

# The West Village Squeeze: Influencers, Ghosts, and the Call for Connection

BY EDWARD ROCHE

Walking out of Sevilla, a Spanish restaurant on Charles Street, I notice an ocean of influencers using the steps of townhomes as their pretty backdrop for social media content. Along Perry and West 11th are rows of recently combined townhomes with darkened windows, seemingly vacant. This is a regular occurrence. I turn around to see the landscaped window inside Sevilla and feel enchanted by a neighborhood that changes while remaining uniquely cozy and a home to many New Yorkers.

I moved to the West Village five years ago and that's the longest I've lived anywhere since I was 14. Like many New Yorkers, I've joined a co-op and planted roots because I finally felt I'd found home. I arrived in NYC over 10 years ago on the GI Bill. I came from the Middle East after serving in the U.S. Army, followed by a two-year stint in Kabul with the State Department. I finally discovered the most precious feelings of belonging in the West Village despite being the furthest thing from a typical West Village candidate. As an Army Ranger veteran and former Blackwater contractor, I'm not the most obvious addition to the West Village, but that's part of what makes our city special.

After traveling all over the world for the majority of my 20s, I finally landed in a place that gives me that homey feeling I never really had in my youth. For the past five years this feeling has fed my spirit in ways where I want to give back and honor my neighborhood while still welcoming (some of) the change. Having lived without a community, the West Village is integral to my vitality as a New Yorker.

Since moving here I've felt increasingly squeezed between this influx of tourists turning quiet blocks into backdrops (like a mini Times Square), ultra-wealthy consolidating historic townhomes into sprawling megamansions, absorbing inventory, and an overchurn of tasteless brick-and-mortar stores that almost make me want to join the Taliban.

The crowds drawn from TikTok fame is a double-edged blade: I am here for the promotion of small businesses but the long lines for coffee, pizza, and ice cream make me wonder if it's only because other establishments are just so egregiously expensive. Tripods blocking the sidewalks and kitschiness of the stores/energy make everyday life feel performative — am I living in a production set for influencers and TikTokers?

Creating pied-à-terres rather than participating in neighborhood life diminishes our vibrant community — rather than neighbors, we often end up with ghosts.

This matters because it isolates locals. Overwhelming public spaces and ultra-wealthy shrinking housing stock reduces space for a mix of residents that generate eclectic energy. I recognize two things here: first this is largely out of our control, and second I am grateful for how TikTokers can rejuvenate small businesses and neighborhood staples. My concern lies in lost connection and neighborly fabric.

While change is inevitable and to say otherwise is a trait of cynicism, I advocate for the pockets that really contribute to the magic that keep my spirit alive and my imagination engaged, like Sevilla. Since

1941 Sevilla has been a West Village landmark on Charles and West 4th — with cozy, wood panels, leather booths, tuxedoed staff, and classic dishes like paella where the hefty portion size exceeds its price point.

Later into the evening it shifts from a cozy family-serving restaurant for both younger and aging locals to a mosaic of a NYC cultural melting pot — adjacent to the enchantment from the movie *Midnight in Paris*.

Sevilla easily has one of the prettiest facades of any restaurant in the neighborhood. The panoramic, rectangular shaped windows capture any given moment likened to a modern day Norman Rockwell painting. Sevilla's a timeless snapshot of diverse patrons, ranging from musicians and artists to everyday New Yorkers mingling genuinely.

Sevilla is my asylum where I feel part of something authentic, not performative or exclusive: no membership required. These serendipitous collisions have evolved into hellos, holiday/Halloween invitations (merci Massey), birthday parties, and other small acts of connection.

This is very much the essence of living in the West Village. By design this is an outdoorsy neighborhood, in juxtaposition to NYC's private clubs built on false barriers, where the Bohemian-corporate-dogwalker-finance bro can cross pollinate and hopefully help each other fight the isolation, the facade of classicism, and the nerves keeping us from knowing our neighbors.

My proposal is to urge us toward more dinner parties both at home and out. To look up and say hello to each other. Meet



EDWARD ROCHE. Photo by Patricia Ries.

your neighbors on the sidewalk, or in line for coffee, so we remain a neighborhood. A place which creates grassroots connections and hosts events like block parties, cooking gatherings, and informal meetups. Hopefully this leads to deeper neighbor knowledge and participation to adjust and renegotiate change. And please, say hello to me.

Despite the squeeze, West Village still feels like home. Its heart persists in establishments like Sevilla and in everyday kindnesses. I encourage you (and myself) to build more connections and to protect the inclusive, Bohemian essence before it is fully squeezed out. The neighborhood can evolve without losing its soul if we show up for each other.

## Why I Choose New York

Love Letter Written in Contrast to Denmark

BY CHRISTIN WINHOLT RACCUA

There are two places that live inside me, not in opposition, but in dialogue. Denmark, where the light is soft and the days stretch gently into one another. And New York City, where everything is immediate, electric, and unapologetically alive. I belong to both. But I have chosen New York. This is not a rejection of Denmark. It is, in many ways, because of Denmark that I understand why.

### Denmark: The Beauty of Enough

Denmark teaches you something profound: that life does not need to be loud to be meaningful. There is an elegance in its restraint. A cultural agreement that enough is not only sufficient — it is ideal. Homes are curated but not excessive. Success is respected but not flaunted. Time is protected, especially time with family.

There is a deep exhale in Denmark. You walk along the coast in Tisvilde and the wind carries a kind of emotional clarity. Life feels

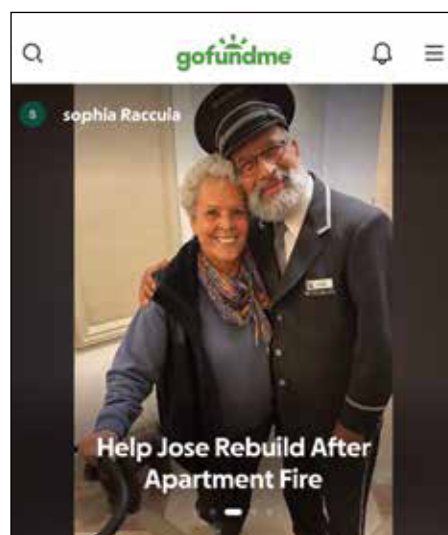
held. Contained. Safe.

And yet, for me, there is also a quiet boundary in that containment. Ambition is softened. Individualism is tempered. There is a subtle social rhythm that asks you not to stand too far outside the collective. It is beautiful. But it is not where I expand the most.

### New York City: The Permission to Become

New York is not interested in containing you. It asks something else entirely: Who are you willing to become? In New York, ambition is not something to hide — it is a language everyone speaks. Reinvention is not suspicious — it is expected.

There is no single way to live here. That, in itself, is freedom. You can be a psychotherapist, a writer, a business owner, a student of philosophy, and still feel like you are only beginning. In fact, that multiplicity is not only accepted — it is admired.



GOFUNDME PAGE FOR AUTHOR CHRISTIN WINHOLT RACCUA'S doorman, who lost everything in a Bronx fire. Her building came together in the most touching manner. Image courtesy of Christina Winholt Raccua.

New York meets you where you are, but it does not let you stay there. It pulls you forward.

### Community: An Unexpected Kind of Care

There is a misconception about New York — that it is cold, transactional, even indifferent. My experience has been the opposite. The community here is not always quiet or assumed. It is active. Immediate. It shows up.

When our doorman lost everything in a fire, my daughter created a GoFundMe page. Within one hour, \$25,000 had been raised. This was not a homogeneous building. It was a mix of stabilized rent apartments and market-rate residents — people from different financial realities, different lives, different stories.

And yet, there was no hesitation. People gave. People shared. People acted. What moved me was not just the generosity, but

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