In New York, a Losing Battle
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THIS is one New Yorker's account of what it has been like to live in this city for the last decade and what it may be like for the next one.

First, I must make it very clear that I am a typically atypical New Yorker —a loner, a nonconformist, an unregenerate idealist, a bourgeois Bohemian, a lover of the luster and luxuries of the city where both glitter most furiously, a passionate devotee of the right to know what one wants, live as one pleases and flaunt a favored life style.

A believer in standards, diversity, sophistication and superiority—the snob mix that has turned New York into a fast-paced world of pros, I am not the silent majority. I am part of the vocal minority that makes New York New York and not Middletown or anywhere else.

A Manhattanite, to put it bluntly. Hooked on New York, like dope.

As for Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island, I am glad that they are there. The first seven years of my married life were spent in Queens. I was homesick. I missed the immediate proximity of Manhattan's surfeit of sparkling and shoddy splendors, and I was surpassingly lonely for Central Park.

The return to Manhattan was made in 1950, to a brownstone parlor floor on East 76th Street. That was the way of life preferred by New York's bourgeois Bohemians.

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The apartment was rent-controlled, at under $200 a month. It consisted of a living room and bedroom that were originally the house's parlor and dining room, each of ballroom proportions; a huge bath with five exposures (it had been added and stood on lally columns in what had been the garden and served first as the butler's pantry) and a kitchen the size and shape of an elevator shaft. (Would you believe, a marblized stove with cabriole legs?)

There were three working fireplaces, 12-foot ceilings, a bedroom topped by a soaring, synclastic barrel vault, Diana the Huntress over the fireplace and a window-wall looking out on small, back gardens. We had leaf-dappled shadows in the summer and virtually no heat in the winter. We painted and constructed and converted and were duly published in the Sunday home pages of The New York Times.

We lived there for 14 years, until 1964, when the house was sold and demolished, a pattern of destruction that was becoming epidemic in New York. In those years, the adjacent brownstones became schools and galleries as the art circuit moved up Madison Avenue; trees were cut down by backyard vigilantes with hearts of concrete, and the sky disappeared behind new Madison Avenue skyscraper apartments.

In 1964, we were evicted by the purchaser, the adjoining Hewitt School, whose fashionable young ladies used to shout unladylike obscenities beneath our back windows and which proceeded to demolish the brownstone for a small structure in what might be called Juvenile Colonial or Keystone Comedy style

We were able to preserve our life style at an approximate 66 per cent increase in cost. The new apartment was another 5½-room parlor floor through in a townhouse on East 81st Street—New Yorkers do not like to leave their neighborhoods. It was not rent controlled.

This one had 11-foot ceilings, one superb French marble fireplace, a bay window with curved glass and Luxfer prisms, and a view of Governor Harriman's garden and small, pseudo-Georgian houses. Part of it was published in The Times's home pages.

That idyll lasted the four years of our lease. In July, 1968, I reported to an unbelieving New York Times real estate department: "The most extraordinary thing has happened. We've been given a 50 per cent rent raise." This was the beginning of that fall's wave of friendly rent gouging by friendly landlords spurred by the city's growing housing shortage, which resulted in city action for rollback and controls. (Our successors in the apartment, paying $550 a month, got the rollback.)

We made the remarkable discovery that the only place we could afford to live was on Park Avenue. Rents in controlled houses were being jumped sky-high, rents in new houses were somewhere in outer space and people in rent-controlled houses were clearly built in.

The rewards of Puritan frugality and the work ethic for a childless couple was the purchase price of a small co-op in an older, well-constructed Park Avenue apartment house built in the 1920's. After desperate soul-searching and equally desperate apartment-hunting, we bought it.

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Unlike many New Yorkers, we never aspired to Park Avenue. We never wanted to live in a conventional apartment. As an architecture critic I am susceptible to, even in need of, handsome architectural spaces and details.

In spite of upper-middle-income earnings, we found that we could no longer live in the spendidly slightly shabby architectural town house manner that had been our chosen way of life. Town house living soared out of sight to the top of the market. Whole streets of gentle brownstones were replaced by expensive new cracker boxes called luxury apartments.

And so we acquired, in August, 1968, for something under $45,000, four and a half rooms in a well-kept, well-staffed, older Park Avenue apartment house. No mosaics or Musak in the lobby. The maintenance is about what we paid for our first brownstone rental. We feel surprisingly comfortable and free. We like the unaccustomed luxury of service and upkeep. We like our doormen.

If I peer down six stories I can see a tree. Our ceilings are nine and a half feet, and the only architecture is the doors. We have now polished 22 solid brass knobs.

As New Yorkers reckon these things, we are ahead of the game. But what we have given up is the one thing that is supposed to go with New York success —choosing your own way of life.

Why compromise? Why settle, as they say in that downtown men's store? Because in the soul-searching that preceded our decision to stay in the city, we found that we were totally committed to New York. Committed and involved. You take New York on its own terms now, not yours.

These terms include an increasing litany of costs and inconveniences. This has been a decade of expensive attrition, a losing battle with the quality of life.

Give me not the taxi statistics; give me a taxi when I need one. We turned in our Philharmonic seats because of the ordeal of getting back from the muddle of Lincoln Center. We tried the theater bus for a while, but one close-to-zero, enforced midnight march home helped break the theater habit.

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I cannot speak about schools, but they have driven many resilient New Yorkers out of their minds or on to the suburbs. I have virtually given up department stores. I cringe at the overabundance of merchandise and the impersonal insolence of the help. Telephone orders worked until the telephone stopped working. If you get through at all (let it ring 15 minutes), surly elves at the other end obstruct and disappear.

Service markets have been replaced by supermarkets—but considering service, that is not all bad. Service stores—shoe repair, stationery, small specialists—have been rooted out en masse by the new construction. Daily existence is an obstacle race. You learn the special New York art of overcope.

For the next decade, therefore, I have no predictions, because the one certainty of New York is its unpredictability. The name of the game is survival, and here are its rules:

¶Do not go across town, ever, for lunch.

¶Do not go across town at all between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

¶Make all appointments between 11 and 3.

¶Find a friendly local doorman and arrange a friendly taxi honorarium.

¶Or take the subway at off hours.

¶Arrange to be out of town for all parades.

¶Shop for food only in the large, well-known alphabetical supermarket.

¶Shop for clothes only in small boutiques.

¶Stay out of all elaborate, pseudo-belle époque restaurants where food, service and waiters vie in aggressive indifference.

¶Go to dinner parties only within walking distance.

¶Stay home. See that you are well supplied with that still sensibly priced supermarket roast beef, an assortment of the most sensational pastries and cheeses in the world, fresh strawberries and vintage champagne (there are some things worth what they cost), all available, if the real estate speculators haven't gotten there first, within one nearby New York block.

And ask in a few people who live within walking distance. They can be varied as often as the menu. They will be alive, informed, attractive, communicative, witty, stimulating, committed, and involved. And that is what living in New York is all about.