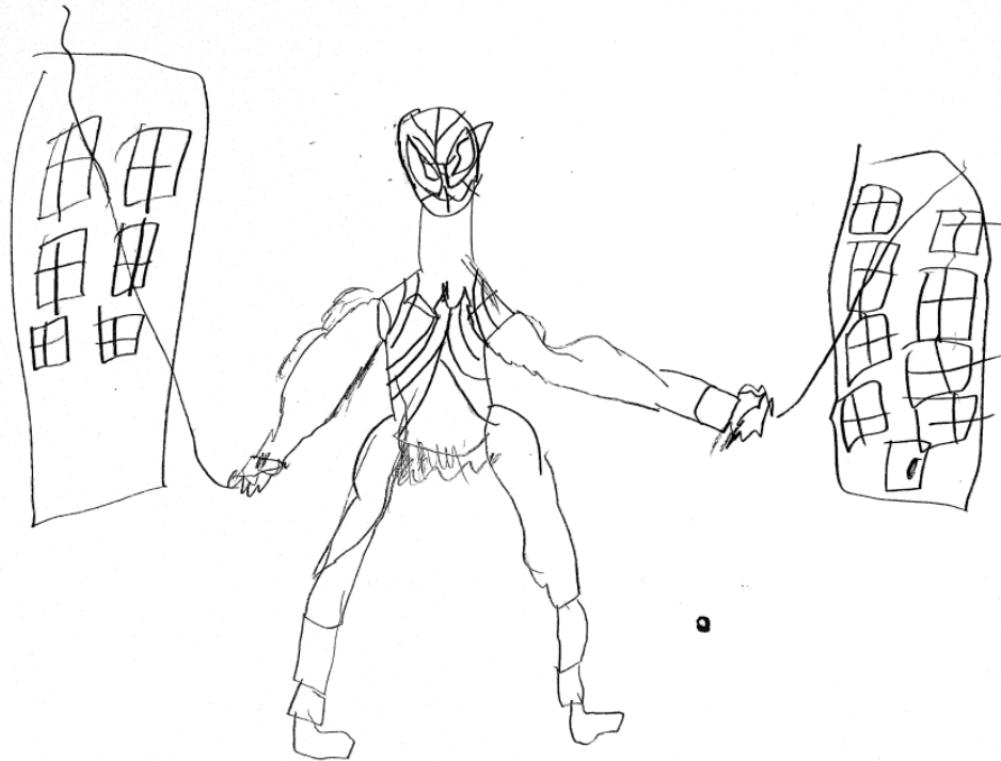


SPIDERMAN
LIVED
IN MY
BUILDING



In winter of 2021 my wife and I were visiting my family in Omaha, Nebraska, when we took our nephew to see *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*. It was my first time watching a movie in a theater since the COVID-19 pandemic began, and my first time ever watching a Marvel movie.

In the opening scenes the mutant known as Spider-Man is frightened because the world has learned his true identity as "Peter Parker." In a fit of sheer terror, he snatches up his girlfriend, MJ, and swings her around New York City, dodging trains and tourists and sewage until they arrive safely at his apartment.

Watching all this from the audience, my wife and I immediately sensed something uncanny. It hit us both in the same instant: the apartment building Spider-Man and MJ had entered was our apartment building.

We gasped. We whispered to our nephew, who was eight years old, "That's our building!" We looked from side to side at the other members of the audience. None of them knew that Spider-Man's building was also our building—that in some intersection of fictional universes, or perhaps even in a "multiverse," Spider-Man was our neighbor.

The moviegoers did not care about this. They were just staring at the film and smiling, the screen's bright light shining on their faces. They were thrilled to see the Spider-Man.

Left: "The Spider J Attacks Crime," by my nephew, Jamal Larson.

Top: the outside of Peter Parker's apartment building in SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME. In real life, the street outside this building is one-way heading south, but the news vans in this scene are facing north. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.



Bottom: the outside of my apartment building, which is also Peter Parker's apartment building. Photo taken with an iPhone.





Top: Peter Parker, dressed as Spider-Man, clutches his girlfriend as they swing into his open apartment window. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.



Bottom: a church across the street from my apartment, which is also visible in the lower right-hand corner of the image above. On most weekdays, children can be heard shrieking from the courtyard beside the church. Photo taken from my kitchen window with an iPhone.

Approximate location
of
Spider-Man's apartment





**Me, looking out from
my bedroom window**



Above: news helicopters descend upon Spider-Man's building, which is viewed at a somewhat oblique angle from the 43rd avenue corner of 46th street. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.

Right: me, attempting to recreate this "somewhat oblique angle" at the corner of 46th street. The Turkish grocery store to my right sells small cups of coffee for one dollar. I don't drink their coffee much, but my wife likes to buy it, especially when her father or someone else with a car picks us up on 43rd avenue for a drive out to Long Island. A few times my wife didn't have cash for the one-dollar coffee, and instead of using a credit card the storekeeper kindly gave her the coffee for free. One time my friend Shakil hosted a brunch in New Jersey, and I didn't know what dish to bring. I stopped by the Turkish grocery and bought some baklava. Everyone at the brunch mentioned how much they enjoyed it. Photo taken by Ben McGuire with an iPhone.

46 ST

ONE WAY

NO STOPPING
Anytime

TURKISH • A

Michelob
ULTRA



Our neighborhood is pretty quiet. Sometimes cars traveling toward Queens Boulevard get stuck behind a truck or a delivery van, and then they honk for a while. There is some kind of daycare or kindergarten in the church across the street, and on weekdays the kids spend a lot of time shouting outdoors. Every once in a while the Sunnyside Drum Corps will tromp past on a Saturday morning, creating a huge racket.

But these are all ordinary neighborhood disturbances. We never encounter anything extra-ordinary, like a freak superhero swinging from building to building, or news helicopters circling in search of the Spider-Man.



Left: Peter Parker sees his building on the news. There is genuine panic on Peter's face, and I imagine that the shock of seeing his building on live television resembles my own shock at seeing my building—which is also his building—in the movie *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.

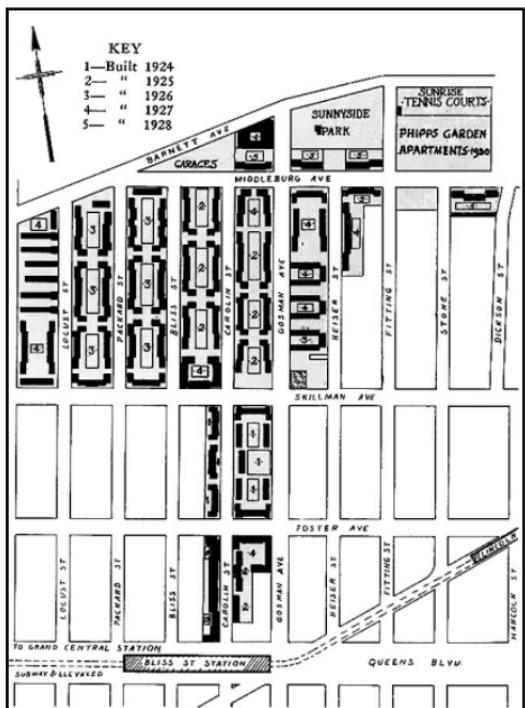
Just because our neighborhood is quiet doesn't mean that it's boring. For example, across the street is the building where Bix Beiderbecke died.

Bix Beiderbecke was a white jazz prodigy. Born in Iowa, he struck out for the midwest jazz circuit at the age of 19, quickly establishing himself as a pioneering cornet soloist—and just as quickly succumbing to the capricious, hard-drinking lifestyle of a 1920s traveling musician.

Like many artists, Beiderbecke was more famous in death than in life. In fact he is often mythologized for his particularly squalid death: what Rilke once described in a different context as the kind of nasty, princely death that great men bear inside themselves and nourish from within their whole life long. In late summer of 1931 Beiderbecke moved into an apartment across the street from my current building, where he remained in isolation, destroying his organs with bathtub gin. Two months later, after a week of heat-induced insomnia and endless drunken piano playing, the building's rental agent heard "hysterical shouts" issuing from Beiderbecke's unit. When the agent inspected the scene, Beiderbecke pulled him inside and screamed that there were two men with daggers hiding under the bed. The agent crouched down to check, and when he stood back up to report that nobody was there, Beiderbecke was falling over dead. He was 28 years old.

Beiderbecke did not live in the neighborhood for two months so much as he died here for two months. Today there is a plaque to commemorate his short life, affixed outside the building where he spent his confused, suffocating, and miserable last days.

One block down the street from our apartment is Sunnyside Gardens, a 1920s planned community that has become an official New York City landmark district and is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. Stretching from Queens Boulevard to Sunnyside Yard, and from 43rd to 52nd, Sunnyside Gardens comprises 77 acres of mostly one-, two-, and three-family houses, all surrounding unique networks of interior courtyards.



Most observers will find Sunnyside Gardens charming, but they will otherwise struggle to distinguish it from the surrounding neighborhood. This is because its full significance only emerges in historical context. When the City Housing Corporation began building Sunnyside Gardens in 1924, New York City was steeped in the cultural, technological, and financial delirium of the so-called Roaring Twenties. This was the greatest decade of construction in the city's history, marked by mammoth skyscrapers, sardine-can tenements, and other buildings haphazardly crammed together to extract maximum value from every last inch of Manhattan real estate.

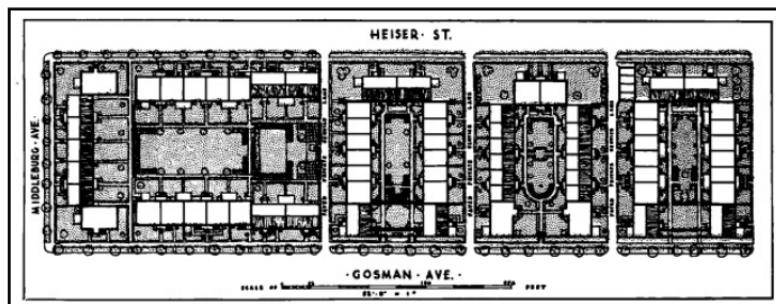
As Manhattan swelled, the borough of Queens opened like a giant steam valve. The rise of mass-produced automobiles, the completion of the Queensboro Bridge, the initiation of the Flushing and Astoria subway lines, and an abundance of cheap land sent developers sprawling. Throughout the decade the population of Queens grew by over 600,000.

What many newcomers discovered in Queens was a borough lacking proper infrastructure and recreational space. Much like in Manhattan, most boom developments near the East River were designed to meet the needs of investors, speculators, and capitalist cronies—not residents. In his book, *TOWARD NEW TOWNS FOR AMERICA*, Sunnyside Gardens's co-designer Clarence Stein recalled how "endless rows of cramped shoddy wooden houses and garages covered the land and destroyed natural green spaces," which he illustrated with this bleak, but typical, housing development in Long Island City:



Sunnyside Gardens offered attractive, affordable, community-oriented housing amid the opportunistic pillaging of western Queens. The project's designers were inspired by the garden city movement in England. Each block of the development contained open lawns, gardens, courtyards, and pathways, all bordered—but not fully enclosed—by simple, beautiful brick houses. Human desire, rather than "lot subdivision," controlled the layout. More compact and more integrated into urban life than Forest Hills Gardens and other contemporary Queens suburbs, but with more light, more fresh air, and more vegetation than a standard dumbbell tenement, Sunnyside Gardens represented a conscious attempt to fuse the country and the city into a single perfect union.

Although the project's funders were not philanthropists, interest rates were capped at six percent. The goal was for working-class residents to own, not rent their homes. Progressive economist Richard T. Ely later offered Sunnyside Gardens as proof that high-quality, privately-funded, and low-cost housing was, at the very least, possible.



Left: plan of a block subsection with one interior courtyard and three courtyards opening onto the street. From Clarence Stein, *TOWARD NEW TOWNS FOR AMERICA*.

Right: an inner courtyard in 1949. From Stein, *TOWARD NEW TOWNS FOR AMERICA*.



The greatest advocate for Sunnyside Gardens was also one of its first residents: the NEW YORKER architectural critic, and one of the United States' most original thinkers of technology, Lewis Mumford. While he appreciated the practical dimensions of cost, aesthetics, and functionality, Mumford ultimately evaluated Sunnyside Gardens in the broader life-or-death context of human freedom. For a century, industrialization had been turning humans into machines, forcing them into cities where, despite their growing numbers and intimate proximity, they became increasingly alienated and lonesome. The built environment was a capital-intensive behemoth, channeling every person's body, thoughts, and desires into apocalyptic processes beyond their individual control. What awed Mumford about Sunnyside Gardens was how it seemed to prompt "spontaneous neighborliness," that it was "not designed to satisfy our private fancies but our common purposes." He captured this sentiment in a scene from his autobiography—a single scene, but "one of a hundred other impromptu meetings":

This was a night in winter when the snow, which had been falling all afternoon, mantling the gabled roofs, outlining the branches of the plane trees, haloing the street lamps, turning bushes into huge white mushrooms, ceased falling around ten o'clock. Then, as if by a whispered command, we neighbors all sallied forth on the streets, hushed in their whiteness, with not even the track of an auto visible: plowing our way through the inner courts, tossing snowballs at each other, licking samples of fresh snow, pausing silently to take in the muted rosy beauty of the night over Manhattan, by turns breathless with delight and shouting with laughter as we encountered some familiar face, ruddy with the same intoxication. We embraced one another then, and we embraced the world in the pure joy of being: knowing life at that moment held nothing better.

It wasn't always perfect. Mumford recalled that, sometimes, a nearby chemical factory filled the sky with yellow plumes. He didn't approve of the local schools, and Sunnyside Yard generated railroad waste. Most of all he complained about "the drab unbuilt acres around us," or "the dreariness of the surrounding area." This was the same dreary surrounding area where Bix Beiderbecke died his pathetic death, perhaps only mere months before Mumford's winter wonderland. This is also the area where I live today, and, since we share the same building, where the Spider-Man lives too.

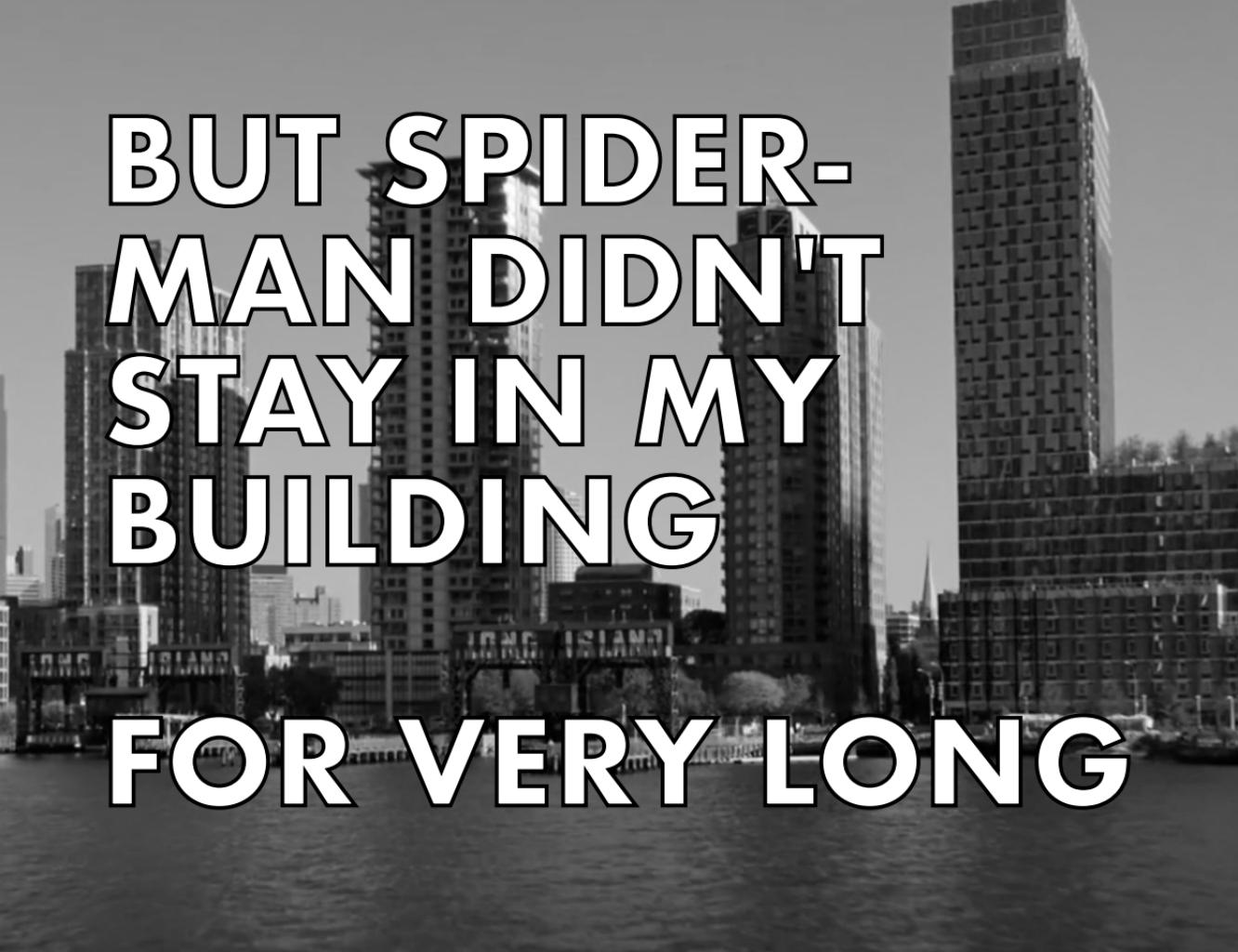


Top: looking east over the 7 Train's 33rd Street station, ca. 1920. When this line was completed, the dreary, unbuilt acres between Long Island City and Flushing were quickly developed. Sunnyside Gardens would soon be constructed somewhere near the upper middle-right edge of the horizon.

From Queens Chamber of Commerce, QUEENS BOROUGH, NEW YORK CITY, 1910-1920.

Bottom: smokestacks on a smelting plant in Newtown Creek, of which Mumford complained in his memoirs. From The Merchant's Association of New York, THE NEWTOWN CREEK INDUSTRIAL DISTRICT OF NEW YORK CITY.



A black and white photograph of a city skyline, likely New York City, featuring the One World Trade Center and other skyscrapers. In the foreground, there is a body of water. Overlaid on the image is large, bold, white text.

**BUT SPIDER-
MAN DIDN'T
STAY IN MY
BUILDING
FOR VERY LONG**

Approximately eight minutes into the film *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*, Peter Parker is speaking with his lawyer at a table in his apartment—which is in the same building as my apartment—when an angry mob hurls a brick through his window.¹ Aunt May leans forward into the camera and says: "We're going to need a safer place to live." The screen immediately cuts to an establishing shot of high-rise buildings on the Long Island City waterfront, and then cuts to Peter Parker and Aunt May crossing the threshold into an ugly new apartment with a high-tech security system.

Just like that, Spider-Man has moved on. My building never appears in the film again.

1. This incident does not represent our neighborhood as a whole. For the entire time I've lived in my building, nobody has ever thrown a brick through my window or, to my knowledge, through any of my neighbors' windows. I suspect this is a ploy designed to gin up extra drama and excitement for fans of the Spider-Man.

For days after watching *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*, I told everyone within earshot that Spider-Man's building was also my building. It didn't take long for me to realize that nobody cared. Friends would respond by saying, "Oh wow!" or "No way, that's totally crazy!"—and then they would change the subject to something else.

Maybe it wasn't as important as I thought. After all, it was only a movie. It was only eight short minutes of a movie. Spider-Man doesn't even exist; he's a fictional character. So did it really matter that this imaginary superhero lived in my building?

And yet, I could not deny that things had changed. Ever since I saw my building illuminated on the big screen, I felt like a stranger in my own home. Each time I turned the corner onto my block, I sensed an eerie glow, as if the brick-and-mortar edifice were a brilliant celluloid projection. I was no longer someone merely living my life. I was someone living my life *in Spider-Man's building*.

Central to the plot of *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME* is the concept of a multiverse: an infinite bundle of alternate realities, which in the movie ruptures, introducing different versions of the Spider-Man into the same shared world. I used to think this was a cheap gimmick to pack as much Marvel intellectual property as possible into a single film. But now I see it reveals a deceptively obvious truth: one's world is never exhausted by one's experience of it. What exists for us at any given moment—an object, an idea, an image—exists in a cross-section of historical, symbolic, and material dimensions, of which only fragments are available to us in our everyday lives.

The task of great art is to explode this cross-section, and through the settling dust to expose those dimensions that had been buried beneath the surface. Nothing about my apartment building, for instance, had actually changed. In a dialectical sense, it had always been Spider-Man's building. But I could never access this dimension of my abode until, suddenly, it ripped open for me like Doctor Strange ripping a hole in the multiverse.

Top: the actor Tom Holland holds the actress Zendaya's hand and escorts her through a crowd of paparazzi. Image from PAGE SIX.

Middle: Peter Parker holds MJ's hand and escorts her through a crowd of protestors and admirers. Or, at least, this is what is happening in the film *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*. In real life, Tom Holland is holding Zendaya's hand and escorting her through a crowd of actors. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.

Bottom: Peter Parker and MJ lean in for a kiss. Or is it Tom Holland and Zendaya leaning in for a kiss? or Tom Holland and MJ? or Peter Parker and Zendaya? This crisis reminds us that reality always means something more than what simply is. Image borrowed from Sony Pictures.



The critical theorist Theodor Adorno once wrote that "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home." Adorno was living in exile at the time, having fled Germany to escape the Nazis. For him there was quite literally no way home, and it suggested a spiritual blindness, even a sickness, to indulge in the hospitality of an utterly inhospitable world. Reflecting on Adorno's dictum four decades later, Edward Said outlined the critical perspective dearly earned by all exiles, who learn the hard way that every home is provisional, and that in an instant the safest refuge can become a prison. "To follow Adorno," Said explained, "is to stand away from 'home' in order to look at it with the exile's detachment."

In the film *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*, the subtitle "no way home" is not a lament for the poor, displaced Peter Parker. It is a reminder that no algorithm exists for solving contingency once and for all. It is an encomium to those who, like the Spider-Man, reject the world as they know it, not by erecting a border, not by colonizing an alternate universe; not, in short, by securing anew all the old comforts of home. Grasping these comforts instead in their fundamental strangeness—learning that one's home is also, perhaps, Spider-Man's home—we burst open the possibilities of a different world, not in some other universe, but in this one. It is a process that begins anywhere, even in the familiar charms of a neighborhood stroll. The plaque commemorating a deceased jazz cornetist; baklava from a Turkish grocery store; fenced-over courtyards in a lapsed garden community; these and the infinite other "waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic": we proceed to stuff them into the teeming bellows through which all of history will pass.

SUNNYSIDE
GARDENS
PARK

PRIVATE PARK

(MEMBER ONLY)
NO DOGS ALLOWED
NO GLASS BOTTLES



LAST THINGS

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FOOT CARE
—43-15—
328

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