



★ 833 Amsterdam Ave,
hamilton heights, Manhattan

Inside the Tenenbaum House

by Adam Baer

Just east of Amsterdam Avenue, in a section of Harlem called Hamilton Heights, I went a little too far with my latest filmic obsession. I had spent my first week in a new and barren uptown apartment with the DVD of Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*. Holed up with my TV and books, I sang along with the quirky soundtrack songs (Nico, The Clash, Paul Simon) and listened carefully to the director's commentary, amazed at his penchant for detail. I gelled with his cast of endearingly gloomy has-beens, characters who just didn't feel comfortable outside the house—and family—they called home.

I couldn't help myself. The film's unflinching weirdness, melancholic narrative fog, and tales of co-dependence were good companions for someone who'd just quit his first post-college job and moved back to his childhood city only to find himself feeling dislocated in a foreign section of it—someone who just felt a little off.

Which is why I wasn't surprised when, out of Saturday morning boredom, I found myself driving downtown from my new





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neighborhood. I began to think maybe I could find the Tenenbaum house; the actual home used in the film.

I then remembered Anderson said the place was somewhere in Harlem. And here I was—on Broadway with a view of the Hudson to my right and blocks of tree-lined streets to my left. I remembered that City College was somewhere around here. Maybe some nice brownstones were in the vicinity. The rooftop views of the river definitely came left from the position of my old hood ornament. And the streets were flat and green, not like the slopes west of Broadway. It had to be east.

“Between here and here!” I said with karate-chop hand gestures to my friend Lina, who looked suddenly frightened of my passion.

I then made a left into the City College area and met my Manhattan real estate oasis: one gorgeous stone home after the other, replete with Gothic architectural embellishments, gardens, and a feeling of solidity that made similar houses on the Upper West Side seem like garden sheds. From the look of it on film, the Tenenbaum house was a home I could live in, attractive narrative symbolism and kitsch factor aside. The conical turrets, circular rooms, dark red blocks, and black-iron gate gave it the majesty of a fortress. Here was a place that could protect you.

The only problem, I figured, was that I’d likely never find it. There had to be thousands of these houses in Manhattan. What really were the chances I’d make a random turn onto the right block?

Rolling down the street at no more than five miles an hour, I pointed to a building.

“That’s it,” I told Lina.

Look at the short half-block behind it. Picture the trees bare, the street empty. Ben Stiller tapping his chin as he peers down from a third-floor window. Owen Wilson crashing into the front gate in a vintage convertible. Luke letting his falcon free from the elaborately tiled roof. Hackman hiding behind the huge built-in staircase, ready to inspire his grandkids with a throw-back line: “I’m not talkin’ about...dance lessons. I’m talkin’



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about...puttin' a brick through the other guy's windshield; I'm talkin' about...taking it out and choppin' it up."

We parked and walked toward the house. I noticed the windows outlined in blue tape, that the doors were new but designed to look antique. The front yard had been gutted of foliage. On the side of the house sat a few planks of wood and a construction hat. And affixed to the windows were documents stating that the city had allowed a two-family conversion following a renovation.

I walked up the stoop and peeked through the mail slot to find a familiar wood-paneled foyer.

"Put your hand in there and see if you can unlock the door," I told Lina.

She gave me an odd look—since when was I this dictatorial?—but bent down and slid her hand through the metal all the same.

"There's something blocking the lock," she said.

We descended to the sidewalk in defeat.

Then I saw a woman with a laundry bag exiting the building next door.

"Did someone shoot a movie in this house a year or two ago?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said. "Something with Gwyneth Paltrow. I heard it was supposed to be funny."

Some thirty minutes later, after a layover in a home built by Alexander Hamilton, now a museum, Lina and I returned to the Tenenbaum house, still determined to find our way in. To essentially climb into a movie.

Waiting was smart: A man with a beeper and work gloves was now carrying in wood and construction materials.

He opened the door after a few knocks. He didn't look surprised. Lina followed my spur-of-the-moment script and mumbled something about an interest in real estate, feigning surprise, as if we were at the wrong house.

"Wait," I said, speaking my pre-arranged lines, "is this *the* house that Wes Anderson—"

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“Yeah,” said the man, scrunching up his eyes with doubt but still managing to appear friendly.

“Are you renovating it?” I asked.

“Yeah, I own it.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a little silly.

“Are you looking for an apartment?” he asked.

“Are you renting one?”

“We’re splitting the place up into a two-family. But there’s one rental unit in the back with a separate entrance.”

The man showed me the rental, where Richie, the suicidal Luke Wilson character, entered through a back window after checking himself out of the hospital. I asked the man if we could tour the house, maybe even peek upstairs. He acquiesced. We followed him and walked about the foyer. We saw the phone-booth where Angelica Huston spoke Italian, the living room where Gwyneth and Luke listened to the Stones in a tent, the closet full of board games where Stiller hid Hackman’s stuffed javelina and Dalmatian mice ran free. It was all there, despite the new flooring.

“How’d your house end up in the movie?” I asked.

“One day I came home and there was a note from Wes in my mailbox,” he said. “Simple as that.”

“You only dealt with him?”

“Yeah. Very nice, very down-to-earth guy. Paid in cash.”

“People love the movie in part because of all the cool things he did to your house,” I said. “He’s pretty interested in the details.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t that hard undoing it all. Disney paid for it. Decent job, they did.”

My inner groupie was on fire.

“So are you really interested in the apartment?” he said, clearly intimating he knew the real reason I had invaded his living room.

“Well, I just moved into a new place not long ago, but I’ve always wanted to live somewhere like this.”



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“That’s how me and my wife felt when we first saw it,” the man said as he took down my name and number. “There’s something about it. It just sort of feels the way a home should.”

We shared a smile. Then I looked around the house again and realized that it was just that: a house belonging to someone else.

My new home was waiting for me fifty blocks north. It was empty, in an unknown neighborhood. But maybe that just meant it was ready to be a character in my life, for me to fill it with the people and memories that make me who I am.

Lina looked at me sympathetically, and the credits rolled.

