
Mark Rubinsky

Mark Rubinsky and Lee Hancock lived in Judson House during Lee's tenure as assistant and associate minister at Judson from 1981 to 1985.

“It needs a little work,” said the tall guy with the sharp, short hair and a perceptible glint in his piercing blue eyes. Today those words would make me want to hide under the bed and cover my ears. In 1981 it was a symphony: 2,000 square feet of limitless opportunity. In those days, “it needs a little work” meant that anything was possible. Besides, I had spent many hours renovating other people’s apartments—and this would be for us.

It was with these thoughts that I first “met” Judson House and the place where the newly called assistant minister, the Rev. Lee Hancock, and I would soon take up residence. It meant a new era in our lives, for Lee a job at one of New York City’s most exciting and controversial churches, and for us an apartment in Greenwich Village.

The measuring, designing, and dreaming began immediately. Then followed several weeks of packing, which was surprising, since the move itself took one day in a loosely packed, modestly sized truck of a professional mover. When the truck pulled into Thompson Street, it blocked traffic. We did not pay attention to the alternate-side-of-the-street sign. Even though the movers unloaded the truck in less than three hours, a particularly obstreperous neighbor called the police, and we split the \$50 ticket for obstructing traffic with the movers. We were officially welcomed to the neighborhood.

Exhausted, we unpacked a few boxes, unrolled our futon by the window, and lay down, bathed in the light from the streetlights through the bare windows as we watched a full lunar eclipse perform for us over the Village rooftops.

AL CARMINES'S OLD APARTMENT

The next morning we surveyed the scene. As you opened the apartment’s front door, you were immediately confronted with three steps

going up to a three-foot-wide runway that ran to the far end of the room where the kitchen was located. The wall to the left was completely covered with shelves made from construction-grade two-by-tens. Usually found under floors and used as joists, they certainly made for strong, if relatively crude, bookcases. A little further to the left was a small bedroom with a pit in the middle. The pit was the shape of a mattress. Again down the runway, also to the left, was a bathroom that at first blush seemed standard: sink, toilet, sunken tub, except that it wasn't really a sunken tub. A raised floor with a weird shaggy black carpet made it look sunken. Past the bedroom was the small but serviceable kitchen, also raised from the original floor level. At the end of the main room to the right of the runway a large squared-off platform created a dining area. The long, thin space to the right of the ramp was the living area. All of this area was covered in threadbare, stained, smelly, dusty, formerly gray but currently scary, industrial carpet, acres of it, climbing the side of the runway and draping the steps. We were not inspired to take our shoes off.

But the space did not stop there. Down a fairly treacherous (at least after a few drinks) spiral staircase was another room. We were told it had been a gallery space. This space with its illustrious past was now dark because a wall covered up one of its windows. The ceiling was crumbling. At the end of a short hallway there was a toilet that had not been used in decades. On one side of the space a door led out to iron steps up to the street, and on the other side there was a munchkin-sized door to the fabulous garden in the rear.

(Yup, it needed a little work, glint, glint.)

But the possibilities were endless. So we got a dumpster and a bunch of friends. We even remembered to order it on the right alternate-side-of-the-street parking day. It was the biggest dumpster we could get: twenty cubic yards. We wanted to be sure to have plenty of extra space. We removed one of the front windows and built a ramp from the window to the top of the dumpster. A few hours of hard work, and we would be rid of the smelly, moldy industrial carpet. We would get rid of this runway, too.

The runway had a rich history. During a discussion with my electrician at the off-Broadway run of Russ Treyz's *Cotton Patch Gospel* I heard a little more of the legend of 237 Thompson Street. Admittedly, this is hearsay, but my electrician claims to have been a participant and he was relatively sober the day he told me the story.

HOW THE APARTMENT WAS ORIGINALLY RENOVATED (ALTERNATE VERSION)

It was five or fifteen years ago (this should set the stage in terms of credibility), and Al Carmines was opening another show. Because he was a loved and respected genius of Off Broadway and because it was his birthday (or Christmas or just because), a group of folks decided to surprise him with an overnight renovation of his apartment at Judson House. While Al labored next door at the Judson Poets Theater, this crew would effect a magical transformation of the apartment. An unnamed set designer drew up plans, and a flock or gaggle or bunch or mob (you choose, but remember it was off-Broadway in the 1960s or 1970s) of stagehands descended upon the premises for an orgy of renovation and managed to have the place complete by the time the curtain came down and the opening night party began.

I have the utmost respect for professional stagehands. I work with them often. They are truly loving, loyal, honest, talented craftspeople. I have also worked as a carpenter and electrician for off-Broadway theater. We, too, were caring, loyal, talented, and honest, but the craft part was variable. Many of us were just learning. I would have to surmise that the assault on Judson House that fateful day was a learning experience for many. It certainly was for me, those many years later, on that day of the dumpster.

YARD AFTER CUBIC YARD OF DEBRIS

Soon the carpet was in the dumpster and barrels of just plain trash were being lugged out. It was now time to demolish the runway. Crowbar in hand, we began to pry at the plywood. With a mighty screech it began to loosen. It screeched because it had been assembled with an evil nail called a resin coated box nail. This nail is coated with the same resin a violinist uses. As the name implies, the nail is meant to secure wooden boxes that will see rough use. It is meant never to come out, and it lived up to its reputation.

We were finally making headway, and the top of the runway came off. It was like opening a treasure chest. Would we find a time capsule of keepsakes? Maybe some old playbills? Would you have guessed all of the construction debris from the renovation? If plaster

weighs around 100 pounds per cubic foot (just a ballpark figure), a conservative estimate would run to a minimum of three tons. It looked more like twenty, and it was topped off with (and this is absolutely, unequivocally true) a pair of dirty socks, some underwear, and half a Blimpie sandwich still in its bag (no, we did not open the bag but it felt rather intact). At least we now knew why things always smelled sour and gritty, like an overflowing ashtray the morning after a good party.

(It needs a little work, he said with a glint in those steely blue eyes.)

Garbage can after garbage can went into the dumpster. In a fit of youthful optimism, we had procured a floor sander, and someone started sanding the exposed floors. They looked like the boards of an old dock that had been exposed to the elements for decades. There was so much dust you could not see the wall at the far end of the space, but by the time the sun was setting the floors had been sanded, the runway was memory, and the dumpster was filled to the rim. It had been quite a day. We served beer and pizza to our faithful friends (thank you) and then took showers in the bathroom with the black shaggy carpet. The water leaked into the community room below. I am sure we slept soundly that night, although I can't remember where.

Several months later I was spending my days renovating and my nights at the Majestic Theater as the stage manager for the show *Agnes of God*. Things were slowing down on the Mr. Fix It front, so we did the logical thing: We decided to throw a party. That would inspire us to move ahead. It was to be Arlene Carmen's fifteenth year at Judson, and a surprise party was in order. In the spirit of earlier renovations, we stayed up all night gluing parquet tiles to the just finished curved steps to the dining area as we vacuumed sawdust and removed construction debris. We finished around 3 p.m. and people started arriving at 4.

It was a great party. At Judson House it always was.

MARK RUBINSKY AND LEE HANCOCK

live in Upper Nyack, New York.