nicely printed, and has 24 striking illustrations. The documentation is thorough; few statements come without clear sources. The proof-reading is sloppy; frequent typographical errors appear, of the kind that would lead one to suspect a spell checking program, rather than a proof-reader, at work: "of" instead of "or," words missing, proper names misspelled, "he" instead of "she." The bibliography sometimes omits publishers. But these are minor, in a very respectable and worthwhile overall addition to the history of housing in New York City.

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