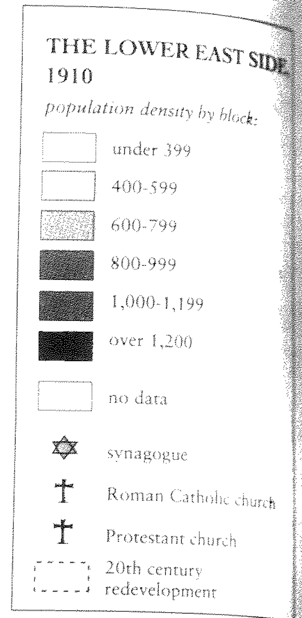
Hester Street

Between 1880 and 1920 most of the two million Jews from Russia, Poland, Austria-Hungary and the Balkans who arrived in the United States settled in New York and made their homes on the lower East Side. They lived in the thousands of tenements thrown up cheaply and quickly by small builders. They were usually five stories tall, with four tiny apartments on each floor. Large families and their borders were squeezed into the ill-lit and crowded rooms. With little fresh air and minimal plumbing, sanitation was inadequate and health inevitably suffered. High infant mortality rates and widespread tuberculosis testified to the shocking conditions.

Nonetheless, Jewish culture and religion flourished. Hundreds of synagogues and religious schools were established, ritual baths built, and religious goods manufactured. There were Yiddish theater companies and literary societies, Yiddish and Hebrew publishers, and Yiddish newspapers: the most famous was *The Jewish Daily Forward* (1898) located in its own building at 175 East Broadway. Jews who had emigrated from the same village or town or city in Europe set up *landsmenschaften*, social and mutual aid groups which provided insurance, burial benefits and even cemeteries. New arrivals in the lower East Side settled into their new lives with the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

Jewish immigrants earned their living in a variety of ways. They sold goods from pushcarts, operated restaurants, cafeterias, and small retail shops and a great number worked in the garment industry. Children and adults often labored from dawn to dusk in their small apartments doing piecework, paid by the number of items they had completed on a given assignment. They also worked in sweatshops – workshops that were squeezed into tenement apartments or loft buildings – and were crowded, poorly-lit, stifling in summer and cold in winter. Wages were low and hours long. The sweatshops were fertile ground for union organizing – the ILGWU (International Ladies



Twentieth-century slum clearance has substantially altered the street pattern east of Pitt Street and south of Grand Street

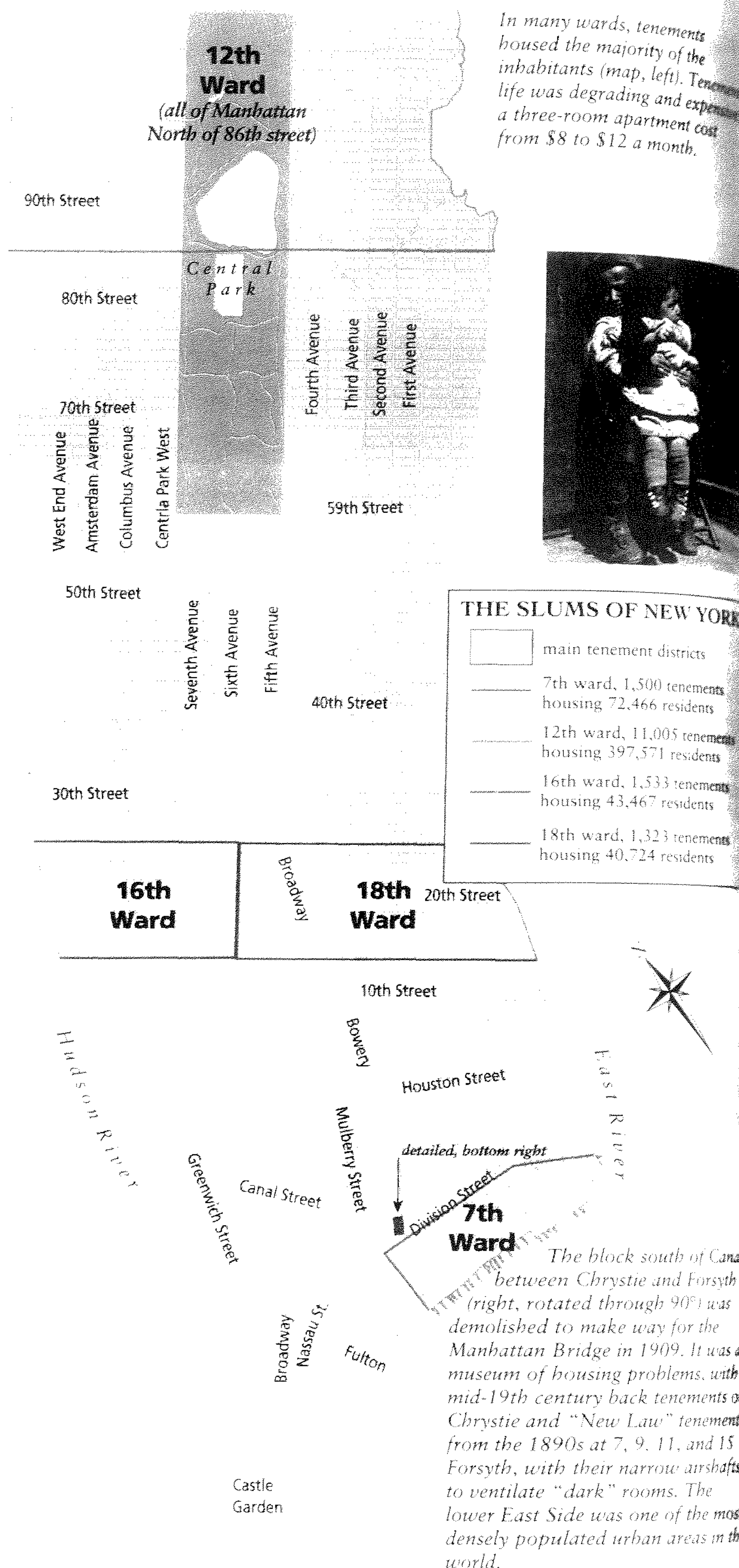
Tenements

Tenant-houses – later called tenements – were a solution to the housing crisis of 19th-century New York. The custom of converting three- or four-story one-family houses into use by two families per floor was already far advanced by 1850. Additional tenement buildings, usually of wood, were often erected on the back portion of city lots, increasing the density of population without greatly altering the city's appearance.

The first large blocks of apartments erected for artisans, such as Gotham Court, on Cherry Street in the 7th Ward, took the problem a half step forward. As you approached this imposing brick structure down the narrow alley which ran its length, the first thing you noticed were the clothes lines running out of virtually every window, signs of unceasing housewifely struggle against dirt, and the pungent odors of a dozen national traditions of cooking. The inadequate provision of sewerage and the difficulty of airing out mattresses, explained the building's terrible mustiness. A closer inspection revealed the overwhelming presence of vermin and lice.

It was only in 1864, when there were already 15,000 tenements in the city, that the first systematic sanitary survey of New York was completed. The physicians who visited every building in each of the 29 sanitary inspection districts, found a system of housing and industry which was unregulated, threatening to health and subject to persistent overcrowding. Legislation followed to establish the Metropolitan Board of Health, which was given significant powers to inspect housing and improve sanitation. The long struggle to improve housing conditions in the city had begun.

The New Tenement House Law of 1879 restricted the proportion of the lot which could be built upon, and mandated the elimination of "dark" rooms. Design competitions sought to improve the standards of design; proposals were made to widen the worst streets, thus eliminating notorious slums like Mulberry Bend and the Five Points. Legislation in 1887 and 1895 set out improved standards, and required more rigorous inspection. But the growth of population, the impact of low pay and unemployment, and the political and financial interests which insulated the largely invisible owners of the tenements from responsibility for the condition of their properties, undermined the efforts of reformers. There were 42,700 tenement houses in Manhattan in 1900, housing 1,585,000 people. Of all the problems the city confronted in this period, the tenement was the most intractable.



In many wards, tenements housed the majority of the inhabitants (map, left). Tenement life was degrading and expensive: a three-room apartment cost from $8 to $12 a month.

The block south of Canal between Chrystie and Forsyth (right, rotated through 90°) was demolished to make way for the Manhattan Bridge in 1909. It was a museum of housing problems, with mid-19th century back tenements on Chrystie and "New Law" tenements from the 1890s at 7, 9, 11, and 15 Forsyth, with their narrow airshafts to ventilate "dark" rooms. The lower East Side was one of the most densely populated urban areas in the world.

The photographs of Jacob A. Riis, taken in the slums in the 1880s, as well as his newspaper articles, lectures with lantern-slides, and a stream of books illustrated with his own photographs (beginning with How the Other Half Lives, *1890), did much to arouse public concern. Children pose for Riis on the roof of the "Barracks" in Mott Street, while lines of washing partially obscure a rear tenement in Roosevelt Street (far right). Riis' "Bandit's Roost" (right) was taken in an alley off "The Bend," a block (demolished in the 1890s) below Bayard, between Baxter and Mulberry, at the heart of the old "Bloody Sixth" ward in the lower East Side.*

The map below clearly shows how additional tenements were inserted behind city lots. Back tenements had some of the most foul and decrepit conditions in the city.