

There Goes the Neighborhood: Surveillance Cameras in the “East Village”

(New York). According to the latest map made by the Surveillance Camera Players (the SCP), a longstanding anti-surveillance theatrical troupe based in New York, the number of cameras installed in public places in the “East Village” has continued to grow at an alarming pace. In the last five years, it has in fact *more than doubled*: there are now 1,275 of them, as compared to 2010, when there were 569. In 2001, when the SCP made its first map of the East Village, there were only 96 such cameras.

This steady upward trend runs counter to the general trend in reported crimes over the same period, which is steadily downwards. The East Village has never been safer; no one denies it. Economically speaking, the area is rapidly “improving,” that is to say, rent for commercial and residential properties is high and growing ever-higher. This is, no doubt, why the number of cameras operated in the area by the various agencies of the City of New York (the New York Police Department, the Department of Transportation, the Department of Education, etc.) has always been relatively small and has only grown modestly over the last 15 years: 29 in 2001; 44 in 2005 and in 2010; and 77 in 2015.¹

If it isn't the government who is installing all these new cameras in the East Village, then who is? The answer is simple: the owners/managers of private properties: expensive apartment buildings and high-priced restaurants, bars and boutiques. But if crime is down and the NYPD hasn't installed hundreds of brand-new cameras (and lord knows the cops have both the money and manpower to do so if they wanted to), then *why* are these new occupants (none of whom were in the area 15 years ago) installing so many of them? – And not only within their own establishments, which is their right, but also outside of them, where what goes on is none of their business (literally).

There are a few possible explanations. The most likely is financial. If these owners/managers install surveillance cameras (lots of them), they will be offered cheaper rates by insurance companies that, through their subsidiaries or “sister companies,” also sell surveillance cameras. Without such sweet deals, in which the fear of crime is simultaneously induced and mollified, getting reasonably priced insurance in the wake of the very costly disasters of the last 15 years (the attacks

¹ For more on the NYPD cameras in the East Village, cf. “Surveillance Cameras Around Tompkins Square Park,” *The Shadow* #57 (Spring 2015), p. 10: <http://www.notbored.org/TSP.pdf>.

on the World Trade Center and Hurricane Sandy) would, no doubt, be impossible. In sum: the growth in the number of privately owned surveillance cameras is a clear reflection, not of rising crime or fears about terrorism, but of rising insurance rates.

It seems clear that there is also a psychological dimension to the mania for installing surveillance cameras in an area once known for its radical political, social and cultural movements. On the one hand, many of the people flocking to the new places in the now-chic East Village – recent arrivals, students with rich parents, out-of-town visitors, foreign tourists and transnational real-estate speculators – have hard-to-forget conceptions of New York City and what used to be called the Lower East Side that have been formed, installed in their heads and ceaselessly reinforced therein by years and years of such anxiety-inducing right-wing shitshows as *Law & Order*, *The New York Post* and *Fox News*, not to mention former and current elected representatives such as Rudolph Giuliani and Peter King.

Their message is simple, consistent and clear: New York is a dangerous place, even today. Especially today! And so these flocks of adventurers to the East Village must be reassured over and over again that all kinds of specific and supposedly effective measures have been taken to ensure their personal safety, despite and amidst the “danger,” which somehow remains exciting (if not necessary) for these people and certainly gives their newly found white-washed playground a few dashes of “local color.” And of course among those measures and dashes are lots and lots of surveillance cameras: a dose of reality in an unreal world.

On the other hand, many of the new owners/managers – and this is judging, not only by their mania for video-surveillance, but also by the aggressive, literally in-your-face placement of all-too-many of their cameras and by the recent proliferation of signs that announce the presence of “security cameras” and the determination of their owners to “prosecute” anyone who commits the dreaded crime of “trespassing” underneath their unblinking electronic eyes – many of these new owners/managers seem just as worried about the non-existent “crime problem” in the East Village as their prospective clients, if not more so. You would think they were positively under siege by vast hordes of panhandling, dumpster-diving vagrants and trespassers! But, of course, they are not.

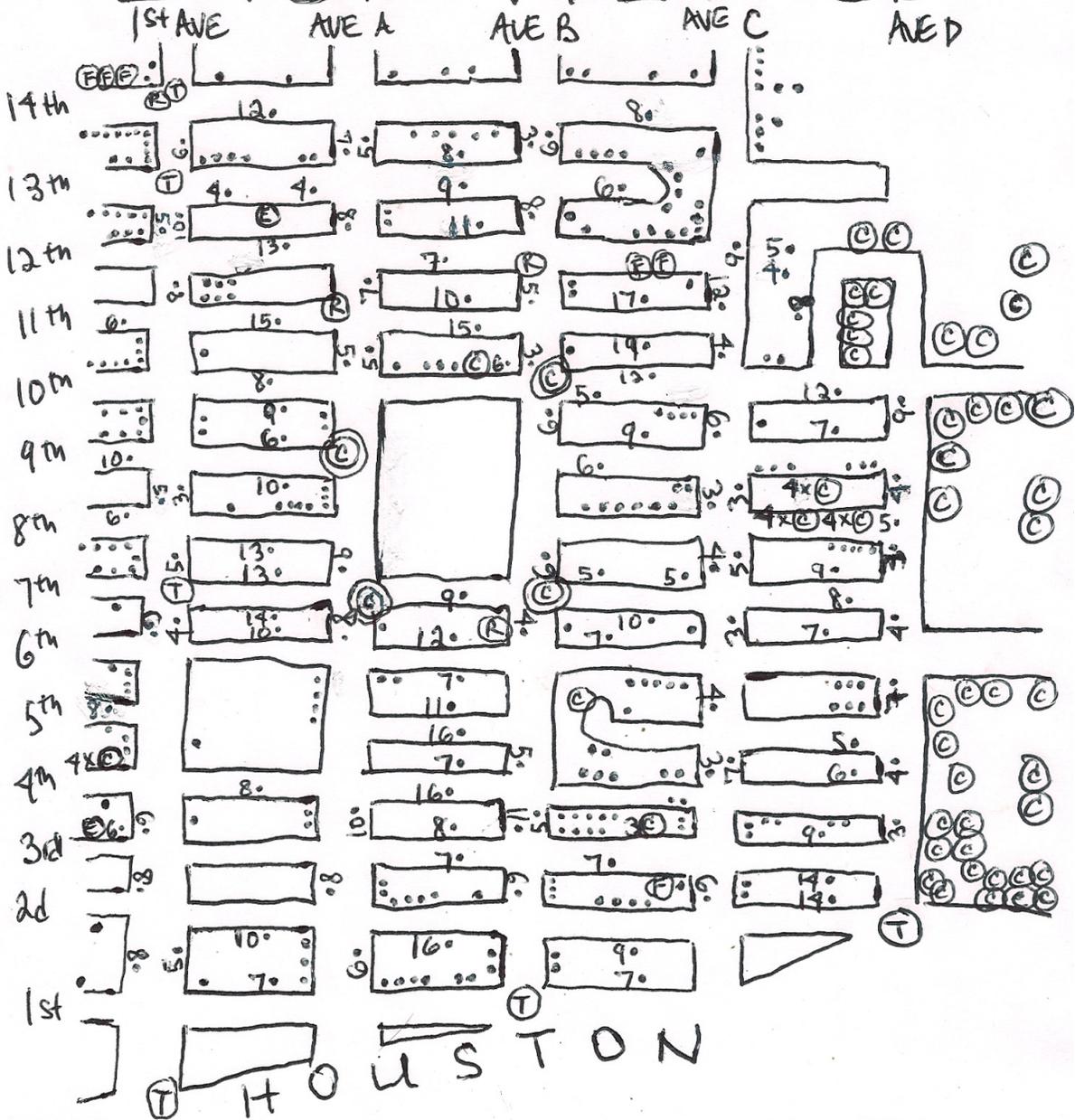
This is where the psychology of thing gets interesting. Though not necessarily victims of “crime,” these new owner/managers need to present themselves – to themselves and to the rest of humanity – as victims of *something* that’s just as serious as crime, if not more so. And what might that be? “Adversity,” “bad luck,” and/or a “bad economy.” To get where they are now, they’ve had to fight against these things, these obstacles, to overcome them, if you

will. And now that they have provisionally succeeded, they are once again victims, *still* victims: victims of high rents and insurance premiums, which only delay their much-deserved returns on their initial investments. That's where all the cameras and signs come in. They proclaim, "We're victims, too; we know what it's like; so don't fuck with us."

What weapons has one against all these cameras, against their unchecked proliferation? The hardware stores still sell hammers, don't they? But what about the people *behind* the cameras and their over-inflated fears of crime and their preposterous pretensions to be "just like us"? Put down your hammer and let me tell you a joke, for laughter – howls of derisive, mocking laughter – can be far more devastating in its impact when one's target are people whose heads are made of blocks of wood.

11 June 2015

PUBLICLY INSTALLED SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS EAST VILLAGE



- Legend
- = PRIVATE
 - Ⓐ = NYCHA, DEPT OF ED, NYPL
 - Ⓒ = NYPD WIRELESS
 - Ⓡ = RELAY UNITS
 - Ⓣ = DEPT OF TRANSPORTATION
 - ⓕ = POST OFFICE, SOCIAL SECURITY
 - ⓔ = ELEVATED LOCATION

Subtotals
 1,196
 61
 4
 4
 6
 6
 2

June 2015

SURVEILLANCE
 CAMERA
 PLAYERS

TOTAL 1,275