

# 'When It Rains Outside, It Rains Inside': Tenants Say Notorious NYC Landlord Is Practicing 'Construction as Harassment'

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2016 AT 11:56 A.M.

BY STEVEN WISHNIA



Weiben Wang is a librarian who has lived in 159 Stanton Street for 20 years.

[Chris Jones](#) for the Voice

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**“I was sitting at my desk, and the ceiling came down on top of me and my computer,” the woman says, standing in the hallway of 159 Stanton Street on the Lower East Side.**

The woman, a rent-stabilized tenant who asked to remain anonymous, lives in one of the ten remaining occupied apartments in the building, which was bought by [Steven Croman](#) three years ago. In August 2015, when a Croman construction crew was demolishing the floor of the apartment above her, the light fixture in her kitchen fell to the floor and shattered. A few days later, cracks suddenly appeared in her ceiling, and she complained to the workers, the city, and the building manager, who told her “we’re working quickly.” Later that afternoon, the chunk of plaster fell and hit her. She was unhurt, but “shaken.” It left a hole more than three feet wide.



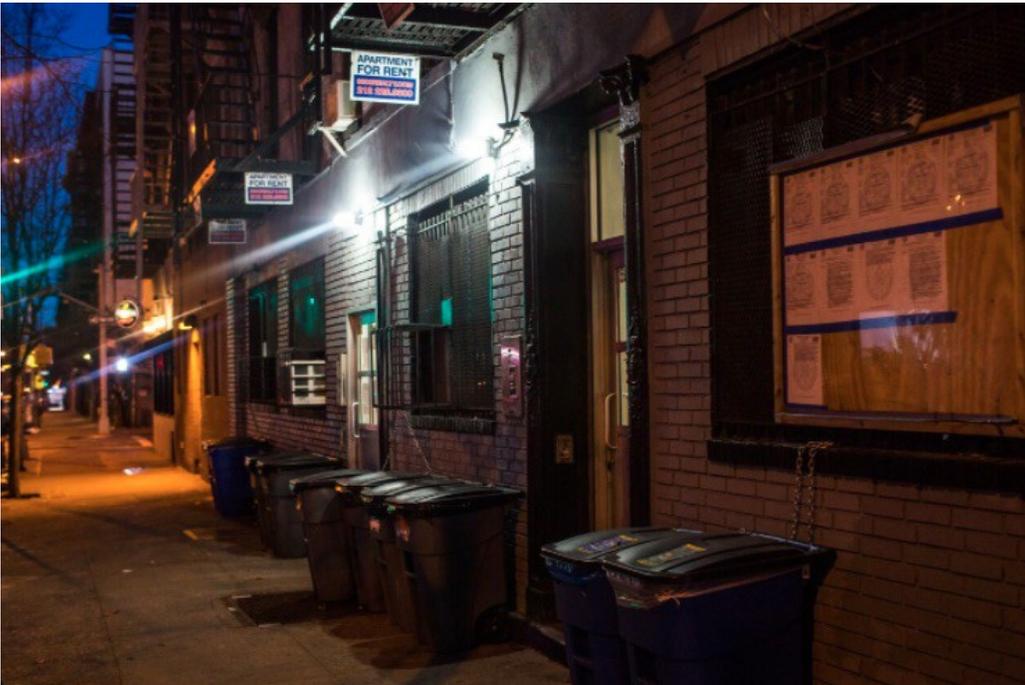
Tenants document the damage to their apartments.

Tenants in the building have endured a pattern similar to those that have Croman facing a [lawsuit from state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman’s office](#) — a combination of aggressive offers to pay them to leave and what Sarah Knispel of [Stand for Tenant Safety](#) calls “construction as harassment,” vacant apartments renovated in a way that leaves the building dirty, dysfunctional, and dangerous enough to make them want to leave.

The twist here is that the work stopped in the fall of 2015 — leaving nine apartments abandoned, with doorknobs removed and windows boarded up or covered with plastic. The remaining residents say the building regularly has intruders, and there have been several thefts and burglaries. In one case, people climbed into an empty apartment at the back of the building and defecated in the bathtub.

“When it rains outside, it rains inside,” Weiben Wang, a librarian who’s lived in the building for 20 years, said at a rally outside the building last week. Earlier, he’d showed cell-phone photos of wet plaster chunks that fell on the stairs during mid-November’s heavy rains.

Tenants announced at the rally that they’ve filed an “HP action” lawsuit in Housing Court to demand repairs and a ban on harassment. The suit also asks the court to order that future construction be done safely, promptly, and with minimum nuisance to tenants, said Urban Justice Center lawyer Sherief Gaber.



159 Stanton Street.

*[Chris Jones](#) for the Voice*

A group of five people tenants identified as Croman employees entered the building a few minutes before the rally and left during it. Asked to respond to the residents’ allegations, they walked away without turning their heads.

“Our good faith efforts are very transparent,” a spokesperson for Croman’s 9300 Realty responded, saying that the company has “on multiple occasions” offered to “immediately address any open issues at the building and in tenants’ apartments.”

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“Management has not been informed of any open repair items in tenant apartments,” she added. “Additionally, past repair issues have been addressed promptly.”

Croman bought the building in 2013 as part of a \$40 million four-property parcel from former Andy Warhol star Baby Jane Holzer, a socialite who married a real-estate heir. ([According to The Real Deal](#), he sued her for extortion while negotiations were underway, charging that she threatened to rent out 18 vacant rent-stabilized apartments if he didn't cough up another \$2.5 million. The sale went through [two months later](#).)



Francis Di Donato and his son, Max Wolf. Donato has lived in the building for 25 years.

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“It used to be a vibrant, lovely Lower East Side building,” says Francis Di Donato, who’s lived there for 25 years and shares the apartment with his 12-year-old son. “Now, it’s half empty.”

Croman’s efforts to drive people out “ramped up very slowly,” says Wang. “People started disappearing.” Wang’s first inkling came when he didn’t receive a routine response to his renewing his lease. Then, when the demolition began in 2015, he “woke up one day to horrendous banging on the wall—so hard my apartment shook.”

Di Donato says that at one point, the cracks in his bedroom wall were so big he could see into the apartment next door. Another time, a sewage pipe leaked into his kitchen, contaminating all the food he had there.

Tenants also began receiving visits from Croman representatives such as Anthony Falconite, the former police officer named in Attorney General Schneiderman’s lawsuit as the landlord’s enforcer. The woman whose ceiling collapsed says she had strangers knocking on her door “before, during, and after” the demolition, offering her \$4,000 to move out.

Rents generally range from \$1,300 to \$1,700 a month, according to tenants.

Wang says that when Falconite “banged on my door” and he said he didn’t want to speak to him, Falconite responded by shouting, “Why are you being so rude to me? Don’t you know drug dealers live downstairs?”

A second woman, who also asked to remain anonymous, says she was offered a “pathetically small” buyout shortly after Croman bought the building. Soon after that, Falconite showed up at her door. He tried to speak to her several more times, she says, with the last visit in October 2015, more than a year after Schneiderman issued Falconite a cease-and-desist order in July 2014.

“I became very nervous about leaving my apartment and possibly running into him in the hall, because he was so intimidating,” she says.

Di Donato says Croman tried to evict him for “not paying rent that I already paid.”

The construction mysteriously stopped around October 2015, tenants say. None know why, but there were rumors that management had said the building was too structurally unsound for it to continue. In October 2015, the city Department of Buildings fined Croman \$8,500 for doing major electrical work in six apartments without a permit. Croman paid \$1,600, according to department records posted online, and was fined another \$1,500 in January 2016 for failing to certify that the “extremely hazardous” violation had been repaired.

That left the vacant apartments half-demolished. Wang says that if you look under their doors, you can see that they have no floor, only bare joists. Early last summer, Di Donato came home to find a gaping hole in his ceiling and debris all over the floor and bed. A burglar had either broken through or fallen through, and stolen \$150 in cash. In August, another burglar took his prize possession, a Gibson semi-hollow electric guitar he’d had for 30 years.

Intruders regularly come in through the open roof door, through unlocked windows accessible from fire escapes, and by “kicking in the front door because the locks are shoddy,” one of the women says.



A doorway to one of the gutted apartments at 159 Stanton Street. Residents say they have been abandoned since the fall of 2015.

*[Chris Jones](#) for the Voice*

The building's situation is "not that unique," State Senator Daniel Squadron said at the rally, as there are plenty of landlords "whose strategy is to drive you out of your homes... in order to make a quick buck."

Croman is the landlord most notorious for "construction as harassment," but others in the East Village and Lower East Side have included [Ben Shaoul](#), [Raphael Toledano](#), [Samy Mahfar](#), and to a lesser extent, [Jared Kushner](#), Donald Trump's son-in-law. Sarah Knispel said it is becoming increasingly common in Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bushwick.

A package of 11 bills intended to stem such practices has been introduced in the City Council. One would require the city Department of Buildings to inspect buildings before allowing construction if they are partially occupied or if the landlord has recently been found

guilty of harassment. Others would increase fines for violations, let the city put liens on buildings whose owners refuse to pay fines, and require owners to create detailed “tenant protection plans” and inform residents about them.

The measures are basically about “enforcing the rules that are already on the books,” says Paul Leonard, chief of staff for City Councilmember Margaret Chin.

Tenants of 159 Stanton say that the conditions have made their homes feel like anything but. “I don’t want to be pushed out of this building,” says Di Donato, but it’s uncomfortable living there while “knowing that things could get worse — and that’s the idea.”