



WRITING THE CITY

Rape New York by Jana Leo

by YAEL FRIEDMAN
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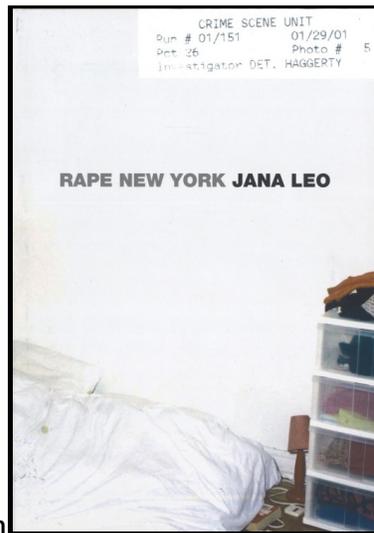
Ten years ago, Jana Leo was raped in her Harlem apartment. Upon the release of her book about the attack, *Rape New York*, Leo spoke with Yael Friedman about how the experience changed her view of both the physical city and its bureaucracies, and describes her efforts to study neglected spaces and to address systemic gaps in urban areas in transition. Leo, in her book and through her subsequent research and advocacy work, explores how the circumstances surrounding her assault fit within a complex system of strategic property neglect, criminal justice procedure and shifting neighborhood dynamics. –V.S.



Pictures of Leo before and after her rape. A document of the difference in her face. Courtesy of Jana Leo.

Neither manifesto nor memoir, Jana Leo's new book, *Rape New York* is, rather, a coolly indignant, highly intelligent appraisal of the state of New York's often predatory real estate reality. The slim volume can serve as a veritable tract on property speculation, urban poverty, and the opacity of the system to the untrained eye. It is also an investigation into the very nature of home and property and the values attached to both, especially in New York.

Through her very painful personal experience of being raped in her Harlem apartment, Jana Leo traces the conditions that led to her assault, always stepping back and extrapolating from the personal to the general and systemic. Recently, Leo, a conceptual artist and architect, gave a reading at the Greenlight Bookstore in Fort Greene, and sat down for a conversation about it with SUPERFRONT'S MITCH MCEWEN. While the audience was composed almost completely of young keen feminists, it would be a serious opportunity squandered to relegate Leo's text exclusively to the realm of gender studies.



Rather than completely severing her connection to the city, Leo's experience instead brought her into a different relationship with it, with fresh insights into what she had not been able to perceive as well before. Towards the end of her book she writes, "It is not the events but the people that still make New York interesting to me. ... These people, in this New York, create a system of chance in which one finds what one needs when looking for something else. I cannot see the city that I saw when I first came. From the top of the Empire State Building, New York appears seductively manageable, like a toy city. But at ground level the reality is different."

Even prior to her ordeal, Leo, and her boyfriend, referred to as "A" in the book, never took their surroundings and their new city for granted. The two, originally from Madrid, had just finished graduate studies in architecture in Princeton, and moved to New York to continue their studies, to teach and to practice. In explaining how she and A decided on Harlem as their new home, Leo describes their approach and their choices — they had first looked at Greenpoint and Williamsburg, two affordable areas preferred by Spaniards, but to Leo, "the buildings emulated American suburbia; but they were also bathed in nostalgia for another place: a Europe that no longer exists. Harlem, on the other hand, felt part of New York City. ... Unlike Greenpoint, which resembled a work camp for immigrants, Harlem still revealed the power it had to produce culture from displacement."

Leo and her boyfriend had a running dialogue about their respective research — A's investigation into prison systems, Leo's work on domestic space and the urban fabric — and applied it to their new surroundings, discussing real estate, crime and the architect's mission in the city.

While highly aware of their own economic limitations and those of their new neighborhood, the two still had a steep learning curve in the realities of neglected and crime ridden pockets of undesirable neighborhoods, the callousness of big city landlords, and the near-byzantine rules and remedies of the City's Department of Housing Preservation & Development and, ultimately, of the City's criminal justice system. After numerous complaints to the landlord about fixing the locks to the front and roof doors (unaware that in New York landlords are also legally bound to ensure that all doors in a building, including individual apartment doors, must have working self-closing locks; her door did not), Leo was raped in her own apartment, followed into the building by her attacker, a homeless man who lived on the roof.



Five Reports: the codified phrases and bureaucratic procedures of rape | Courtesy of Jana Leo (click to enlarge)

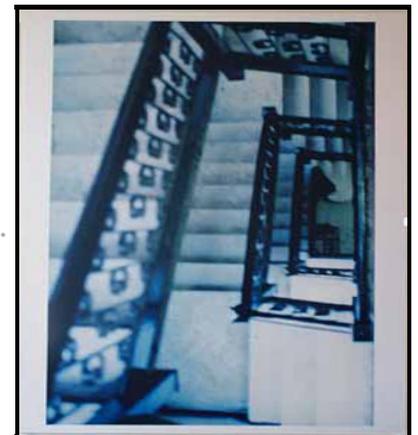
In the book, moving from the individual to the systemic, Leo describes the cynical exploitation of crime by property developers, in the worst cases pushing crime into specific buildings targeted for speculation. Another crude reality she learned is that brokers profit greatly by high turnover — new tenants bring new brokers' fees and higher rents, and so there is little incentive to invest in a more habitable living environment where someone might want to stay for too long. As Leo observes, "If a third of the tenants in a thirty apartment building moved annually, income doubled, yielding up to an extra one hundred thousand dollars. Eventually the building would fall completely vacant, and was no longer subject to rent stabilization laws. It would then be demolished or converted into luxury housing." After her rape, Leo traced the rental history of her own apartment and building, which almost seemed a blueprint for these types of machinations.

The circumstances of Leo's rape immediately immersed her in the actual reality of all the conversations she and A had been having since arriving in New York. Now, along with walking through the city with a new, keen awareness of the gaping holes in its urban fabric, she was similarly acutely aware of the flaws in the administration and legislation of housing laws and practices in New York. Leo learned how to navigate the various channels in the city through which one can hold landlords accountable, bring criminals to justice, and ensure that various buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods receive the type of civic attention they often desperately need.

Leo ultimately brought a civil suit against her landlord, and her rapist (who, by law, according to Article 16, must be included in such an action for Improper Security). She notes that "the very existence of an article that legally regulates the relations and financial liabilities between the landlord or owner and a rapist gives a clue of how many rapes happen in apartments and inside buildings."

After enough time had passed and Leo gained a more distant perspective, she began projects to address the gaps she perceived in the interweaving systems that "colluded" to create these types of situations. Through the appropriately named Civic Gaps, a small think tank, Leo sought to advocate for the creation of a city agency that addresses areas in transition, those communities in the process of rapid demographic shifts and piecemeal economic development. Transition periods during gentrification have been widely studied and commented on and yet, according to Leo, there are no actual major projects to address them concretely. Along with Civic Gaps, Leo has also created the FUNDACIÓN MOSIS, back in Madrid. The Foundation takes an even broader approach and engages with the connection of art to cities.

Leo still has great attachment to New York, despite her experience, but she acknowledges that it has radically changed how she sees the physical city. "Now it is like I am experiencing the city from the inside out," she told me in a recent interview, "almost from inside my body out, I only see interstitial space. It's funny, when you are an architect you do basic studies, figure/ground – what do you recognize, do you recognize something on top of the table or do you recognize the table. In the city do you recognize the buildings or do you recognize the grid? Suddenly I was in the grid, seeing what is connecting things, seeing a different city."



Interstitial Space | A photo taken by Jana Leo of her staircase the day after her rape. "My perception of the space has changed. This familiar place has been made into something scary." Courtesy of Jana Leo.

Yael Friedman writes about art and culture, and often about sports. She lives in Brooklyn and grew up in Tel Aviv and Rockaway (Bauhaus heaven and unapologetically homey beach town, respectively). You can check out more of her stuff at IDA POST.

The views expressed here are those of the author only and do not reflect the position of Urban Omnibus editorial staff or the Architectural League of New York.

