

**CONTRIBUTOR**

# Clock Towers of New York; You Are My True North...

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1 Hanson Place, Brooklyn, NY

Growing up in New York City, clock tower buildings have been my navigational tools, my true north for as long as I can remember.

I was born and raised on 17th Street between Irving Place and Park Avenue South back in the day when it was not a good neighborhood.

### **Once Upon a Time...**

S. Klein on the Square and Mays department stores lined Union Square Park pre-Starbucks, Whole Foods, Coffee Shop, and all the other current trendy, crazy rent-paying businesses. If you dared enter the park, it was at your own risk. The legendary, or perhaps notorious, Max's Kansas City was around the corner, and home to Andy Warhol and the hip, creative artists and musicians, movers-and-shakers, trendsetters of the day.

The W Hotel on 17th Street was a Chemical Bank. The New York Film Academy building across the street (which has since moved) was a union meeting hall. The Michelin Guide described our neighborhood as 'non-descript,' a far cry from what it no doubt is called today.

The city was covered in graffiti, and was grungy, edgy, with more of a black-and-white color palette than its current technicolor. It had personality, the creative energy was palpable, and it wasn't so safe.



Zechendorf Towers over Union Square

## **Our Small Town Within New York City...**

Living on the fringe of Gramercy Park, it was our small town, minus the white picket fences. While the city was a tad funky, as kids, we were pretty much free to trek around where we wanted without adult supervision.

After the Empire State building, and then the World Trade Center in the early 70s, clock tower buildings were some of the tallest in the city at that time, thus becoming an easy point-of-reference.

For me, it all started with Con Edison's clock tower, just three blocks south of our house. From north to south, east to west, the clock was visible so I could always find my home, and see how late past curfew I was.

And then the inevitable happened to change the tale of this fateful neighborhood. Zechendorf Towers were born. A 29-story, 4-tower building complex became erect in 1987, casting a dark shadow over Union Square Park, and blocking my shining star. From certain angles, you could catch a glimpse of the clock, but it seemed from that point on, the clock wasn't kept up with as much love and care, and the time, more often than not, was wrong.

## **Gentrification, You Blocked My Shining Star...**

After years of automatically turning to look up at the clock, to this day, decades later, the habit is still deeply ingrained, and I look for it whenever I'm in that neighborhood.

The Met Life building, now some fancy hotel on Madison Square Park, also with a clock tower, was useful growing up, but often confused me as it was similar in height, look, and in roughly the same neighborhood as Con Ed. But it remains beautiful and continues to remind me to look up when passing by.

I ended my love affair with Manhattan, and it was traumatic break up with the city 16 years ago. I crossed the river, something I never did while growing up, and moved to Brooklyn. As fate would have it, my new digs were a few blocks from the clock tower building on Flatbush Avenue near Atlantic.

Brooklyn welcomed and comforted me with my new north star. A new borough, yet a familiar tool for orientation. Look up, see the time, and know where I am: a ritual since childhood.

As I've never been a watch wearer, and pre-cell phones and devices that keep us perpetually hooked on time, the clock tower served me well for all these years. But damn if this gentrification isn't messing with me again.

What I happily left behind in Manhattan has crossed the river and at warp speed. Just as with growing on 17th Street, when I first moved to Brooklyn, this hood was funky, buildings were no more than four stories high, bodegas, Hong Kong Pharmacy, local video stores were the norm, and the sky view was visible everywhere. It felt like a move to a small town in the country. No Starbucks, Duane Reade, American Apparel, or Target, in sight.

And then came the Barclays Center, a stadium, two blocks from my apartment, which was incredibly painful to watch go up, but as a neighbor said, "We ain't ever going to see it come down, so we better make friends with it."

Once again, my version of a small town was evaporating before my eyes. The essence, the heart and soul of Brooklyn is crying, "I'm melting." After 45 years, a local bodega shut its doors.

After a few decades, the local video store shut its doors. And on and on and on this story goes. Commercial rents are over \$300 per square foot, 3-bedroom apartments are \$7,000/month, packed with multiple roommates, and a local pizza place pays \$11,000 just in rent. Seriously? That's a lot of slices to sell!

From my home office window, I now see five cranes where new high-rise construction is underway.

Time waits for no one and eventually disappears. Gentrification is a good reminder to live now and be fully present and appreciative of this moment because everything is always changing.

## **Virginia Wolfe Says We All Need a Room With a View...**

'Tis true, but I also need clock tower views. I wonder what will force my next move first, gentrification or the presidential elections. Canada must have some good clock tower buildings!

## **So where do you look to find your way home?**

*Comments, shares, and likes are welcome!*

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