

# It's Chinatown: Neighborhood Sees Yet Another Harbinger of Gentrification

By Kim Velsey | 08/20/14 6:10pm



Chinatown. (Troy Young/flickr)

Today, the New York State Tenant Protection Unit served a subpoena on Marolda Properties, investigating allegations that the landlord had harassed tenants in an attempt to make them leave their rent-regulated Chinatown apartments. While the gentrification of Chinatown [has been ongoing](#), the neighborhood has remained one of the few enclaves below 125th Street to have resisted widespread, all-transforming change. But there is, perhaps, no greater bellwether of the neighborhood's shift than the harassment of rent-regulated tenants.

Greenwich Village, the East Village and the Lower East Side have all been loci of similar battles in recent years, with the roles of villain largely played by Ben "the Sledgehammer" Shaoul and Steven Croman. (After years of staunch opposition from tenants, Mr. Croman is [now under investigation](#) by Attorney General Eric Schneiderman for using

illegal tactics to force them out; among the allegations, the claim of a couple who rejected a buyout offer on their E. 8th Street apartment and went on summer vacation that they returned to find their apartment's contents warped and destroyed by blasting steam heat.)

As with Mr. Shaoul and Mr. Croman, who have allegedly tried to push rent-regulated tenants out of newly-acquired buildings, the complaints against Marolda center on recent purchases. The company, which owns over 70 buildings, with approximately 1,700 apartments throughout the five boroughs and Westchester County, has, of late, greatly expanded its holdings in Chinatown and the Lower East Side. After buying the buildings, the company "engaged in a pattern of unlawful and abusive behavior to drive tenants out of their homes, including: denying basic services, refusing to renew leases as required by state's rent laws, bringing groundless eviction proceedings and pressuring tenants to accept low buyout offers," according to the Tenant Protection Unit.

Taking advantage of the common surnames of many rent-regulated tenants in its Chinatown buildings, Marolda allegedly targeted individuals and families for eviction, claiming that tenants who had lived exclusively in their apartments for decades maintained primary residences elsewhere.

Among those he tried to evict: a woman in her mid-80s who was an active member of a community senior center and local religious organizations and had lived in her apartment for 40 years. Another family was summoned to housing court and forced to prove they lived at their apartment, despite having no links to another address and young children attending a neighborhood school.

"This case is especially egregious because it appears this landlord preys on many tenants who are elderly and whose primary language is not English—which will not be tolerated in New York State," said Gov. Andrew Cuomo in a statement.

A call to Marolda Properties was not answered.

Though the state probe is new, discontent with and complaints against the company have been building for some time. As a Yelp user wrote last summer (Marolda has two stars): "I live in my apt for over 15 years before Marolda

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Properties bought the whole building. First thing they did was to kick out all the old tenants, they suited [sic] all the old tenants with any reason they found. They rent out the empty apt at market place [sic] to 'new' New Yorkers."

Last October, the Asian American Defense [published a 50-page report](#) on gentrification in the Chinatowns of New York, Boston and Philadelphia, which found that while the growth of luxury housing and rising rents were a problem in all three, New York's had actually been protected more than the other two by the city's rent regulation laws.

Nonetheless, with the need for affordable and [even no frills market rate apartments increasing](#), along with the vast sums that can be made converting rent-regulated housing to high-end luxury units, it's no surprise that one of the last bastions of affordable housing in the city would be seen as both a goldmine by developers and a haven for the beleaguered middle class. The report found that there are fewer children under 17 living in Chinatown, with the population having shifted towards students and young professionals and away from families.

Restaurants and food shops, have meanwhile, also shifted away from Asian establishments, with 43 percent Asian to 57 percent non-Asian.

Most telling of all, perhaps, besides tenant harassment, is the anti-gentrification graffiti: the report noted that just before a large coffee shop opened on Canal Street, the Chinese characters for "gentrification" were scrawled on the plywood outside.

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