

SPRING PRINT EDITION 2021

# Rat-Borne Bacteria and other Amenities in Ved Parkash's Buildings

*“He should live in one of his apartments for a year.  
He really should. Him or his family.”*

by EILEEN MARKEY

April 28, 2021



**Mold grew dark on the bedroom walls at Tiebout Avenue, fed by faulty plumbing and a leaky roof.**



Ved Parkash, once known as New York City's worst landlord, a Bronx emperor of evictions who forced out more apartment dwellers in 2019 than any other city property owner, and whose tenants in one building got sick from rat-borne bacteria — one died — is at it again. With Covid-19 and its economic fallout still hammering the Bronx, Parkash is moving to oust more than 10% of his tenants — some 600 families — while at the same time begging for property-tax relief on buildings where families went without heat this winter. Even as the state grapples to ameliorate a Covid-induced real estate crisis, Parkash's record illustrates that the problems facing poor tenants long predate the pandemic, and will shape whatever version of the city emerges from it.

Ana Javier keeps her apartment immaculate. Her one-bedroom a block south of Fordham Road exudes the aggressive cleanliness of a Dominican grandmother's home: silk flowers on the polished table, a dark-wood sofa set whose spotlessness suggests it is reserved for very important occasions, diaphanous curtains that keep out the sidewalk. The floors are what you notice first though: light-blond laminate made in imitation of the hardwood flooring that once ran through this six-story 1941 building, where the high ceilings and muralled lobby hint at former grandeur. The murals depict Peter Minuit laying claim to Manhattan Island, NYC's first real estate transaction—in which someone got screwed. The building on Tiebout Avenue is not a glamorous address these days, but Javier and her neighbors are living their lives. She paid \$1,000 for the new floors to replace the boards ruined last year when a pipe burst, spewing filthy water two inches deep throughout her apartment. The senior

---

---

citizen clutches her shawl around her housedress as she leans over to point to the tops of the baseboards, where the slosh of water reached. She submitted the receipts to the landlord, but Parkash has ignored them.

“I just want him to come and fix the stuff he’s supposed to fix and then leave me alone,” she says. This winter the problem was heat. For 10 days in February there was none in the building. “We were shivering. I’m still shivering,” she says. “I called the landlord crying. I called him directly, but he did nothing.”

In 2016, Parkash topped a list the city public advocate compiles to try to shame the landlords with egregious housing-code violations into making repairs; it’s modeled on the “10 Worst Landlords” articles Village Voice muckraker Jack Newfield pioneered in the 1960s. Parkash made enough repairs to get off the list, but his portfolio still has scores of serious violations, from lead paint to mold, broken doors, roach and rodent infestations, busted window guards, and holes in the walls. In 2019 he evicted 158 families across his 71-building portfolio, more people than any other property owner in the city, according to records analyzed by the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition and data collective JustFix.nyc. Because of state and federal Covid-19 protections, no one has been evicted from a Parkash building—or any other—since March 2020.

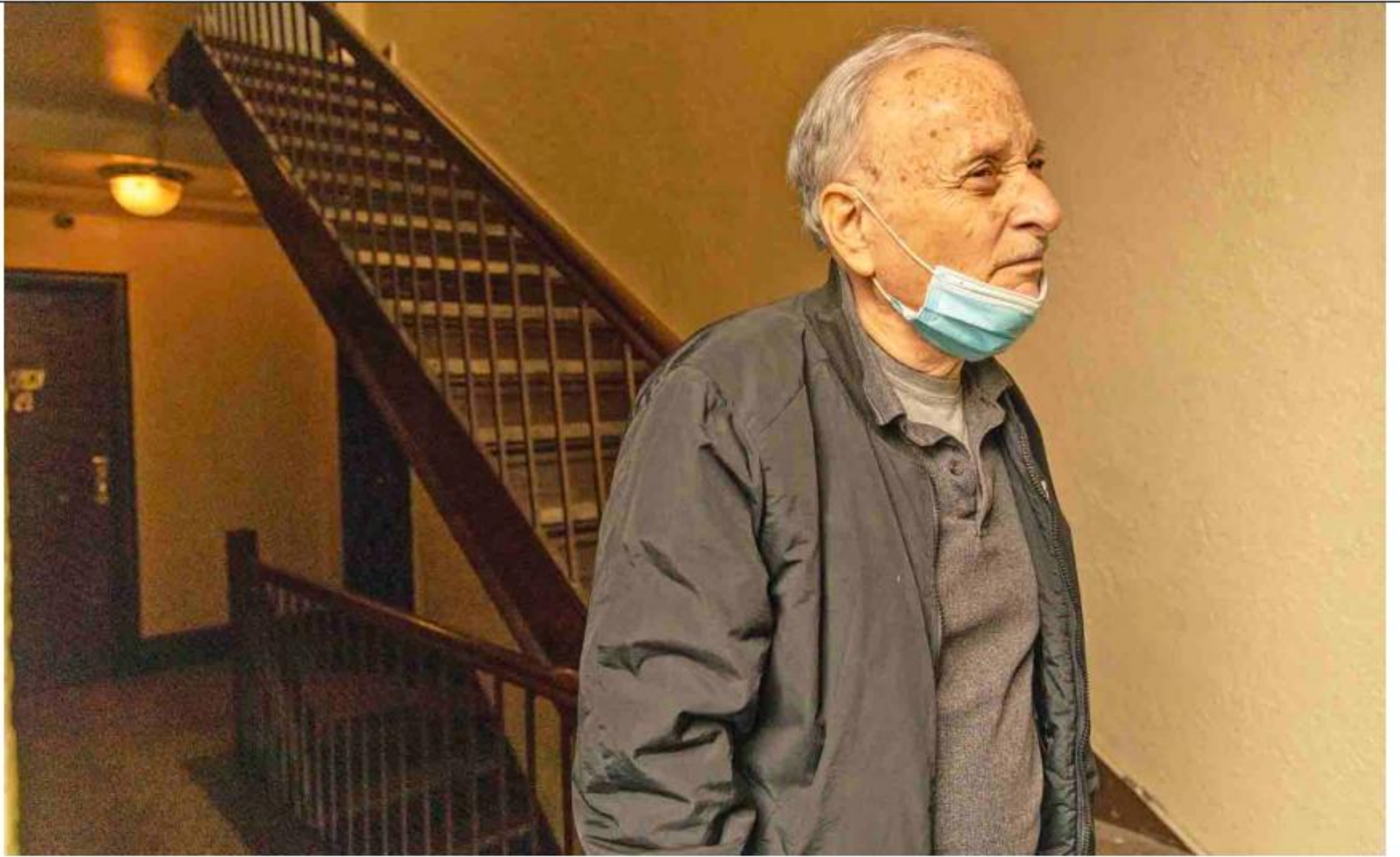
But in August, landlords were cleared to bring new cases against tenants who fell behind on rent in 2020, and to petition to resume eviction cases started before the pandemic. Parkash filed 300 petitions in housing court between August and November and another 350 since, 5% of all Bronx cases, according to court records.

Actual evictions — the city marshal carting tenant's stuff onto the sidewalk — have been suspended, but the legal steps leading up to that scenario are moving forward.

Many tenants leave when they get an eviction notice, or sign agreements to pay back rent that they'll never be able to honor, unaware that in certain NYC zip codes they have the right to a free lawyer. Parkash has more than 100 appearances on the court calendar set for March, April, and May. A third of those tenants are not represented by counsel.

“He’s just lining them up for when the moratorium lifts,” says Caroline Kirk, a data analyst at University Neighborhood Housing Program (UNHP), a nonprofit in the Northwest Bronx that conducts research on affordable housing.





**Jaime Steinberg: In it for the long haul.**

At the same time, Parkash is seeking relief from city taxes. On October 9, he filed 53 motions against the city Tax Commission, arguing that his Bronx portfolio is worth less than it was assessed for. Forty-seven of these buildings were without heat and hot water for stretches this winter — the same buildings where he has begun eviction proceedings against hundreds of tenants. “The guy’s a multimillionaire, why does he need a tax break?” asks Yoselyn Gomez, one of Parkash’s tenants.

“We have complied with all local, state, and federal eviction regulations and housing laws throughout the pandemic,” Anurag Parkash, manager at Parkash Management, and Ved’s son, said in a written statement. “The housing court, not Parkash Management, is slowly restoring cases to the calendar — especially pre-pandemic cases and particularly those where a judgment had been entered.”

But Parkash’s history demonstrates that he makes aggressive use of housing court. “There’s enough reporting on and past organizing in Parkash’s portfolio to know that evictions and minimal building reinvestment have been key parts of his business plan,” says Jacob Udell, research director at UNHP. The state budget adopted on April 7 provides significant aid to tenants who owe back rent; New York tenants owe a total of \$1 billion. But beyond avoiding evictions, it’s critical that state and city leaders ensure that landlords who get that rent actually take care of their buildings, Udell explains.

Parkash denies that eviction is part of the company's business strategy, or that he turns to it easily. Anurag Parkash said in the written statement, "Empty apartments, just as failure to pay rent, have a negative impact on all tenants and the building itself, which is why our efforts, first and foremost, are geared toward compassion and flexibility — working with financially struggling tenants, giving them time to pay, within reason of course." He argued that some tenants took advantage of Covid protections, "despite having the financial wherewithal to pay rent."

This past winter, what many Parkash tenants were struggling with was cold. There was no heat or hot water at 825 Gerard Avenue for 15 days in February. At 125 Mt. Hope Place, tenants had no heat or hot water for 19 days in December, including Christmas Day, or for 11 days in February. Another Parkash building, 2842 Grand Concourse, was without heat or hot water for 13 days in January and for 8 days in February. A few blocks south, at 2625 Grand Concourse, the tenants had no heat or hot water for 16 days in January or for all but four days of February.

In a portfolio of old buildings — most of them built before 1940 — maintenance is a constant process, Parkash has said. In the written statement, Anurag Parkash said, "We maintain heat and hot water at the lawfully required temperatures, but when a problem arises in our aging buildings, we work with the appropriate city agencies to efficiently, effectively, and lawfully remedy heating and hot water, as well as lead paint and other complaints or problems when they are brought to our attention."



Another tenant, Ms. Clare, smiles ironically when asked about life at 3873 Orloff Avenue. She doesn't give her first name because she's a survivor of domestic abuse and doesn't want her former partner to find her, but she has plenty to say about the building. Persistent mold in her poorly ventilated bathroom made her asthmatic daughter sick. She had to take Parkash to court before he would make repairs. This winter there were 46 days without heat. She's grown accustomed to turning on her kitchen faucet and having nothing happen. "They are always claiming that the boiler is broken so they have to shut off the water to fix it. How many times do you have to fix it?" she asks, cocking her head. "I just think they shut it off in daytime so they save in heat and hot water." The front doors are always broken, Clare says. Anyone can walk into the building. When it rains, the lobby floods. In the summer, the apartments are full of flies, coming in through the plumbing, she suspects. "He should live in one of his apartments for a year. He really should. Him or his family," she says, amused at the idea. "The tenants are afraid, but they don't know their legal rights."

In 2016, residents at 750 Grand Concourse — where the rat-borne infection sickened people and killed one—gathered tenants from other Parkash buildings to file lawsuits forcing repairs. The Parkash Tenants Association got lots of media coverage, and met with then Public Advocate Letitia James; things got better at 750 Grand Concourse and they won rent freezes, says resident Gomez. But in other buildings, conditions remained poor and it took years to get repairs.

Eighty-two-year-old Bolivian immigrant Jaime Steinberg battled Parkash — and mold — for five years. He helped start a tenants' association in his building on Tiebout Avenue, and worked with organizers from the Northwest Bronx Community & Clergy Coalition and Community Action for Safe Apartments, which works primarily in the Southwest Bronx, while Gomez was organizing her neighbors on the Grand Concourse. But over the years tenants moved out, and others lost heart. “One thing that I noticed since I come here to this country, the American people are very quiet. They accept it. If they raise the rent, if they raise the subway cost, they don't complain. Maybe they complain for one week and then they forget it. But people need to wake up,” Steinberg says, his emphatic pronunciation equal parts Yiddish and Spanish.

Mold grew dark on the bedroom walls in Steinberg's apartment, fed by faulty plumbing and a leaky roof. Parkash made repairs again and again, but they never got to the root of the problem. Steinberg thinks the shoddy repairs were harassment for his organizing work. “Every time they came to fix something, they made it worse. They wanted me out,” he says. (Parkash denies this.) Many nights the smell of the mold, and of something fetid and nasty in the broken radiators, was so intense it drove the old man from his apartment. “You can't sleep with this, the smell. There were nights, so many nights, I slept on the stairs because the smell was so bad,” he says, waving a hand at the staircase leading to the roof. Steinberg sued Parkash, and at the end of March reached a settlement in which the landlord will pay Steinberg a sum and ensure that the apartment is in good condition for a year. (The settlement is not an admission of harassment.) Steinberg says, “This has always been the state of the world:

the greed and power. These two things dominate the world. I didn't go to university, but I learned some things in this life." It only takes a minute standing in his bedroom to smell the mold. He sleeps in his living room now.





Michelle Lopez looks like a sentry in the vestibule on Tiebout—the buzzer doesn't work, so she's waiting for her Amazon package, greeting neighbors with "Love, how's your mother?" as they come and go. She's lived in the building for 20 years, raised her sons here, and remembers when the lobby used to be decorated beautifully for Christmas, and when the super made real repairs. "We as a community have to stick together and make things work better, but ourselves, we can only do so much," she says.

Lopez believes the two weeks without heat in February were the result of slapdash repairs. "He hired Mickey Mouse boiler repair people because he don't want to pay," she scoffs. "That's why we were weeks without hot water. We slept with jackets and extra blankets." Her son, a sweet-faced young man in his early 20s, moved to upper Manhattan a few years ago. When there was no hot water, she went there to shower. On this day, he's stopped by the building to check on her. "She's my princess. Always," he says. Many people have moved away. "A lot of these people moved out because they couldn't take the negligence," Lopez says. "I would love to move, but everywhere else is expensive and I can't afford it. Everywhere you go these landlords want to take advantage of you."

---

Since January, the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development has filed five lawsuits against Parkash. At 58 East 190 Street, HPD has been trying since 2019 to get him to follow the lead-paint law. A city lawyer argued that Parkash should pay \$60,000 in fines—and prove he's gotten rid of the lead paint. That case will be back before a judge on May 6. At 835 Walton Avenue, not far from Yankee Stadium, HPD is invoking a \$1000-a-day fine against Parkash for failing to provide heat and hot water. HPD records show that tenants complained about heat on seven days each in December, January, and February. A ceiling collapsed on the sixth floor in December, and HPD issued violations for roach and rodent infestations in multiple apartments. After receiving dozens of 311 complaints from 3873 Orloff Avenue—where Clare lives—the city sued Parkash in March, seeking an order “to provide legally adequate heat and hot water to the premises.”

Parkash owns 4,643 apartments. Most of the tenants don't know each other. Even within buildings, engaged tenants like Lopez, who've watched families grow up and know people's names, are now a rarity. They work too many hours to chat in the hall. And since Covid, you barely see other residents.

But some still have Yoselyn Gomez's number from when tenants fought back in 2016. This past fall, she started getting calls and texts from people on Gerald Avenue, and from the building on Walton. When tenants got eviction notices, they dialed her number. In early March, more than 40 tenants from several buildings met to develop a plan. It's the sort of activism that's happened for generations in the Bronx, from rent strikes organized by leftist Jews in support of Black neighbors in Bronx Park East during the Depression to strategy sessions in Catholic parish halls in Hunts Point in the 1970s and 80s, as fire engines wailed, where people parsed banking regulations and eventually got laws written against redlining.

They are usually meetings led by women—pushy, demanding, working-class women who aren't expecting luxury, but know they deserve better than this. Instead of a lobby or a church basement, the March meeting took place over Zoom. “Someone has to stop him. Someone has to stand up,” Gomez says. She moved to the Bronx a decade ago, after getting pushed out when Harlem gentrified. Rent on the Grand Concourse ate up \$1,600 of the \$2,000 she made each month as a customer service worker at a Lowes in Brooklyn, a job she no longer has. “I'm behind on rent. I know I'm on the [eviction] list,” she says. “Where else am I supposed to go? We have nowhere else.” She's not scared though, she says. “I'm ready.” ❖