

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH SHAKEDOWN STREET



"Sex and the City" stopped shooting in 2003, but for the residents of Perry Street between Bleecker and West Fourth the show hasn't gone away. Twice a day (three times on weekends), around fifty tourists, the majority of them women and about half of them foreign, stream down the block and form a line across the street from No. 66: Carrie's house. (Although Carrie Bradshaw, the character played by Sarah Jessica Parker, was said to live on East Seventy-third Street, her comings and goings were actually filmed on Perry.) The tourists take turns sitting on the stoop and posing for pictures, and after twenty minutes or so they return to a bus on Hudson, near the Magnolia Bakery, eager to move along to Hotel Venus, the next stop on what's known as the "Sex and the City" Tour. They pay thirty-seven dollars for the privilege.

The tour has been operating for almost four years, but recently, in the absence of any new episodes, its popularity has surged, to the point where a thousand camera-wielding strangers now visit the block each week. Try as they may to be unobtrusive (and the tour guides have established some ground rules about keeping in a single file and whispering), the sightseers can't help but disturb the neighbors, some of whom like to sit on their own stoops and read the newspaper.

"We keep hoping they'll get bored and go away, but they don't," Betty

Rinckwitz, the president of the Perry Street Block Association, said the other day. "So, since they didn't, we called them up and said, 'Come on, you're a real pest.'"

Greenwich Village residents, who tend to like everything just so, have long been familiar with the inconveniences brought on by movie and TV crews, and also with the effectiveness of a little petulance in extracting a "contribution" to the cause of neighborhood beautification. You take a bad situation, add a few hundred dollars, and make it good—call it the Village shakedown.

So Gerald Banu, the vice-president and treasurer of the Perry Street association, met earlier this month with Georgette Blau, the head of the tour company, to talk philanthropy. Banu was aware, for instance, that a disruptive presence on nearby Charles Street—MTV's filming of "Making the Band 2," during which a dog fell to its death—had been mitigated by "a very nice donation," as he put it, which made possible the installation of a retro Bishop's Crook lamppost in place of the standard cobrahead. Perry Street, meanwhile, was still stuck with cobraheads, and, as a matter of fact, there's one right in front of No. 66. Just think how much nicer all those photos would look with an elegant lamp in the foreground.

"I told them, 'You know, just saying you're sorry is not enough for people,'" Banu said last week. "They've got to see something tangible.' And I was very pleased when all of a sudden we got this major donation."

In a letter addressed to the block association the day after the meeting, Blau wrote proudly of the "15+ jobs" that the "Sex and the City" Tour had created, before announcing, "We have agreed to pay \$1,000/month to the Perry Street Block Association." The letter came with a check for five thousand dollars—"a lump sum to expedite the purchase of a new street lamp"—and another for nine hundred dollars, to be put toward the block's annual fall bulb planting.

"We sort of politely ask them for it," Rinckwitz explained. "And Gerry Banu is six feet six, so when he politely asks you, you listen. My husband calls it extortion."

Blau, for her part, seemed genuinely

contrite. "I felt horrible, because it's a very quiet street," she said. "Of course, you know Carrie doesn't live there, really. There are actually real people living there." (True enough. The owner of 66 Perry has called Blau on a number of occasions to complain personally—for example, about the time some tourists sat on her fence and broke it.)

In the grand context of neighborhood rackets, the Perry Street settlement may not amount to much, but in local terms it's a coup. Marilyn Dorato, the head of the Greenwich Village Block Association, an umbrella organization overseeing dozens of smaller community groups, maintains a Film Shoots Report Card, cataloguing the neighborhood impact—



Perry Street

and relative generosity—of various production companies. Big studios, she says, can typically be counted on for a onetime donation of perhaps two thousand dollars, while independent houses offer substantially less. MTV, after the Charles Street incident, gave thirty-five hundred. ("Law and Order," she says, is the worst: "They are frequent, persistent, obnoxious, and cheap.")

"I'm sort of curious why only Perry Street is benefitting," Dorato said. "I'm going to ask Gerry about that, because the tour affects West Eleventh Street, too—the exhaust from the buses is bad for our children."

Last Tuesday afternoon, as a larger-

than-usual tour group swarmed Perry Street, a couple of locals standing in front of a barbershop eyed the intruders with some weariness.

“It’s a pain in the ass,” one said.

“She actually lives right around the corner, you know,” the other said, referring to Sarah Jessica Parker, who has a town house on Charles Street. “Maybe we should tell them.”

“I’ve tried—they just laugh. They think I’m kidding.”

—*Ben McGrath*