

Morning commuters on Fulton Street in Lower Manhattan. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

Downside of Lower Manhattan’s Boom: It’s Just Too Crowded

The neighborhood has made a comeback since the Sept. 11 attacks. That success now threatens its quality of life.

By WINNIE HU DEC. 2, 2016

— A sidewalk war has erupted in Lower Manhattan.

Paul Proulx is caught in the middle of it. Just to get to his apartment in the financial district, he has to contend with hordes of commuters and selfie-snapping tourists clogging narrow sidewalks. But these are the least of his problems.

Security barriers around landmarks and key government posts send him in circles if he forgets to plan ahead. Scaffolding stretches above him in an impenetrable line, ensuring that the walk home is dark and claustrophobic. He is not even safe on his side of the curb. Delivery trucks routinely park on the sidewalk as if they own it.

If that was not enough, there is the trash. Supersize contractor bags of smelly, leaking garbage are stacked up to 10-feet high outside gleaming high-rise towers, ready to topple over on someone who is not paying attention, or is just really unlucky.

“We fight every day for every square inch,” said Mr. Proulx, 44, a land-use lawyer and soft-spoken father of three who moved to the area from Brooklyn in 2007.

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So Mr. Proulx and his neighbors have banded together to take back their sidewalks. Earlier this year, they formed the Financial District Neighborhood Association, a volunteer organization that has grown to more than 100 members. The threat to the quality of life in this well-to-do enclave of multiplying skyscrapers is obvious to anyone who has made it their home: crowding.

In the 15 years since the Sept. 11 attacks, Lower Manhattan has come back bigger, bolder and busier than ever. [One World Trade Center](#) and the [National September 11 Memorial and Museum](#) attract millions of visitors a year. The transit system was not just rebuilt but upgraded, with Santiago Calatrava’s sleek, steel-ribbed Oculus anchoring a sprawling commuter hub. One after another, new luxury apartment towers — including a 76-story building designed by Frank Gehry — rose where there were once parking lots, vacant parcels and former commercial sites.

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Thousands of young professionals and families settled into an area that used to be seen as a pass-through for Wall Street workers. When Sarah Elbatanouny moved to John Street in 2005, her oldest daughter was one of only two children in the 427-apartment building. Now there are 70 children — so many that a storage room was converted into a playroom two years ago.

Along with all the people came the headaches.

"I always say be careful what you wish for," said Ms. Elbatanouny, 43, the chief talent officer for Group SJR, a digital content agency. "We always wished for more restaurants and bars, but what's come with that is trash, noise and congestion. It's one of those double-edged swords."



Jacob Fera, a worker for the Alliance for Downtown New York, sweeping up garbage left behind by a sanitation truck. Dave Sanders for The New York Times

More people live and work in New York City than at any time in its history. The population has grown every decade since 1980, when it had slipped to 7.1 million, from 7.9 million in 1970, after residents left in droves to escape crime and a financial crisis. In later decades, as the city recovered, more people stayed and immigrants and transplants arrived. As life expectancy increased, they lived longer.

By 2000, the city's population had passed eight million for the first time. Today, it is 8.5 million and counting. By 2040, it is expected to hit nine million, according to city projections.

For many government officials and business leaders, this growth is a testament to the city's success: Everyone wants to be in New York. There are many reasons. The city has never had so many jobs — 4.3 million-plus — including more than 276,000 private-sector jobs that were created since 2014, according to city officials. Tourism is thriving, with about 60 million visitors estimated for this year.

"We have turned a corner out of the challenges we faced in the '60s, '70s, '80s, and we've gone much farther than I think a lot of us ever would've imagined already," Mayor Bill de Blasio said at a meeting called "Getting Ready for Nine Million New Yorkers" hosted by Crain's last month in Midtown Manhattan. "And this growth has been extraordinary."

Still, Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, added that the "pathway to nine million" would not be easy. "It will come with challenges to say the least," he said. "We all are experiencing the congestion in this city, and that is in part because we are victims of our own success."

Roughly seven out of eight neighborhoods now have more residents than in 1990, according to an analysis of census data by Queens College using neighborhood boundaries as defined by the city's Planning Department.

The biggest change was in Lower Manhattan-Battery Park City, which gained 30,502 residents for a total of 42,485 in 2014, up 255 percent from 1990.

"Crowding exists in other parts of the city," said Patrick Kennell, 40, a lawyer who is also a member of the Financial District Neighborhood Association. "But it's unique here because of the sheer amount of development that has happened post-9/11."

Four other neighborhoods also gained more than 20,000 residents during that period: Borough Park and Canarsie, in Brooklyn; the area encompassing Hudson Yards, Chelsea, the Flatiron district and Union Square, in Manhattan; and North Corona, in Queens.



Sarah Elbatouny and Patrick Kennell, who helped create the Financial District Neighborhood Association, a volunteer organization that has grown to more than 100 members.
Above and below, Photographs by Dave Sanders for The New York Times

But even in a growing city, not all neighborhoods grew — 23 of them shrank, including the Upper West Side, which lost the most residents, 8,357. Right behind were the Upper East Side-Carnegie Hill and Seagate-Coney Island, an area hit hard by [Hurricane Sandy](#) in 2012.

For many New Yorkers, a crowded city means having no personal space on the subway or walking through traffic because of [gridlock on the sidewalk](#). It means never getting that babysitter on a Saturday night, or abandoning hope of ever getting tickets for Shakespeare in the Park.

As school enrollment has grown, it means larger class sizes and waiting lists at many neighborhood schools. Of the 1,763 public schools in the 2014-15 school year, about 43 percent were designated "overutilized," according to city data.

Citywide, the average class size for kindergarten through third grade is 24.3 students this school year, up from 20.9 students in 2007-8, according to city data.

With more people calling the city home, it means building more places for them to live, work and eat. Construction is booming, with 2,465 permits issued for new building projects in 2015, up from 1,517 in 2010, rebounding from an earlier dip during the recession.

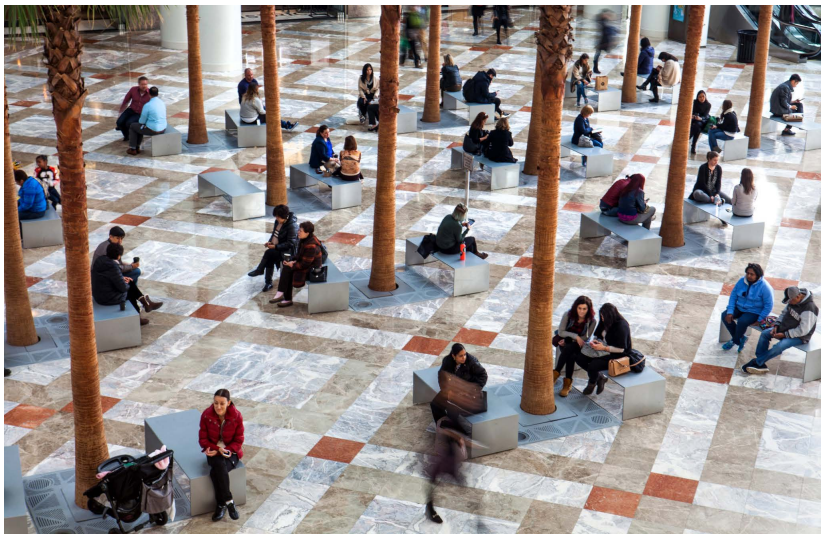
And with all this construction going on, it also means a louder city. There were a record 57,796 noise complaints in 2015, up from 40,158 two years before.

The cacophony of rebuilding Lower Manhattan is inescapable for residents. Or as Ms. Elbatouny put it, the noise is "the welcoming committee" when she comes home. Recently, her family was kept up late at night by demolition trucks breaking down debris in the street, long after work is supposed to have ended for the day. "It's a loud, banging noise — they stop, and you relax, and then it starts again," she

said. "It feels like the wild, wild West."

Still, there are also benefits to having more neighbors. More people bring more services, more arts and culture, more energy — in short, a more vibrant city.

Laura Starr, 58, a landscape architect, recalled that when she lived in the South Street Seaport in the 1980s, there was no decent grocery store close by, let alone a pharmacy or dry cleaner. "I could tell who lived in the seaport because on the 2 or 3 train, I would see people carrying bags from Fairway," she said. "We had to leave the neighborhood for practically everything."



Inside Brookfield Place. Danny Ghitis for The New York Times

Now no one ever has to leave. There are shopping centers, Westfield World Trade Center and Brookfield Place, along with a new luxury multiplex movie theater with oversize leather chairs, pillows and blankets. In recent months, two luxury hotels, the Beekman and the Four Seasons Hotel New York Downtown, and the upscale Italian market Eataly NYC Downtown all opened their doors.

The trade off, of course, is the crowds.

Ms. Starr, for one, has all but stopped using the Citi Bike system to commute. She used to ride from her apartment in TriBeCa to her office on Maiden Lane in the financial district nearly every day. But as more pedestrians and cyclists filled the streets, she had to concentrate to avoid running into anyone or being run into.

"I have more peace of mind walking," said Ms. Starr, who now rides maybe once a month. "If I'm on a bike, it takes so much vigilance."

Crowding, at its worst, brings life to a standstill. Consider the sidewalk. Morning and evening commuters heading to and from Pennsylvania Station and the Port Authority Bus Terminal regularly overwhelm Seventh and Eighth Avenues in Midtown. The throngs on Main Street in Queens can paralyze downtown Flushing.

In Lower Manhattan, people are not the only obstacle. Construction on streets and buildings is everywhere. A labyrinth of imposing metal scaffolding hems in available walkways and forces pedestrians closer together, or into the street.

Mr. Kennell, of the neighborhood association, pointed to scaffolding in front of at least two buildings near his home that have been in place for many years, even when no construction was going on. "It's infuriating,

and there's nothing you can do about it," he said.

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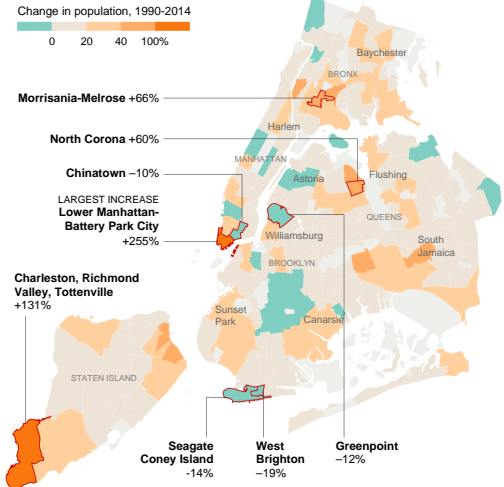
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At his own apartment building on John Street, which has been under scaffolding since 2013 for repairs, residents are planning a party when it is finally dismantled soon. "People literally cheer when these things come down," he said. "The streets are so narrow to begin with, and the buildings are so close together, light is a precious resource."

The neighborhood association is calling for city legislation to tighten regulations on scaffolding. The Buildings Department issued 6,667 permits for scaffolding in front of buildings — so-called sidewalk sheds — in the city in 2015; in 1990 only 1,016 permits were issued.

City building records show that scaffolding was approved in 2007 for 45 John Street, a financially troubled conversion of a 14-story office building into rental apartments that has changed owners. Joseph Soldevere, a spokesman for the Buildings Department, said it was unusual for scaffolding to remain that long. Mr. Soldevere said that according to city law, scaffolding must stay up until a building’s facade was deemed safe for pedestrians passing by and any construction that would affect public safety was completed.

Neighborhoods in Flux



Anjali Singhvi/The New York Times | Sources: Census Bureau; Andrew Beveridge and Susan Weber-Stoger, Social Explorer

William Schneider, a lawyer for the current owner of 45 John Street, who bought the building earlier this year, said that three-quarters of the work was done and that the remainder of the project was expected to be finished in March, when the scaffolding will come down.

The influx of families to Lower Manhattan has also strained public school resources. More than one-third of the elementary schools below Houston Street were designated “overutilized” for the last school year, according to a review of city data by the United Federation of Teachers.

Michael Mulgrew, the union’s president, said the city needed more school seats and called for better planning by officials to address fast-growing neighborhoods such as Lower Manhattan, Downtown Brooklyn and Hunters Point, Queens. “New towers are all over the skyline, not just in Manhattan,” Mr. Mulgrew said. “And new buildings mean more families and more pressure on schools that are already at or over capacity.”

City education officials said they planned to add more than 44,000 new school seats across the city in coming years. In Lower Manhattan, eight new schools and an annex to an existing school have opened since 2007, adding more than 5,600 seats and helping to maintain, or reduce, the average class sizes. "We are dedicated to addressing overcrowding," said Devora Kaye, a spokeswoman for the Education Department, adding that it was working closely with families and the community to identify new school sites.

Several of these new schools in Lower Manhattan are already grappling with space issues. The [Peck Slip School](#) (P.S. 343) in the seaport, which opened in 2012, has grown to about 380 students — too many to fit on its rooftop play area at one time. So the school has lobbied to close the street it is on during school hours to use as a playground. LAZ Parking, which has an entrance on that block, initially opposed the request, but later agreed to the street closing after [Manhattan Community Board 1](#) and elected officials negotiated a compromise in which a new entrance to the parking lot will be created on another street, said Anthony Notaro, the board's chairman.

At the [Spruce Street School](#) (P.S. 397), which is in the new Gehry building, parents have raised concerns about a parking garage overseen by NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital that opened this year next to the school's entrance. Now cars entering the garage drive through a plaza where parents and children walk. Though barriers have been erected to separate them, many parents find these inadequate. "It's a big concern," said Mr. Proulx, of the neighborhood association, whose three children attend the school. "You have an unsafe condition because of the conflict that is inherent between children and automobiles."

NewYork-Presbyterian said it had worked closely with school administrators and community leaders to maintain a safe environment around the garage, including the installation of a traffic light at its entrance, allowing only trained attendants to drive the vehicles and activating an alarm system during school fire drills when children can walk in front of the garage.

"We remain committed to having further discussions with the school, parents and all of our neighbors in the interest of protecting everyone's safety," said Karen Sodomick, a spokeswoman for the hospital.

Crowding problems have real economic costs for those who have to put up with them day in and day out.



Santiago Calatrava's sleek, steel-ribbed Oculus anchoring the World Trade Center Transportation Hub.
Richard Perry/The New York Times

At [Da Claudio](#), an Italian restaurant that opened near City Hall in 2014, meat, fish, vegetables and wine are supposed to be delivered before noon. But when drivers get stuck in traffic or cannot find parking, they often trickle in too late to be served.

Some delivery and service companies tack on extra charges for fuel, labor and even parking tickets to deliver to the restaurant, said Linda Marini, 43, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Claudio. Not long ago, a refrigerator repair service charging \$150 an hour included the half-hour when the repairman disappeared to feed the parking meter, Ms. Marini said. Her bill was reduced after she called the company to complain.

"I'm constantly looking at the bills," said Ms. Marini, estimating that she pays more than \$5,000 a year in extra delivery costs. "It cuts into all the profits, and it hurts."

In spite of these costs, the Marinis said they were not leaving Lower Manhattan. The couple, who have three children, moved there in 2000 and have stayed as apartment rents have risen, schools grew crowded and even babysitters became harder to find (and more expensive). They stayed after their previous restaurant in the seaport, Barbarini, flooded during Hurricane Sandy.

"My family has roots here," Ms. Marini said. "We made a commitment after 9/11 to stay down here. We made a commitment after Sandy destroyed our business to build down here. We're just too heavily invested here."

The crowding problems in Lower Manhattan pose unusual challenges. The area has long drawn daytime crowds of commuters and tourists visiting Wall Street, often on their way to the [Statue of Liberty](#), and, in recent years, the Sept. 11 museum and memorial site. Add to this the expanding number of downtown residents who need to pick up children, walk dogs, run errands and go out to restaurants and movies.

All of these people have at times overwhelmed parts of the city's oldest neighborhood, which differs from the rest of Manhattan because its residential skyscrapers sit on a colonial-era maze of narrow streets that was not designed for the masses. The city's rectilinear grid above Houston Street allows for better mobility. For instance, William Street is 34 feet wide; West 54th Street is 60 feet.

Kate Ascher, a partner at BuroHappold Engineering and the author of "The Works: Anatomy of a City," said additional factors contributed to the crowding problems in Lower Manhattan, such as a large number of irregular intersections; deep canyons between buildings, which obstruct views and make it confusing to get around; and security barriers around the New York Stock Exchange and government buildings. And the increasing number of residential conversions has resulted in more trash bags piled on the street (unlike commercial buildings, which have loading docks where garbage is collected, residential trash is picked up at the curb).

Ms. Ascher said [cities such as Barcelona](#), Istanbul and London had all faced similar crowding issues, which have been addressed by redesigning and managing streets in ways that better balance the needs of pedestrians and vehicles. BuroHappold has been working with city officials, community leaders and residents in Lower Manhattan to identify potential solutions as part of two studies underwritten with \$125,000 in grants from the J. M. Kaplan Fund.



Mounting piles of trash bags in Lower Manhattan. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

City planning officials and business leaders noted that even with Lower Manhattan's transformation into a 24-hour neighborhood, its residential density is still well below the average for the borough's neighborhoods.

The [Alliance for Downtown New York](#), which is funded by commercial property owners and runs a business improvement district in Lower Manhattan, pointed out that there are fewer workers today in the neighborhood — 235,000 in the private sector compared with about 270,000 before the Sept. 11 attacks — because there is 20-million square feet less office space (many units were not rebuilt after the attacks, while others were converted into residential apartments). In addition, the alliance said sections of the neighborhood remained fairly empty, especially at night, when daytime crowds of commuters and tourists leave.

"The key to continued progress is to tackle any thorny outgrowths of our success in a thoughtful and specific manner," said Jessica Lappin, president of the alliance. "We should harness our momentum and build upon it constructively so businesses here can continue to thrive and enrich and enliven the entire community and all of New York."

Some businesses said that at least some of the congestion on the streets had been caused by temporary construction projects, and would get better as those projects finished. Jordan Barowitz, a spokesman for the Durst Organization, which manages 1 World Trade Center, said many tenants now used an underground passage, which opened earlier this year, to reach the Fulton Center, a transit and retail hub. This has, in turn, reduced the crowding on Vesey Street.

City transportation officials have also taken steps to ease the crowding. They have extended the sidewalk at heavily used pedestrian crossings along Water and Whitehall Streets and built a new pedestrian and bike pathway along South Street on the waterfront, which is expected to draw pedestrians and cyclists away from congested interior streets.

Zoning regulations for Lower Manhattan have encouraged new developments to include public plazas and open spaces and locate subway stations inside buildings to improve pedestrian flow. The city's Economic Development Corporation has also overseen a series of projects in Lower Manhattan, such as building a pedestrian bridge on West Thames Street and improving an esplanade along the East River, and plans to increase ferry service.

City sanitation officials said they were working with new residential

buildings to improve trash and recycling collections, including suggesting that they store the bags in containers rather than pile them directly on the sidewalk. The Sanitation Department has also increased trash collection to three times a week, from two, in crowded areas.

Relief cannot come soon enough for Fern Cunningham, a marketing executive for Nielsen who recalled feeling like a pioneer when she moved to Lower Manhattan in 1983. Back then, she said, it was “a little patch of quiet in New York.”

No more. Ms. Cunningham's 14-story co-op building on Nassau Street has been dwarfed by new towering high-rises, and there is no escape from the crowds — or their garbage. She often walks in the street rather than try to edge single-file past a “corridor of waste” that reeks of foul liquids and attracts rats.

“It’s absolutely too crowded,” she said. “There are not enough services for people, and yet they keep bringing them down here.”

Susan C. Beachy contributed research.


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