

Progress and Poverty on the Heights

A favorite history teacher of mine, Hans Kohn, once remarked in a lecture that to get along in this modern world “one must either be a saint or own property.”

About three years ago my wife and I carefully investigated our inner resources and decided to adopt Mr. Kohn’s second choice. In November, 1956, we bought a house on the Heights.

Property ownership, like saintliness, is a way of life, and if one lacks the inner resources requisite to the former, he must be prepared to invest most of his visible resources in the latter. We learned about this law on our very first day as we scurried around the neighborhood scraping together enough money for the downpayment.

The signing of the contract was scheduled for 11:30 a.m. in the owner’s office on Montague Street. At 10 a.m. we repaired to the Brooklyn Savings Bank to withdraw all our savings. Then we emptied our checking account, and after that, our pockets. Upon toting up, we discovered in horror that we were 97 cents short. What was to be done? We had already sold a few sticks of furniture as well as our car (getting out before alternate parking got in).

At 11:15 my wife, Diane, knocked on a neighbor’s door. “Would you mind lending us 97 cents?” she asked. “You see, were buying a house today. “

Open Door

Fortunately, our neighbor was inclined to be charitable. She not only loaned us the 97 cents but resisted what must have been a terrific temptation to slam the door in my wife’s face. We later concluded that she was one of those saints who made it possible for lesser breeds to own property.

The house we bought is at 126 Willow Street, a combination of brick and brownstown, vintage 1845. It is by no means a majestic edifice but it has a certain charm of solidity, albeit vertical, and it has achieved historic one-upness in that it has survived for more than a century. I do not doubt that it will survive us, too. In fact, if we are not careful, it will devour us.

This house is a so-called “income property” – i.e., a house that has tenants. The realtor through whom we bought the house had dwelt at length on the utopian aspects of this arrangement, pointing out that the money we collected from the tenants would cover such incidental expenses as mortgage payments, taxes, heat and repairs. It turned out later that he had never owned a house.

Manifesto

It was the dour Karl Marx who wrote that “pauperism develops more quickly than... wealth”--- and he was right, but he failed to see the intimate relationship between

pauperism and private property. I saw it the very first time I met a mortgage payment. Like the old plantation owners of the honey-suckle South we were land poor.

Marx also missed some of the subtleties in owner-tenant relationships, possibly because he was thinking of serfs and feudalism, but more likely because he had never lived in a floor-through apartment on Brooklyn Heights. We have four tenants, and two of them are families who live on floor-throughs (floors through?). Their children have the privileges of our yard – which includes wading in a sunken wading pool, sanding in a sunken sandbox (sometimes they box, too) and catching cigar butts thrown from the ninth floor of the Standish Arms by a man of unknown identity but of easily surmised character.

Our own children, ages three and one, have found the yard very convenient for making friends on the block, and I have seen Harry, the elder son, invite a child into the yard in exchange for some candy. It pains me some to find that Harry's exploitative use of private property fits right in with Mr. Marx's theories, but I console myself with the thought that Harry's parents are much too inept as landlords to exploit *anybody*.

At bottom, I think, we still feel like tenants. When our faucet breaks our first impulse is to grab the 'phone and bawl out the landlord.

It always comes as something of a shock when a tenant grows irate. Can it be that he's angry with us? I must hasten to add that this doesn't happen very often because the people who live in our house are gentle and civilized; they try very hard to understand our problems and are willing to tolerate our personal peculiarities so long as we tolerate theirs.

The only possible exception has been Mr. Cartwell (a fictitious name to protect the innocent as well as the guilty) who eventually moved to an efficiently operated apartment building on Pierrepont Street. Mr. Cartwell, a fastidious accountant in an old and reliable shipping firm, could never quite adjust to his surroundings

Not Yet

Mr. Cartwell was a great note-writer, and I rather miss the cryptic messages he used to leave for me on the hall table. Most of them dealt with burnt-out lightbulbs and assorted plumbing problems, but there was one which I consider a classic in the literature of tenancy. It was attached to a small chunk of plaster, and it said: "Mr. Margolis, is the house falling down? "

I kept the plaster, but I returned the note with the reply, "Not yet. "

Probably Mr. Cartwell was not sufficiently comforted by my answer, because about a month later he left us. In his place is our friend Lee Hayes, who seems to agree with us that the house is likely to stand for a few more centuries.

It is this awesome prediction that gives us the sense of being mere tenants in a house that really has a life of its own. Of course, we are caretakers, too, for future generations as well as for ourselves. We are grateful to the previous caretakers for their efforts in keeping the

house alive and vital, and we would like future caretakers to be grateful to us. The poplars we've planted in the backyard will someday be tall enough to blot out the Standish Arms. We wish they had been planted 50 years ago.