

REAL ESTATE

## A Kinship With Westbeth

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### What I Love

By DAN SHAW

Decades before the elevated train tracks on the Lower West Side of Manhattan were transformed into a global tourist attraction called the High Line, they were Gwynne Duncan's playground.

As children growing up in the 1970s in Westbeth — the former Bell Telephone Laboratories complex, bounded by Bank, Bethune, Washington and West Streets, that was turned into 383 units of loft-style affordable housing and studio space for artists by the architect Richard Meier — young Gwynne and her friends would trespass and explore the abandoned railroad bed overgrown with weeds.

“The tracks used to extend right through the building, and we would shinny down a rope ladder from a fourth-floor apartment,” Ms. Duncan, 45, recalled the other day, sitting in the sunny living room of her third-floor Westbeth duplex, which doubles as her painting studio. “We also used to sneak up to the old, elevated West Side Highway to ride our bikes and roller-skate.”

When Westbeth opened, with much fanfare, in 1970, Ms. Duncan's parents moved in from a public housing complex at Ninth Avenue and 16th Street. One of their new ninth-floor neighbors was the photographer Diane Arbus, who committed suicide down the hall in 1971. “The building was full of young families then,” Ms. Duncan said. “The hallways were amok with children playing. Few people ever leave, so now we are the young people. There are several second-generation Westbethians. We have a mothers' group that meets once a month.”

Westbeth was the first subsidized artists' housing complex of its type in the United States, and it was hailed by the Times critic Ada Louise Huxtable. “Mr. Meier's

architectural solution is exemplary,” she wrote in 1970, explaining that the architect thought of “Westbeth as a kind of Corbusian *unité d’habitation*, or least a step toward it.” Today, Westbeth has the vibe of a dormitory at a progressive college where no one ever graduates.

When Ms. Duncan’s parents split up in the mid-1970s, her father, the artist Tom Duncan (who will have a show of his Joseph Cornell-style box art this spring at Chelsea’s Andrew Edlin Gallery), moved to Thompson Street, but he eventually returned to Westbeth and now lives on the 10th floor. Ms. Duncan stayed with her mother, the writer Erika Duncan, and sisters, who were able to take over the lease when their mother moved to Long Island, where she founded the Herstory Writers Workshop, which teaches women who have experienced personal or political traumas how to tell their stories.

In the mid-1990s, Ms. Duncan and her boyfriend (now husband) Alec Stephen decided they needed to create their own life as a couple, so they moved to Brooklyn. It was the right and the wrong choice. “We loved Brooklyn,” she said, “but I knew someday I wanted to get back to Westbeth, so I immediately put my name on the waiting list. We waited 14 years, and I finally got home.”

During her Brooklyn sojourn, Ms. Duncan curated grassroots art shows and worked on her own paintings. She was commissioned in 1998 to paint a mural for the Clinton/Washington Avenues station of the G line, which was supposed to be temporary but remains on view today. “Amazingly, it’s never been vandalized!” she said.

The 12-foot-long painting depicts riders on a 1945 subway car with ceiling fans and woven seats. She got input on the details from her father and husband, who are both old-train fanatics; in fact, Mr. Stephen has model trains set up in the dining area next to their open kitchen. His guitars and amplifiers are scattered around the apartment like objets d’art.

Ms. Duncan explains that they were lucky to get one of the coveted duplex units, which allows their 7-year-old daughter, Mimi, to have her own lower-level bedroom. A steep, brutalist staircase leads upstairs and directly into the open area in the middle of the apartment where the parents sleep. “We could have made the living room the bedroom so we’d have privacy, but I thought the best space in the apartment should be where there’s natural light and I can paint.”

But in fact there is too much sunshine, so it’s not ideal for painting. “I am on the waiting list for studio space here,” Ms. Duncan says, as her daughter arrives home from

Public School 3 on Hudson Street. “All my friends growing up went to P.S. 3,” she adds, then explains that her own mother sent her to private grade school because she’d had an unhappy experience herself as a public-school student in Queens. She went to public Music & Art High in Harlem, which moved to Lincoln Center her junior year and was renamed LaGuardia High School. She then got a scholarship to attend Bard College in upstate New York, where she majored in painting.

One of the fringe benefits of living in Westbeth is that it has a 2,900-square-foot community gallery, where Ms. Duncan is curating a group show scheduled for April called “Witness: The Cedar Tavern Phone Booth Show” that will pay homage to the bygone artists’ bar on University Place.

Being an old-timer in the neighborhood proved useful during Hurricane Sandy, when Westbeth lost heat, water and electricity. “My daughter has tropical fish that can’t survive in cold water,” Ms. Duncan said. “I went to longtime local businesses that know me, like Tortilla Flats, Imperial liquors and the Bus Stop Café, and they gave me bottles of hot water for the tank, and all the fish survived.”

Although having the security of affordable rent allows her to paint and her husband to pursue his music (he was in an indie band called Railroad Jerk from 1992 to 1999 and now plays with the Clay Dots), they have day jobs, too. They run a small business called Floor Plans NY that does architectural renderings. “Most of our clients are in Brooklyn,” she said, “so now we do the reverse commute.”

While she laments that her childhood neighborhood has been overtaken by glass-tower condominiums, hordes of tourists and restaurants she cannot afford, she also appreciates how much safer it is. “We were not allowed to go to the piers as children. There was arson, prostitutes, the works. It was pretty terrifying,” she recalled, conceding that gentrification has its benefits. “We love Hudson River Park and the bike path. I still think this is the best place to live in New York.”

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