

Life On The Other Side

Living in Tenement Housing

By Sarah

You think your home is too small, always dirty, and smells funny? Well, no one has room to talk until they have lived in tenement housing. What follows is nothing but fact about what it is really like to live in tenement housing.

Picture this, you are a middle aged woman who just moved to America from eastern Europe. You can't speak the language, you're having trouble finding and keeping a job, and the only place to live is in a run down tenement house with your two sister-in-laws and their eight kids. Do you still think your life is tough?

Let us start off first with what tenement housing is exactly. Tenement houses can generally be found in the city slums where old row houses or slave quarters used to be. Tenement housing is created by splitting up existing buildings in order to house more people. These new "tenements" are then rented at a cost to families who need places to live. Rooms are barely ten feet wide and windows are considered rare commodities. Windows that actually let in daylight and have decent views are nonexistent. Still think your house is too small?

The people living in tenement houses today are mostly immigrants and industrial workers. Even though everyone, including the young children, in these families work to bring home money, they still have trouble paying the rent and having money left over for food. To solve this problem, many tenements house not only one family but normally two or three. If the renters do not have family to share the rent with, they will normally take in boarders to help pay the rent.

When talking about multiple families in a tenement we are not talking about little families. The families sharing housing normally consist of at least four if not five or six people each. This makes for a very crowded living space.

In small, dark, crowded places, like tenement houses, it is very easy for disease to spread. Whole families are incapacitated and struck down by diseases such as the measles and smallpox. Poor families can barely afford to pay their rent little own to pay for the service of doctors. These families are forced to take care of each other the best they can.

Not only can families living in tenement houses not afford doctors but because some of them are sick they often have less income and can not afford the food they need to nourish the sick back to health. For this reason, the death rate of both children and adults in the city slums is very high and still growing.

Along with the growing death rate is the growing crime rate. The people in poverty are forced to steal what they need from their neighbors and others. Many people living in tenements do not feel safe and often life is made harder by burglars who decide to steal your children's' last meal.

Sanitation is one of the largest problems in the city slums where tenement housing is common. Almost all of the buildings provide no plumbing for their occupants. Residents are forced to throw their waste into the streets. Imagine wading to work in your next door neighbors dinner remains and the family above you's fecal matter. Not a pretty picture.

One immigrant housekeeper describes a shaft used for disposing of waste: "It's damp down there, and the families, they throw out garbage and dirty papers and the insides of chickens, and other unmentionable filth....I just vomited when I first cleaned up the air shaft." Can you imagine what life was like for the people who lived there?

One of the largest problems in tenement buildings is fires. Because the only way to heat the houses was with coal-burning stoves, these fires are frequent. Accidents happen or flues get clogged and things catch on fire. Since the buildings are made of cheap material and are built so close together, fires pose a great threat. If a fire starts in the middle of a row of buildings it is very easily predicted that

the entire row could be burned down before the fire was put out.

Another issue with the fires was the lives that are taken. The run down tenement buildings do not have adequate ways to exit the buildings. If there is a fire, entire families are left to burn to death. Children in their mother's arms and brothers holding their sisters to trying to ease the pain.

What is the most amazing of all of this is that these so-called houses are a stone-throw from most city halls. A few steps and a whole new world. One reporter from the Chicago Times summed it up entirely "The river stinks. The air stinks. People's clothing, penetrated by the foul atmosphere, stinks. No other word expresses it so well as stink. But cross that line and everything smells like roses." This quote emphasizes the potential of the government to fix up anything it wants to. If it can make building next to the slums smell like roses than why can't it make the tenement house smell like roses. Because they do not want to.

You might be saying to yourself right now, so what if these people have to live like this, its their own fault. To that response ask yourself, what would you do if all of the sudden you had to leave America and all you belongings behind and travel to a new country? Would you be able to speak the language, find a job, live like you do now?