**A Guide to Researching Buildings in New York City**

This is a set of steps you can take to research many of the buildings in New York City on-line. This is not a comprehensive guide and you may know of – or discover – ways to supplement the information you can find by following these steps. For example, there are architectural and other guidebooks that may reveal some of the social and physical histories of particular buildings. Feel free to seek out other sources of information – and to share those sources with the class.

**Step One: Identify a building to research.**

I did a search on the *Curbed* blog (curbed.com) to find a recent development in Bushwick. Several options came up, but I decided on one located at 114 Troutman. This post also linked me to other articles.

<http://ny.curbed.com/archives/2011/06/10/bushwick_artists_haven_unhappy_with_transient_youths.php>

**Step Two: Read whatever information is immediately available and seek clues for further research.**

For 114 Troutman, there were a couple of articles easy to find through the *Curbed* post. The *New York Times* article gave me a sense of the building’s recent history, who its developer is, who lives there, and the cost of rentals as of 2010. The *Curbed* post also led me to some articles about controversies surrounding the building and its tenants.

From there, I also learned that 114 Troutman is now known as Castle Braid (a name borrowed from Betty Smith’s 1943 book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*), and that led me to the development’s own web site, which helps me understand what amenities are available there and how the building is currently marketed.

**Step Three: Go to the ACRIS site (**[**http://a836-acris.nyc.gov/CP/**](http://a836-acris.nyc.gov/CP/)**.)**

ACRIS, an acronym for Automated City Register System, is a tool offered by the NYC Department of Finance. People usually use it to determine ownership of buildings and to look at the history of tax assessments. We are going to use it to fill in an economic and social history of 114 Troutman.

**Step Four: You will need to find the building’s BBL (Borough, Block, Lot), which can be located under “Find Addresses and Parcels” and then “Property Address.”**

I learned that the BBL for 114 Troutman is Brooklyn-03184-0019.

**Step Five: On the BBL page, click on the button, “Document Search by BBL,” which will take you to another search page. Just click “Search” at the bottom of the page to see all the details that are available about this building’s ownership.**

By looking at this ownership history, I’m able to learn several interesting things:

* ACRIS doesn’t record anything before 1972 here, but I can see that the building is owned by the same family from 1972 until 1983.
* If we look at the images of the various transactions, we can also see that the Dolgin family does not live in Bushwick. They live in Great Neck, New York, which is a pretty affluent suburb of the city. Here, we also see that 114 and 116 Troutman are essentially the same property.
* In 1983, ownership of the property is transferred to the Commissioner of Finance of the City of New York. This usually means that the owners of a property have effectively abandoned it by not paying taxes for a long period of time. The city under these circumstances repossesses the building. Buildings like this are known as “in-rem,” a legal designation that means the court has taken control of the property. This happened to a lot of buildings in New York in the 1970s and 1980s. A separate search revealed to me that it happened to several other buildings near 114 Troutman as well.
* Between 1997 and 2006, the property goes through many different owners and it’s not clear what plans may exist for it. Some of the owners seem to be local (that is, in Williamsburg/Bushwick/Bed-Stuy), while others are not (that is, in Manhattan, Staten Island, and South Brooklyn.)
* In 2006, the property is transferred to the Community Development Corporation (http://www.communityp.com.) A quick search of this organization reveals that it is a non-profit that works often with the City of New York to develop affordable housing.
* In 2010, the property is transferred again and fully to Troutman Gardens LLC (and its bank), which has been involved in the property since at least 2005. What does this tell us? A Google search – and adding the name of the developer, Mayer Schwartz – reveals that Troutman Gardens LLC has received tax subsidies and loans from the city and state to build rent-stabilized, rental housing on the site of 114 and 116 Troutman. By 2010, this property is already being developed. Another quick Google search reveals that by 2014, rentals have skyrocketed, which suggests that, despite an intention for rent stabilization, renters may have turned over so quickly that the rentals have exceeded rent-stabilization ceilings and are now going for market rate. Does this seem like “affordable housing” to you?

**Step Six: Go to the Department of Finance web site (**[**http://www1.nyc.gov/site/finance/index.page**](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/finance/index.page)**), scroll down to “Valuing Your Property” and click. From there, go to “Data and Lot Information” and then “Bills, Notices, and Assessments by BBL.”**

Through this tool, I can trace the valuation of this property over time. I can also compare the rate at which the city assessed the property was assessed for tax purposes to the market rate. As you’ll note, these two values rarely match. You’ll also notice that Castle Braid LLC continues to receive a lot of tax exemptions from the city and state.

**Step Seven: Go to the Department of Records site to see what the building looked like in 1980.**

[**http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet**](http://nycma.lunaimaging.com/luna/servlet)

Here, you can see that the building appears to be boarded up and possibly abandoned. It’s obviously an industrial building surrounded by others similar to it. Remember: the city took ownership of 114 Troutman only a few years later.

**Step Eight: Look up the address in the *New York Times Historical Index* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on-line to see if you can find any other information. (See separate sheet for links to these sources.)**

The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* revealed to me that our building used to house a factory called Arbuck that produced furniture and upholstery. Many of the 1950s most popular designers worked with Arbuck and their furniture is now considered collectible.

**Step Nine: Finally, you can refer to a few different census sources to learn more about the neighborhood surrounding your building. The American Community Survey (**[**http://www.census.gov/acs/www/**](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/)**) will give you more recent data, but you will need to find the census tract in which your building is located first (http://maps.nyc.gov/census/). The full 1940 census is also searchable on-line (**[**http://1940census.archives.gov**](http://1940census.archives.gov)**), as is every decennial census prior to it.**

The census tract for 114 Troutman is Kings County 423. Armed with this information, I was able to search the ACS housing data, data on ethnicity and race, as well as information on occupations for the year 2013. I learned that most of the buildings in my census tract were built before 1939, but that the next “housing construction boom” started to occur between 2000 and 2009, which is around when 114 Troutman was developed. I also learned that the majority of people living in this census tract are Hispanic or Latino.

When you look at the NYC.gov Census Fact Finder, you can also look at demographic change. For this census tract, the number of white non-hispanic residents increased about 582% between 2000 and 2010.