Notable & Quotable: Benno Schmidt on Free Speech

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Dec. 7, 2015 7:02 p.m. ET

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From “Universities Must Defend Free Speech” in the May 6, 1991, Journal, adapted from remarks by Benno C. Schmidt Jr., who was at the time president of Yale University:

The most serious problems of freedom of expression in the U.S. today exist on our campuses. Freedom of thought is in danger from well-intentioned but misguided efforts to give values of community and harmony a higher place than freedom. The assumption seems to be that the purpose of education is to induce “correct” opinion rather than to search for wisdom and to liberate the mind.

On many campuses, perhaps most, there is little resistance to growing pressure
to suppress and to punish, rather than to answer, speech that offends notions of civility and community. These campuses are heedless of the oldest lesson in the history of freedom, which is that offensive, erroneous and obnoxious speech is the price of liberty. Values of civility, mutual respect and harmony are rightly prized within the university. But these values must be fostered by teaching and by example, and defended by expression. When the goals of harmony collide with freedom of expression, freedom must be the paramount obligation of an academic community.

Much expression that is free may deserve our contempt. We may well be moved to exercise our own freedom to counter it or to ignore it. But universities cannot censor or suppress speech, no matter how obnoxious in content, without violating their justification for existence. Liberal education presupposes that a liberated mind will strive for the courage and composure to face ideas that are fraught with evil, and to answer them. To stifle expression because it is obnoxious, erroneous, embarrassing, not instrumental to some political or ideological end is—quite apart from the invasion of the rights of others—a disastrous reflection on the idea of the university. It is to elevate fear over the capacity for a liberated and humane mind. . . .

A more vexing question of freedom of expression concerns the actual use of university authority to suppress freedom. This is the most serious example of confusion and failure of principle in university governance today. It reminds us how frequently in history threats to free expression have come not from tyranny but from well-meaning persons of little understanding.
Report outlines trustee frustrations over transparency and finances

Submitted by Kellie Woodhouse on December 9, 2015 - 3:00am

Trustees of comprehensive public universities don’t feel as though they have an adequate understanding of the finances at the institutions they lead, and many of them are concerned the boards they serve on merely rubber-stamp the proposals presented to them by administrators.

These are two findings of a report from Public Agenda that surveyed trustees and presidents on the roles of public university and university system governing boards, and the challenges facing them.

The report found that trustees often feel stifled by open-meetings laws and the public nature of their positions. It also highlighted tensions between trustees and university administrators, namely presidents. Some presidents reported feeling as though trustees don’t understand their universities’ missions, while some trustees said administrators are reluctant to lose control over big decisions.

“I worry that we’re just too much of a rubber stamp, that we’re not informed enough and we’re not active enough,” one trustee told Public Agenda.

Public Agenda, a nonprofit that seeks to bring a nonpartisan lens to tricky issues in higher education and other public policy areas, conducted confidential, in-depth interviews with 42 trustees representing 29 boards responsible for a total of 143 public comprehensive universities. The group also interviewed 45 presidents about board governance for its report, “A Difficult Balance: Trustees Speak About the Challenges Facing Comprehensive Universities,” released Wednesday.

Alison Kadlec, Public Agenda’s director of higher education and one of the people who compiled the report, highlighted how in a survey prior to the recession, most governing board members saw their role as a more limited one: to hire the president and approve building plans. But since the recession, Kadlec says, trustees now see their role as more complex, according to their responses in this most recent survey. Many believe that with dwindling state resources and heightened calls for college affordability, they’re now tasked with pushing universities to rein in their spending, become more fiscally prudent and limit tuition growth.

Comprehensive universities face particular challenges in the financial arena, as they are struggling with rising costs and limited funding, yet are under political pressure not to raise tuition for their students, most of whom hail from nearby regions.

“They’re in a position where they have to figure out how to do more with less,” Kadlec said of
trustees. "They understand more about their need to understand more than they have in the past."

Yet the Public Agenda report found that many trustees don’t feel they have the knowledge -- or even enough adequate information -- to make important financial decisions.

"It's not like they have their heads in the sand by any means -- they really do understand the financial pressures that their institutions are facing," said David Schleifer, a senior researcher with Public Agenda. "They get that, but a lot of them said that they're successful in other fields, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they understand higher education finances."

Finances

The majority of trustees are bankers, lawyers and businesspeople -- more often than not they have a robust understanding of the financial models in their own fields.

But they soon come to understand that the financial model of a university is often more complex and much larger and more integrated than the financial systems they're used to dealing with in their own careers. And boards must weigh a number of factors when making financial decisions, including elements like deferred maintenance, debt service and multiple union contracts. The culture -- where academic freedom, shared governance and faculty consultation are paramount -- is also different from the workplace settings they're used to.

Explained one trustee:

"I come out of business environments where one acts with speed, with clarity, with purpose, with precision. I find that in the university environment, because of union relationships or political relationships, change is very difficult to effect. From a board point of view, it is frustrating."

Added another, who was frustrated with the pace of change at universities:

"People embrace the slow speed of higher education, which doesn't make sense in a market that is under attack with rising costs and the burden of student debt."

And the report found that many trustees think universities could benefit from adopting a more businesslike model.

Explained one:

"Higher education has really got to get serious about prioritizing. They should focus on cutting costs from the things they don't do well. Education has never been in this position of having to think like a business. We don't like it but we have to do it."

Trust

As trustees report that they don't have enough knowledge of university finances, they also express frustration with how financial and other information is conveyed to them.

"No one feels like they're being given false information, but there's definitely an awareness that when they're getting information from senior administration and staff … there's a certain amount of spin or strategy or framing," said Schleifer.

One board member called the university he or she oversaw a "monstrous entity" comparable to one of the largest corporations in the world. Yet all the board members of that university have full-time jobs and aren't experts in higher education -- so they rely on administrators to suggest strategies and make clear why an institution should pursue a certain path. Many resent the reliance they have on administrators, and are skeptical that the information they are being provided is the whole story.

Explained one trustee:
"There's inevitably a certain amount of spin or strategy. It's very, very hard for the board to get accurate information about the decisions we have to make. It's the biggest shortcoming of the board that we don't have a professional staff capable of analysis that works just for us. We have only the staff of the system, which is the same entity that is asking us to make the decision about them."

Another trustee recalled attending a national conference where he and his fellow trustees discussed their lack of trust in the administrators feeding them information.

He explained:

"The staff likes to treat you like mushrooms: keep you in the dark and shovel you with manure. They just want to tell you, 'Here's a stack of papers and you don't need to read it all, just look, here's what we think you ought to do.' If the trustees don't read it all -- and these are busy people -- a lot of times they're saying, 'OK, I'll go with the staff recommendation.' Sometimes some of us read and get into it. Then the staff says, 'Uh-oh,' and gets all worked up, because it becomes much more difficult and they don't run the show. The inmates shouldn't run the prison."

**Transparency**

Board members also report feeling constricted by open-meetings laws. Many reported to Public Agenda that they felt open meetings -- particularly ones attended by journalists -- impeded their ability to have forthright conversations and ask questions. Public boards are governed by open-meetings laws, and in most states decisions about tuition or other financial measures must be made during a public session (although states often have provisions that allow boards to meet in closed session when discussing personnel and other sensitive issues).

Trustees told Public Agenda that it is difficult to fully discuss thorny issues in public.

"It's ironic. You think about transparency and you think that's an unquestioned good. That more transparency is a good thing," said Kadlec. "But to listen to the trustees, we heard that there are some unintended negative consequences of transparency that impact the ability of trustees to have candid conversation."

Explained one trustee:

"One of the things that presidents don't want to talk about at open meetings is cost-effectiveness. As soon as you start talking about it, the press treats it as though you've already made those decisions. Then you get people all stirred up and the Legislature all stirred up and you haven't even done anything yet. And then presidents respond by doing things behind closed doors instead."

Added another:

"The board seems to operate under a lot of restraints, some of which have been created by the challenge of deliberating in a public setting, others by the need of the staff and the administration not to lose too much control over many of the sensitive matters which we are dealing with."

The result, Public Agenda found, is that university boards often feel like they're rubber-stamping the proposals of administrators.

Explained one trustee:

"We pretty much rubber-stamp 95 percent of what the staff brings. Every once in a while some board member will raise a question, but then the staff pretty much justifies what their recommendation is. That's the bottom line."
What the Presidents Think

Presidents, meanwhile, have their own set of concerns when it comes to board governance. Presidents of universities within large systems said that because trustees are charged with looking at the big picture, they often don’t understand the nuanced difficulties facing each individual institution. Some presidents reported feeling as if their governing boards didn’t understand their institution’s specific mission.

One president said the process of communicating with board members is akin to speed dating:

“"You go from one trustee to the next, make sure they see you, try to make them interested in what you’re doing, and then you move on to the next one. You try to see as many trustees as you can so they will put a name to a face and will support your proposals because they like you. It is just absurd."

Presidents of stand-alone institutions that aren’t a part of a larger system face a different set of problems. Many are concerned about board overreach and micromanagement. Some complained about their trustees getting too deep in the weeds, with one saying it is easy to get sucked into “the daily care and feeding” of trustees.

Said one president:

"The trap for these people is that they’re very successful and used to managing stuff and knowing the details. But we need them to think big, not details."


Links:

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Welcome to "Ask Brianna," a Q&A column that helps 20-somethings prepare for the job search, handle money and manage student loans. Every other week, a new "Ask Brianna" will address these topics with tips I've picked up while writing about this stuff.

Have a question? Send it to askbrianna@nerdwallet.com, and I'll send back my best answer. Your question may appear in a future column.

You couldn't pay some college grads to go back to school. Working full time, and no longer having papers due or finals to study for, is too good to pass up. Others, myself included, soon feel an itch to go to grad school so they can learn something new, change a career or specialize in the field they chose in undergrad. When you start thinking about an advanced degree, a natural next question is:

I want to go to grad school but it seems really expensive. What's the best way to pay for it?

Answer:

There's no one way to pay for grad school. Students often cobble funds together using savings, student loans, income from work (at the university and elsewhere) or an employer stipend if that's available. Since a lot of graduates interested in an advanced degree are still paying down loans from undergrad, it's perhaps most important to make sure grad school is the right decision before you apply.

Taking on more loans, and not earning full-time wages while you're in school, will have both short- and long-term effects on your finances. Here's how to make sure you're giving grad school the full consideration it deserves, and how to get the most from your money if you go.

Step 1: Pick a school you know you can afford

A big part of your decision will depend on the graduate programs available to you. Even a comparatively low salary after graduation can...
I had thousands of dollars in student loan debt from undergrad at New York University when I made the tortured decision to go to grad school for journalism. Everyone told me I didn’t need a master’s degree to be a journalist, but I also knew I didn’t have the experience to get a reporting job without one – or the self-discipline to build my skills by freelancing on my own.

So I searched for a program that wouldn’t cost a lot. I saved as much money as I could the year before I started school so I wouldn’t have to take out loans to pay for living expenses. I lived in an impossibly tiny room in Brooklyn for too long because it was cheap. Looking back, I’m glad I chose to go to the City University of New York, a public school, because I graduated with almost no debt at all. I did this because journalism traditionally is not a well-paying field. I had to be realistic.

You can also consider moving to a place where your rent, food, transportation and other expenses will be lower when you decide to go to school. Affordable rent combined with in-state tuition at a public school may make your grad school choice more feasible.

Step 2: Exhaust scholarships and grants before you take out loans

You probably remember hearing this when you applied to college, but there’s a huge number of scholarships available, some of which don’t get a lot of applicants. Search for professional organizations focused on the field you’re interested in, for instance, and see if they offer graduate scholarships.

To get access to federal, state and school-specific financial aid, including grants you don’t need to pay back, fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). It’s available from Jan. 1 to June 30 every year, and the earlier you fill it out, the better chance you’ll have of getting aid through programs that have limited funds. Complete it even if you don’t think you’ll qualify for need-based support; you never know what funding might be available to you. NerdWallet’s FAFSA guide can help.

[Want more advice on money, student loans and life after college? Get it delivered straight to you weekly in the NerdWallet Grad newsletter.]

Step 3: Borrow only the amount you need

You’ll also need to complete the FAFSA to be eligible for federal student loans. When you’re accepted to grad school you’ll get a financial aid award letter, which will include federal and private loans to cover the cost that scholarships, grants and your personal contributions won’t. But you don’t need to take the full amount of loans your school offers you.

Most grad schools will have an online portal where you accept your loans before they’re disbursed to you. Consider whether you really need that amount of money, or if you can use savings or income from part-time work to cover some expenses. You also have 120 days to return loan money you’ve realized you don’t need.

Minimize the amount of loans you take on by graduating on time, so you don’t have to borrow additional money, and by paying the interest on your federal loans while you’re in school. That will prevent the interest from capitalizing, or being added to your balance when your loans go into repayment.

Step 4: Pick the right student loan repayment strategy

When it’s time to pay back your grad school loans, there are lots of ways to make your monthly bills manageable. If you have federal loans, you can choose from six repayment plans, some of which tie your monthly payments to your income. If you don’t earn enough to afford the 10-year standard repayment plan, you can pay up to 10% of your income on income-based repayment or the Pay As You Earn plan instead. Your loans will be forgiven after 20 years of payments on those plans too.

Work in certain jobs after graduation and your student loans could also be forgiven. Public Service Loan Forgiveness cancels your remaining federal loan balance after 10 years of payments if you work as a teacher, nurse, firefighter or in other public service jobs. The government offers additional forgiveness programs for teachers who specialize in certain subjects or who work in low-income areas.

Finally, if you earn a steady income after graduation and have excellent credit history (or access to a co-signer), you can refinance your student loans to get a lower interest rate and monthly payment. This is especially useful for doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and Master of Arts grads, a recent NerdWallet study found. Although you can refinance both your federal and private loans, it’s best to keep your federal loans separate if you plan to take advantage of the government’s flexible repayment options or forgiveness programs. You’ll lose those benefits when you refinance federal loans.

NerdWallet’s resources will help you make sense of your grad school loans.
Greasing the Wheels: The Secret Benefits of Corruption

By Sebastian Reyes

The 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.

After coming to power in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping began an anticorruption campaign that has been unprecedented in recent Chinese history. Xi has achieved a number of successes, cracking down on officials ranging from local government employees to generals in the People’s Liberation Army. In light of the widespread frustration around high levels of perceived corruption in the bureaucracy, Xi’s campaign is just one of many factors contributing to the president’s image as a strongman who won’t tolerate undisciplined party members.

But in trying to discipline the CCP bureaucracy, Xi may misunderstand the economic implications of corruption in China. Considering his country’s slowing economy, the president appears to be fighting corruption in the belief that it is a hindrance to economic growth. This view, the so-called “sanding-the-wheels” theory, has long been the mainstream in academia. Nevertheless, a notable faction of economists and political scientists have alternatively suggested that corruption can, at least in some cases, work in favor of economic growth. They make the case that corruption actually “greases the wheels” of economic growth by allowing people to circumvent the impediments imposed by an inefficient or otherwise obstructive bureaucracy.

As China’s political and economic landscapes have changed over recent decades, the nature and impacts of corruption in the country have evolved as well. Although corruption may have had negative effects some thirty years ago, Xi’s present-day campaign may be the right economic move after all.

Corruption in 1980’s China

In a 2007 paper, University of Kansas School of Business professor Douglas Houston developed an economic model that supports the “greasing-the-wheels” hypothesis. Houston found 12 countries in which the expansionary effects of corruption on an economy outweighed other harmful, restrictive effects. Speaking with the HPR, Houston explained that these states were very impoverished and had little social and political capital, low trust levels, and weak legal frameworks. He posited that in countries with such institutions, “it is very improbable that one can make a kind of economic transaction work unless one can get to the resources one needs, whatever they may be. The way to do that in such economies is what many might deem as corrupt behavior, because in some instances [entrepreneurs] must find a way through a nasty, corrupt bureaucracy that might otherwise foil one’s efforts.” In short, Houston believes that for entrepreneurs in such countries, “desperate times call for desperate measures.”

China was not among the 12 countries in which Houston found that corruption had net positive effects on economic development. But the China of the late 1970s and 1980s was much more
similar to those countries than the China of 2007. Indeed, Yang Sun, a City University of New York political science professor and author of Corruption and Markets in Contemporary China, suggested in an interview with the HPR that corruption bore fruit for Chinese economic growth in the 1980s. This expansion primarily occurred at the local level in township and village enterprises, commonly referred to as TVIs, which are market-based ventures collectively owned by rural agricultural communities. Sun argued that TVIs utilize bribing because they were largely left out of the government’s central economic planning. Even when Deng Xiaoping led the CCP to legalize the enterprises in 1984 as part of his economic reform regime, TVIs remained excluded from both market access and the allocation of state resources. As a result, bribery served as one of the only means by which TVIs were able to procure capital.

“Profiteering activities, which were also prevalent in the 1980s, could also be considered somewhat positive,” Sun further explained. “Under central planning, businesses could only sell or buy according to the plan. [But] because of the incentives of bribery, businesses were selling outside the market and outside the plan. In that way they expanded the range of economic activities in the country.” Essentially, corruption opened the doors for non-state actors on both the supply and demand sides, thereby helping spur rapid growth and diversify the Chinese economy.

Sanding the Wheels

While corruption in China has significantly diminished in recent years, the country’s politics are still far from clean. In 2014 the watchdog agency Transparency International ranked China the 106th most corrupt state out of 175 on its Corruption Perceptions Index. Two decades ago, in contrast, the group labeled China the second worst in the world. But despite this substantial improvement, corruption remains integral to various sectors of the Chinese economy and a cultural norm that most Chinese see as an opportunity to get ahead.

However, the question remains whether corruption in China brings the same benefits today as it once did. Sun argued emphatically that it does not. He noted the rise of what he calls “princeling capitalism,” in which the heads of state-owned companies, many of whom are the children of high-level government officials, utilize their unique status and connections to reinforce their monopolies. There are many examples of this phenomenon, but Sun gave the example of former president Hu Jintao’s son, Hu Haifeng, whose company, Nucitech, was awarded a contract to install airport security equipment throughout the country. Although these connections might have helped overcome bureaucratic red tape, Sun believes that this and similar cases are ultimately harmful. As the government awards deals to the children of its elite, it prevents other, less connected businesses from competing. These nepotistic forms of corruption entrench income inequality, thereby producing results that are antithetical to those of the 1980s, when corruption served to diversify economic activities and allow new players to enter the market.

The Good and the Bad

As the nature of both corruption and the economy in China have changed, the benefits of skirting regulations have likely evaporated. Xi’s anticorruption efforts, therefore, may be a boon after all. His campaign seems in congruity with the “sanding-the-wheels” theory held by the vast majority of political scientists and economists. Indeed, even those academics who recognize that corruption may have potential benefits are hesitant to defend such a proposition absolutely. Houston was quick to clarify the implications of his article noting, “I never meant that the conclusion ... is that you should encourage, as a policy, corruption in very poor countries.”

Houston went on to say that “the title of the paper ["Can Corruption Ever Improve an Economy"] is provocative and immediately can create a knockdown response that ‘this is just ridiculous.’ [But] if you get at the things underneath, it seems more reasonable.” The story of corruption in China certainly affirms that corruption could improve an economy. If only in situations where economic actors have little legal access to resources. Professors Jac Heckelman of Wake Forest University and Benjamin Powell of Suffolk University perhaps summarized it best in their 2008 working paper: “corruption is growth enhancing when economic freedom is most limited.”

There is no doubt corruption has myriad harmful effects. But the widespread view that corruption is always bad is likely inaccurate. The Chinese case, which has featured different flavors of corruption over time, demonstrates that both the “sanding-the-wheels” and “growing-the-wheels” propositions have their merits. This validation of both theories brings more complexity to assessments of corruption and the already gray area of government interactions with the private economy.

*image source: Wikimedia (天下文明大妙) / Gabriel*
Muslims in Donald Trump’s Old Neighborhood Say, Come Get to Know Us

By LIZ ROBBINS  DEC. 8, 2015

Donald, come home.

That was the message on Monday night in Queens, as two dozen men finished their prayers in a basement mosque beneath a discount store on Hillside Avenue in the Jamaica neighborhood, just a block from where Donald J. Trump grew up.

They were saddened, frightened and dumbfounded by Mr. Trump’s latest declaration while seeking the Republican nomination for president — that in reaction to the killings in San Bernardino, Calif., last week, he wanted to ban all Muslims from entering the country until the nation’s leaders can “figure out what is going on and why.”

And they had a request.

“People always ask, ‘Where are the moderate Muslims?’” Ali Najmi, 31, a defense lawyer and a co-founder of the Muslim Democratic Club of New York, said during a discussion after prayers at the Arafa Islamic Center. “We’re right here; we’re right in Donald Trump’s neighborhood. He needs to come back home.”

For all his Manhattan pomp, Mr. Trump is a son of Queens. His father, Fred C. Trump, was the son of German immigrants, and he began his career as a developer
with a house in Woodhaven. Donald Trump grew up in a stately mansion with columns on Midland Parkway, in the wealthy enclave of Jamaica Estates, which Fred Trump partially built. Although he moved on from the borough, he frequently mentioned his experiences of taking the F train on Hillside Avenue into Manhattan, and how Queens gave him perspective on New York City's diversity.

Now, not far from Mr. Trump's childhood street, a dozen mosques are spread out along Hillside Avenue — there are 93 in Queens, one-third of the city's total, according to Tony Carnes, the editor of "A Journey Through N.Y.C. Religions," which collects data on faiths. In all, Mr. Carnes said, there are 770,000 Muslims in the New York metropolitan area.

Many of them make their homes in Queens. There are close to 64,000 Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants in the borough, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey from 2014; many of them are Muslim. The Muslim community also includes Afghans, Albanians, Bosnians and more. Halal meat shops and barbecue restaurants are bustling in neighborhoods like Jamaica, Jackson Heights and Astoria.

“What is a Muslim? You will see Muslims from every race here,” Mohammed Tohin, 47, said at the Arafa Islamic Center.

“You'll see white, black, Asian-American,” added Mr. Tohin, who works in real estate and is a member of Community Board 8. “So who is he pointing at — that's the question I'm asking. Is it me? Is it someone white? Is it the brother born here?”

Across the borough's neighborhoods, Muslims responded to Mr. Trump's comments with hurt and surprise.

“I love this country, 100 percent,” said Mohammed Rana, 39, an assistant imam at the Islamic Center of Jackson Heights, who is from Bangladesh. When he heard people blaming Muslims for violence, especially after the attacks in Paris and California, he said: “If people go and do something bad, we are very sad. Muslims never accept these kinds of things.”

If Mr. Trump were to have attended the post-prayer discussion on Monday, he would have heard Yusuf Abdul Wadud speak in a thick New York accent. Mr. Wadud,
59, was born in the United States and raised Catholic. He converted to Islam more than 30 years ago.

"Donald Trump is preaching hatred, fear and separation," Mr. Wadud said. "ISIS is hatred. Islam is love. No Muslim would ever pick up a gun and shoot people.

"Donald Trump is using this because his crowd wants to hear this. Donald Trump is playing right into the hand of ISIS."

Shaukat Choudhury, 70, who for 46 years has lived on the same street, Midland Parkway, as Mr. Trump's childhood home, said that at first he could not take the remarks seriously. "I very much laughed out loud," he said. "I said, 'Here goes Trump — again!'"

But Mr. Najmi was offended because he, too, was born and raised in Queens. His parents were Muslim immigrants from Pakistan, and this fall, he lost his bid to become the first person of South Asian ancestry to be elected to the City Council. He graduated from Oberlin College and from the law school of the City University of New York.

On Twitter on Monday, he invited Mr. Trump back for some halal kebabs and a cup of chai tea in the old neighborhood.

"I'm outraged that anyone born and raised in Queens would say something like that," said Mr. Najmi, who grew up in Glen Oaks, Queens. "Especially since Queens County is home to so many immigrants — it's the symbol of immigrants in America."

Alhaz Mowlana A. Kalam spoke in front of Kabab King, a popular restaurant on Diversity Plaza, in Jackson Heights. When told of Mr. Trump's comments, he shook his head. "It's crazy, it's crazy," he said.

And he had another thought for Mr. Trump. "Look at all the mosques in this area," he said. "We are so many that we are praying on the street. He's not going to be president if he says something like this."
Flush from outer borough market binge, Joe Berko makes a bet on West Side

BY CHRISTIAN BRAZIL BAUTISTA  •  DECEMBER 9, 2015

Joe Berko, the founder and president of commercial real estate firm Berko and Associates, is making a huge bet on the Far West Side.

Berko, who has been watching the moves of firms such as
Mollman, Durst and Brookfield in the area, said that he is in the process of spending $100 million in the neighborhood. "All those guys are doing great projects over there. I believe this corridor between 10th avenue and 11th avenue is eminently going to change over the course of five to seven years. It's going to be a whole different blend of apartment buildings, with hopefully some interesting retail," he said.

Berko, whose firm recently worked on large deals such as the $182 million conversion of an office building to the Marriott Hotel near Times Square, did not provide specifics on the project. However, he said that it is still in its early stages, and is still awaiting approval from the city.

"It's (in) pre-uniformed land use review process. So the zoning still has to go through that change," he said.

The Far West Side, which covers parts of SoHo all the way through to the West Village, has been a prime target for the city's biggest developers.

One of the largest projects in the area is Brookfield's 1 Manhattan West, a 67-story building on 33rd street and Ninth Avenue. Related Companies, meanwhile, is building Hudson Yards, the largest private real estate development in the history of the United States and the largest development in New York City since Rockefeller Center.

That development will bring more than 17 million square feet of commercial and residential space, more than 100 shops, a collection of restaurants, approximately 5,000 residences, a cultural space, 14 acres of public open space, a 750-seat public school and a 200-room Equinox branded luxury hotel — all offering unparalleled amenities for residents, employees and guests.

Berko does no consider any of those initiatives as competition but is concerned about their shared difficulties in the area. "I just think that the major challenge right now is the zoning... There has to be a quasi-intervention between the private sector, which wants to build, and the demand of the public for housing and the affordable component, which is needed," he said.
While Berko’s immediate future hangs on Manhattan’s new prime real estate destination, his sights remain on conversion of industrial lofts in the north of the curve and those areas still present a certain amount of return in arbitrage since it’s not yet a proven market. We’re finding it increasingly difficult to find (something) comparable. The competition is fairly low at the moment,” he said.

He’s also long targeted Brooklyn. Earlier this year, his company worked on the $34 million sale on $33.7 million sale of the former Schlitz Brewery location in Bushwick. His firm also worked on a deal to convert a Gowanus loft building into offices.

Berko founded his firm in 2005, ten years after starting out in commercial real estate investment banking and financing where he’d quickly emerged as a top producer in his field, arranging competitive debt yields for his clients.

Born and raised in Israel, he’d had an ongoing fascination with the city of New York since his first visit in the early 1980’s. In 1994, after completing his service in the IDF, he moved to New York, graduating from Baruch College with a degree in The Science of Real Estate and Metropolitan Development.

His distinctive approach and his creative methodologies in securing complex transactions, have earned him a reputation as an industry leader and his firm has grown to be a low-key, yet prolific player in the tri-state area’s investment sales and financing landscape, evidenced by his recent distinction as a CoStar Power Broker of the Year Award Winner.

Over the course of nearly twenty years, Berko has structured, raised, syndicated, sold, and financed several billions dollars in commercial real estate deals. Such transactions range from office buildings, mixed-use properties, hotels, shopping centers, and industrial parks. He has arranged for joint ventures, equity participation and mezzanine debt, as well as dispositions of distressed and performing notes for national and regional portfolio lenders.

In 2009, New York State Governor David Paterson nominated Berko as an advisor to the State’s Real Estate Board, an honor bestowed upon a select group of only five real estate professionals. Then, in 2011, New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo appointed him to serve as the secretary of the Board.
The Secret History of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

**SUCCESS STORY**
By Sally Soames/Camera Press/Redux.

A half-century ago, Gabriel García Márquez, after yet another visit to the pawnshop, sent his now signature novel to his publisher. As *Solitude* turns 50, Paul Elie interviews Gabo's longtime...
agent—just weeks before her death, at 85—and discovers the events that led to a literary revelation.

BY PAUL ELIE

he house, in a quiet part of Mexico City, had a study within, and in the study he found a solitude he had never known before and would never know again. Cigarettes (he smoked 60 a day) were on the worktable. LPs were on the record player: Debussy, Bartók, A Hard Day’s Night. Stuck up on the wall were charts of the history of a Caribbean town he called Macondo and the genealogy of the family he named the Buendías. Outside, it was the 1960s; inside, it was the deep time of the pre-modern Americas, and the author at his typewriter was all-powerful.

He visited a plague of insomnia upon the people of Macondo; he made a priest levitate, powered by hot chocolate; he sent down a swarm of yellow butterflies. He led his people on the long march through civil war and colonialism and banana-republicanism; he trailed them into their bedrooms and witnessed sexual adventures obscene and incestuous. “In my dreams, I was inventing literature,” he recalled. Month by month the typescript grew, presaging the weight that the great novel and the “solitude of fame,” as he would later put it, would inflict on him.

Gabriel García Márquez began writing Cien Años de Soledad—One Hundred Years of Solitude—a half-century ago, finishing in late 1966. The novel came off the press in Buenos Aires on May 30, 1967, two days before Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was released, and the response among Spanish-language readers was akin to Beatlemania: crowds, cameras, exclamation points, a sense of a new era beginning. In 1970 the book appeared in English, followed by a paperback edition with a burning sun on its cover, which became a totem of the decade. By the time García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1982, the novel was considered the Don Quixote of the Global South, proof of Latin-American literary prowess, and the author was “Gabo,” known all over the continent by a single name, like his Cuban friend Fidel.

Many years later, interest in Gabo and his great novel is surging. The Harry Ransom Center, at the University of Texas, recently paid $2.2 million to acquire his archives—including a Spanish typescript of Cien Años de Soledad—and in October a gathering of his family members and academics took a fresh look at his legacy, repeatedly invoking the book as his magnum opus.

Unofficially, it’s everybody’s favorite work of world literature and the novel that, more than any other since World War II, has inspired novelists of our time—from Toni Morrison to Salman Rushdie to Junot Díaz. A scene in the movie Chinatown takes place at a Hollywood hacienda dubbed El Macondo Apartments. Bill Clinton, during his first term as president, made it known that he would like to meet Gabo when they were both on Martha’s Vineyard; they wound up swapping insights about Faulkner over dinner at Bill and Rose Styron’s place. (Carlos Fuentes, Vernon Jordan, and Harvey Weinstein were at the table.) When García Márquez died, in April 2014,
Barack Obama joined Clinton in mourning him, calling him “one of my favorites from the time I was young” and mentioning his cherished, inscribed copy of One Hundred Years of Solitude. “It’s the book that redefined not just Latin-American literature but literature, period,” insists Ilan Stavans, the pre-eminent scholar of Latino culture in the U.S., who says he has read the book 30 times.

How is it that this novel could be sexy, entertaining, experimental, politically radical, and wildly popular all at once? Its success was no sure thing, and the story of how it came about is a crucial and little-known chapter in the literary history of the last half-century.

**LEAVING HOME**

The creator of contemporary fiction’s most famous village was a city man. Born in 1927 in the Colombian village of Aracataca, near the Caribbean coast, and schooled inland in a suburb of Bogotá, Gabriel García Márquez quit pre-law studies to become a journalist in the cities of Cartagena, Barranquilla (writing a column), and Bogotá (writing movie reviews). As the noose of dictatorship tightened, he went on assignment to Europe—and out of harm’s way. He had hard times there. In Paris, he turned in deposit bottles for cash; in Rome, he took classes in experimental filmmaking; he shivered in London and sent back dispatches from East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. Returning south—to Venezuela—he was nearly arrested during a random sweep by military police. When Fidel Castro took power in Cuba, García Márquez signed on with Prensa Latina, a press agency funded by the new Communist government, and after a stint in Havana he moved to New York in 1961 with his wife, Mercedes, and their young son, Rodrigo.

The city, he later said, “was putrefying, but also was in the process of rebirth, like the jungle. It fascinated me.” The family stayed in the Webster Hotel, at 45th and Fifth, and then with friends in Queens, but Gabo spent most of his time at the press office near Rockefeller Center, in a room with a lone window above a vacant lot overrun with rats. The phone rang and rang with calls from outraged Cuban exiles who saw the agency as an outpost of the Castro regime they detested, and he kept an iron rod at the ready in case of attack.

He was writing fiction all the while: Leaf Storm in Bogotá; In Evil Hour and No One Writes to the Colonel in Paris; Big Mama’s Funeral in Caracas. When hard-line Communists took over the press service and ousted its editor, García Márquez quit in solidarity. He would move to Mexico City; he would focus on fiction. But first he would see the South of William Faulkner, whose books he had read in translation since his early 20s. Traveling by Greyhound, the family was treated as “dirty Mexicans,” he recounted—refused rooms and restaurant service. “The immaculate parthenons amidst the cotton fields, the farmers taking their siesta beneath the eaves of roadside inns, the black people’s huts surviving in wretchedness.... The terrible world of Yoknapatawpha County had passed in front of our eyes from the window of a bus,” he would remember, “and it was as true and as human as in the novels of the old master.”

García Márquez struggled. He turned to screenwriting. He edited a glossy women’s magazine, La Familia, and another specializing in scandal and crime. He wrote copy for J. Walter Thompson. In the Zona Rosa—Mexico City’s Left Bank—he was known as surly and morose.
And then his life changed. A literary agent in Barcelona had taken an interest in his work, and after a week of meetings in New York in 1965 she headed south to meet him.

**A SHEET OF PAPER**

"This interview is a fraud," Carmen Balcells declared with conversation-ending finality. We were in her apartment above the offices of Agencia Carmen Balcells, in the center of Barcelona. In a wheelchair, she had rolled out to meet me at the elevator and then spun the wheelchair to a giant table laden with manuscripts and red file boxes. (VARGAS LLOSA, read the label on one; WYLIE AGENCY, another.) Eighty-five, with thick white hair, she had the formidable size and bearing that led her to be called La Mamá Grande. She wore a capacious white dress that suggested a resemblance to a female Pope.

"A fraud," she said in English, in a high, small voice. "When a celebrity, or an artist—when this person dies and is no longer there to answer many things, the first move is to interview the secretaries, the hairdresser, doctors, wives, children, tailor. I am not an artist. I am an agent. I am here as a person who really had an importance in Gabriel García Márquez's life. But this—it is not the real thing. The magnificent presence of the artist is missing."

**CELINE**

Balcells was preparing for a future she would not be present to see. A deal to sell her business to the New York literary agent Andrew Wylie had recently come apart. (More on this later.) Now other suitors were making their entreaties, and Balcells was trying to decide who would look after her 300-plus clients, the estate of García Márquez chief among them. Our interview, she told me wearily, would be followed by a meeting with her lawyers—"a dirty business," she said.

That afternoon, grandiloquently alive, she pushed such matters aside and recalled the day she first felt "the
magnificent presence of the artist" near at hand.

She and her husband, Luis, liked to read in bed. "I was reading García Márquez—one of the early books—and I said to Luis, 'This is so fantastic, Luis, that we have to read it at the same time.' So I made a copy of it. We both had enthusiasm for it: it was so fresh, so original, so exciting. Every reader says in his mind, of certain books, 'This is one of the best books I have ever read.' When that happens to a book again and again, all over the world, you have a masterpiece. That is what happened with Gabriel García Márquez."

When Bajecells and Luis arrived in Mexico City, in July 1965, García Márquez met not just his new agent but two people who were intimate with his work. In the daytime, he showed them the city; nights, they all had supper together with local writers. They ate and drank, and ate and drank some more. And then García Márquez, having fully warmed to his guests, took out a sheet of paper, and with Luis as a witness he and Bajecells drew up a contract declaring her his representative in all the world for the next 75 years.

"Not a hundred and fifty—I think a hundred and twenty," Bajecells told me, smiling. "It was a joke, a spoof contract, you see."

But there was another contract, and it was no joke. In New York the week before, Bajecells had found a U.S. publisher—Harper & Row—for García Márquez's work. She'd made a deal for the English-language rights to his four books. The payment? A thousand dollars. She had brought the contract, which she presented for him to sign.

The terms seemed onerous, even rapacious. And the contract also gave Harper & Row the first option to bid on his next work of fiction, whatever it was. "This contract is a piece of shit," he told her. He signed anyway.

Bajecells left to return to Barcelona; García Márquez set out with his family for a beach vacation in Acapulco, a day's drive south. Partway there, he stopped the car—a white 1962 Opel with a red interior—and turned back. His next work of fiction had come to him all at once. For two decades he had been pulling and prodding at the tale of a large family in a small village. Now he could envision it with the clarity of a man who, standing before a firing squad, saw his whole life in a single moment. "It was so ripe in me," he would later recount, "that I could have dictated the first chapter, word by word, to a typist."

In the study, he settled himself at the typewriter. "I did not get up for eighteen months," he would recall. Like the book's protagonist, Colonel Aureliano Buendía—who hides out in his workshop in Macondo, fashioning tiny gold fish with jeweled eyes—the author worked obsessively. He marked the typed pages, then sent them to a typist who made a fresh copy. He called friends to read pages aloud. Mercedes maintained the family. She stocked the cupboard with scotch for when work was done. She kept bill collectors at bay. She hocked household items for cash: "telephone, fridge, radio, jewelry," as García Márquez's biographer Gerald Martin has it. He sold the Opel. When the novel was finished, and Gabo and Mercedes went to the post office to send the typescript to the publisher, Editorial Sudamericana, in Buenos Aires, they didn't have the 82 pesos for the postage. They sent the first half, and then the rest after a visit to the pawnshop.

He had smoked 30,000 cigarettes and run through 120,000 pesos (about $10,000). Mercedes asked, "And what if,
MIND ON FIRE

The past is never dead. It's not even past," Faulkner observed, and with One Hundred Years of Solitude, García Márquez made the presence of the past a condition of life in Macondo—like poverty, or injustice. Over seven generations José Arcadio Buendía and his descendants are relentlessly present to one another: in their inherited names, their fits of anger and jealousy, their feuds and wars, their nightmares, and in the current of incest that runs through them—a force that makes family resemblance a curse and sexual attraction a force to be resisted, lest you and your lover (who is also your cousin) produce a child with a pig's tail.

"Magic realism" became the term for García Márquez's violation of natural laws through art. And yet the magic of the novel, first and last, is in the power with which it makes the Buendías and their neighbors present to the reader. Reading it, you feel: They are alive; this happened.

Eight thousand copies sold in the first week in Argentina alone, unprecedented for a literary novel in South America. Laborers read it. So did housekeepers and professors—and prostitutes: the novelist Francisco Goldman recalls seeing the novel on the bedside table in a coastal bordello. García Márquez traveled to Argentina, to Peru, to Venezuela, on its behalf. In Caracas, he had his hosts stick up a handwritten sign: TALK OF ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE FORBIDDEN. Women offered themselves to him—in person and in photographs.
To avoid distractions, he moved his family to Barcelona. Pablo Neruda, meeting him there, wrote a poem about him. At the University of Madrid, Mario Vargas Llosa, already acclaimed for his novel *The Green House*, wrote a doctoral dissertation about García Márquez’s book, which was awarded top literary prizes in Italy and France. It was seen as the first book to unify the Spanish-language literary culture, long divided between Spain and Latin America, city and village, colonizers and colonized.

Gregory Rabassa bought the book in Manhattan and read it straight through, enthralled. A professor of Romance languages at Queens College, he had recently translated Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch*—and had won a National Book Award for it. He’d served as a code breaker for the Office of Strategic Services during the war; he’d danced with Marlene Dietrich when she entertained the troops. He knew the real thing when he saw it.

“I read it without any thought of translating it,” he explains, sitting in his apartment on East 72nd Street. Now 93, frail but mentally agile, he still attends reunions of surviving O.S.S. spies. “I was used to tried-and-true methods of storytelling. Oh ... I’d done Cortázar. I knew [the work of] Borges. You put the two together and you got something else: you got Gabriel García Márquez.”

Harper & Row’s editor in chief, Cass Canfield Jr., having paid $1,000 for the previous four books, got an approval for $5,000 for the new novel, to be paid to the Bercells agency in installments. García Márquez asked his friend Julio Cortázar to recommend a translator. “Get Rabassa,” Cortázar told him.

In 1969, at a house in Hampton Bays, on Long Island, Rabassa set to translating the novel, beginning with its unforgettable triple-time first sentence: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.” He established certain rules: “I had to make sure the patriarch was always José Arcadio Buendía, never any truncated version, much the way that Charlie Brown is never called anything but Charlie Brown in *Peanuts*.”

Editor Richard Locke had first heard about the book in 1968 from novelist Thomas McGuane, while on a trip to visit him in Montana. “Tom was extremely well read,” says Locke. “He said this was the guy everybody was talking about.” By the time Harper & Row sent out advance proofs, in early 1970, Locke had become an assigning editor at *The New York Times Book Review*. “When the novel came in, I realized it was a very important book,” Locke remembers, “by a very different kind of writer—and in a new form that we had never seen before. And I gave it an enthusiastic report.”

Canfield, meanwhile, had sung its song to a Times reporter, and there appeared a preview of all the new Latin-American literature coming into English—El Boom—with García Márquez at the head of the line. “We are certain that García Márquez will cause the same sensation as some of the postwar French and German writers brought to
the American literary scene,” Canfield predicted.

One Hundred Years of Solitude was published in March 1970, its lush-green jacket and understated typography concealing the passion within. Then, as now, the key reviews for sales and prizes were those of the Times. The Book Review praised it as “a South American Genesis, an earthy piece of enchantment.” John Leonard, in the daily Times, held nothing back: “You emerge from this marvelous novel as if from a dream, the mind on fire.” He concluded, “With a single bound, Gabriel García Márquez leaps onto the stage with Günter Grass and Vladimir Nabokov, his appetite as enormous as his imagination, his fatalism greater than either. Dazzling.”

Signed up for $5,000 on the basis of a “piece of shit” contract, the book would sell 50 million copies worldwide, becoming a year-in-year-out fixture on the bestseller list. Gregory Rabassa watched with mingled pride and unease as his work—paid for in a lump sum “of about a thousand dollars,” like the work of a gardener “spreading manure on a suburban lawn”—became at once the most acclaimed novel in translation and the most popular. García Márquez himself read One Hundred Years of Solitude in the Harper & Row edition and pronounced it better than his Spanish original. He called Rabassa “the best Latin American writer in the English language.”

THE ALTERCATION

Many have entertained the notion of making a movie of One Hundred Years of Solitude. None has come close. Sometimes author and agent named an astronomical sum for the rights. Other times García Márquez set fantastical terms. Gabo told Harvey Weinstein that he would grant him and Giuseppe Tornatore the rights, provided the movie was made his way. As Weinstein would recall: “We must film the entire book, but only release one chapter—two minutes long—each year, for one hundred years.”

Instead of adaptations, then, there have been homages by other novelists—some explicit (Oscar Hijuelos’s highly amplified novels of Cuban America), others indirect and furtive (William Kennedy’s Ironweed, in which a child speaks to his father from the grave). Alice Walker bent the iron bars of plausibility in The Color Purple, where letters sent to God elicit real replies. Isabel Allende, a relative of the slain Chilean president (and herself a Balcels client), told the story of modern Chile through a family saga in The House of the Spirits.

“I was sitting in my office at Random House,” says Toni Morrison, then an editor with two of her own novels published, “just turning the pages of One Hundred Years of Solitude. There was something so familiar about the novel, so recognizable to me. It was a certain kind of freedom, a structural freedom, a [different] notion of a beginning, middle, and end. Culturally, I felt intimate with him because he was happy to mix the living and the dead. His characters were on intimate terms with the supernatural world, and that’s the way stories were told in my house.”

Morrison’s father had died, and she had in mind a new novel, whose protagonists would be men—a departure for her. “I had hesitated before writing about those guys. But now, because I had read One Hundred Years of Solitude, I did not hesitate. I got permission from García Márquez.”
—permission to write *Song of Solomon*, the first of a run of big, bold novels. (Many years later, Morrison and García Márquez taught a master class together at Princeton. It was 1998—"the year Viagra came out," Morrison recalls. "I would pick him up in the morning at the hotel where he and Mercedes were staying, and he said, ‘The peell: the peell is not for us men. It is for you, for you women. We do not need it, but we want to please you!’")

John Irving was teaching literature and coaching wrestling at Windham College, in Vermont, an Iowa Writers’ Workshop graduate in thrall to Günter Grass. Like *The Tin Drum*, García Márquez’s book struck him with its old-fashioned breadth and confidence. "Here’s a guy who’s a 19th-century storyteller but who’s working now," says Irving. "He creates characters and makes you love them. When he writes about the supernatural, it’s extraordinary, not ordinary. The incest and intermarriage ... it’s pre-destined, like in Hardy."

Junot Díaz, a generation younger, sees Gabo as a guide to current realities. Díaz read the novel in his first months at Rutgers, in 1988. "The world went from black-and-white to Technicolor," he says. "I was a young Latino-American-Caribbean writer desperately looking for models. This novel went through me like a lightning bolt: it entered through the crown of my head and went right down to my toes, redounding through me for the next several decades—up to right now." He was struck by the fact that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had been written just after his own homeland, the Dominican Republic, was invaded by U.S. troops in 1965, and he came to see magic realism as a political tool—one "that enables Caribbean people to see things clearly in their world, a surreal world where there are more dead than living, more erasure and silence than things spoken." He explains: "There are seven generations of the Buendía family. We are the eighth generation. We are the children of Macondo."

Salman Rushdie was living in London and thinking about the country of his childhood when he first read the book. Many years later he wrote, "I knew García Márquez’s colonels and generals, or at least their Indian and Pakistani counterparts; his bishops were my mullahs; his market streets were my bazaars. His world was mine, translated into Spanish. It’s little wonder I fell in love with it—not for its magic ... but for its realism." Reviewing García Márquez’s novel *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Rushdie summarized the novelist’s fame with the controlled hyperbole he and Gabo had in common: "The news of a new Márquez book takes over the front pages of the Spanish-American dailies. Barrow boys hawk copies in the streets. Critics commit suicide for lack of fresh superlatives." Rushdie called him "Angel Gabriel," an offhand gesture that suggests García Márquez’s influence on *The Satanic Verses*, whose protagonist is called the Angel Gibreel.

By then, Gabo was a Nobel laureate. He had a new U.S. publisher, Knopf. And in a rare stroke, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was published in full in the premiere issue of the revived *Vanity Fair*, in 1983, where Richard Locke had taken the editor’s chair. Locke and Alexander Liberman, Condé Nast’s editorial director, had commissioned accompanying artwork by Botero, the Colombian portraitist. The admiration for the author was universal. He was the laureate everyone could love.

Everyone, that is, except Mario Vargas Llosa. They’d been friends for years: Latin-American expats in Barcelona, prominent writers of El Boom, clients of Carmen Balsells’. Their wives—Mercedes and Patricia—socialized. Then they had a falling-out. In 1976, in Mexico City, García Márquez attended a screening of the film *La Odisea de los Andes*, for which Vargas Llosa had written the script. Spotting his friend, García Márquez went to embrace him. Vargas Llosa punched him in the face, knocking him down and giving him a black eye.
“And García Márquez said, ‘Now that you’ve punched me to the ground, why don’t you tell me why,’“ Balcóells told me, recalling the episode. Ever since, literary people in Latin America have wondered why. One story is that García Márquez had told a mutual friend that he found Patricia less than beautiful. A second is that Patricia, suspecting that Mario was having an affair, had asked Gabo what she should do about it, and Gabo had told her to leave him. Vargas Llosa has said only that it was "about a personal problem."

His longtime agent, Carmen Balcóells, at her home in Barcelona, 2007.
By Lelia Mendez/Contour/Getty Images.

“Another writer said to Mario, ‘Be careful,’“ Balcóells recalled. “You don’t want to be known as the man who clocked the author of One Hundred Years of Solitude.’”

For four decades, Vargas Llosa has categorically refused to discuss the episode, and he has said that he and Gabo made a “pact” to take the story to their graves. But in a recent conversation about his friend and rival, Vargas Llosa—himself a Nobel laureate—spoke affectionately and at length about what García Márquez has meant to him, from his first encounter with Gabo’s fiction (in Paris, and in French translation) to their first meeting, at the Caracas airport, in 1967, to their years as boon companions in Barcelona, to their plan to write a novel together about the 1828 war between Peru and Colombia. And he spoke about Cien Años de Soledad, which he read and wrote about “immediately, immediately” when it reached him in Cricklewood, North London, a few weeks after publication. “This was the book that enlarged the Spanish-language reading public to include intellectuals and also ordinary readers because of its clear and transparent style. At the same time, it was a very representative book: Latin America’s civil wars, Latin America’s inequalities, Latin America’s imagination, Latin America’s love of music, its color—all this was in a novel in which realism and fantasy were mixed in a perfect way.” About his falling-out with Gabo he kept his silence, saying, “That is a secret for a future biographer.”
Perfect Marriage

Carmen Balcells will be known always as the agent who represented the author of One Hundred Years of Solitude. She met me in Barcelona, with the understanding that she would be speaking as the one who, in the title of Gabo's own memoir, was still "living to tell the tale."

Our encounter, as it turned out, would take a Márquezian twist. We were at the giant table in the sala, like a classic six on Park Avenue. A portrait made of Balcells many years earlier was hung on one wall—the same darting eyes, the same strong jaw—and it was as if the younger Balcells were present, too, witnessing the long story of the agent's relationship with her writer. It has been called "un matrimonio perfecto."

I told her that I had worked as an editor with Farrar, Straus and Giroux. "Aha!" she exclaimed. "I have a photographic memory for faces, you see, and it must be that I saw your face when I was there to see Roger [Straus, the publisher]. You have the same face you had then!

"Because I met you, you can ask me anything you want," she went on, and we talked for an hour and a half. Ever the agent, she attached provisos to the conversation. She told me ("but not for your article") what it was that prompted Mario to slug Gabo that night in 1976. She explained ("but you must promise not to publish until I die") how she had leveraged One Hundred Years of Solitude again and again to "make a secret deal" with its publishers worldwide, granting them the rights to new books only on condition that they amended their individual contracts for Gabo's book—so that rights to it would revert back to the agency.

She spoke without proviso about the state of the agency. "I retired in the year 2000," she said. "The business was with three associates: my son, the man who does the contracts, [and another]. But I had to return because of the debts, the losses." She described her dealings with the most powerful agent in the English-speaking world: "Andrew Wylie is one of the persons who has wanted to buy my agency for 20 years. It should have been done six months ago. Andrew was here with Sarah [Chalfant, his deputy], and with a publisher who has become an agent ..."

"She shook her head, unable to recall the name of Cristóbal Pera, who ran Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial in Mexico before joining Wylie in August."
In May 2014, Agencia Carmen Balcells entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Wylie Agency about an eventual sale, and the Times reported the deal as all but done. Balcells clearly trusted Wylie enough to have taken things that far. So why wasn't the deal done? Because, Balcells said, she surmised that Wylie anticipated closing the office on the Diagonal in Barcelona and folding the Balcells agency into his operations in New York and London. This she was strongly against. So she began entertaining other offers: from the London-based literary agent Andrew Nurnberg, who represents authors ranging from Harper Lee to Tariq Ali (as well as the late Jackie Collins), and from Riccardo Cavallero, who previously ran Mondadori in Italy and Spain.

"Three offers, all very interesting," she told me. "But the process is frozen, because none of them was good enough." In a little while the lawyers would arrive and she and they would try to sort things out. She articulated her greatest fear: betraying her authors, should the needs of a new agency partner supersede the needs of individual writers. "To be a literary agent: it's a modest job," she said. "But it's a job that's important for the writer. It's a position that you take the right decision for your clients. And the problem is that the ego [of the agents] can get in the way. It's very important that the agency is a person, one person. It's not about money."

What was it about? Andrew Wylie won't talk about their discussions. So Balcells' word may be the last word. For her, it was also about something else—about the agent as a presence in the lives of her authors, and as a person
who would be there when what she called “the magnificent presence of the artist” was no more.

Rolling gracefully in her wheelchair, she showed me to the elevator. She kissed my hand in parting. Seven weeks later, she died of a heart attack, stricken in that Barcelona apartment. Despite her advanced years, her death took the publishing community by surprise. And with her passing she would become, like her magical author, altogether present, a specter that haunts the fight for her agency—and Gabo’s legacy.

Who will represent *One Hundred Years of Solitude*? Right now, no one knows. But the Buendías and their village, Macondo, are ably represented: we are their descendants, and they are present to us, as vivid as a swarm of yellow butterflies in the pages of Gabriel García Márquez’s magnificent novel.
Mosque Shows That Muslims Have Long Been a Part of New York

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP DEC. 9, 2015

Muslims have been called many things lately in America. New Yorkers, however, have had their own word for them, going back more than a century:

Neighbors.

Historians have long known about Little Syria, a flourishing community in Lower Manhattan, south of what is now the World Trade Center. But most evidence, including the landmark former St. George’s Syrian Catholic Church, spoke to its having been an overwhelmingly Christian enclave.

Today, evidence is coming to light that Muslims not only lived in Little Syria but worshiped there, too, in a mosque — or masjid — on Rector Street, between Greenwich and Washington Streets (just around the corner from St. George’s).

“Muslims are not a recent, foreign intrusion that should generate fear, but are an ever-present feature of the American — and specifically New York — fabric,” said Todd Fine, president of the Washington Street Historical Society and a doctoral candidate in history at the City University of New York.
“Most Americans identify with iconic stories of ethnic immigration,” Mr. Fine said. “The Rector Street mosque in Little Syria offers an elegant way to show that Muslims also belong.”

A tantalizing description is found in the files of The New York Sun newspaper.

“While the voice of the muezzin, calling the faithful to prayer, is never heard in New York, nevertheless the Mohammedan form of worship is carried on here,” The Sun told its readers on Feb. 25, 1912.

The newspaper’s office was 16 blocks from a six-story building, the Oriental, at 17 Rector Street. “There is nothing about the building to indicate that here is a temple where gather those who believe in Allah and Mohammed,” The Sun said.

There was certainly something — a barber pole — to indicate that here was a shop where gather those looking for a shave and a haircut. Above the basement barbershop, lacy undergarments were displayed in the Moutran family store.

Upstairs, on the third floor, was a suite of rooms, including an apartment, rented by the consulate general of the Ottoman Empire for the use of Mehmed Ali Effendi, an imam and an attaché to the Ottoman Embassy in Washington. From his conventional streetwear, The Sun said, “You might mistake him for a German scholar.”

Beginning in 1910, the imam had promoted greater adherence to religious practices among the city’s Muslims, the newspaper said.

“In the Rector Street mesjed, the same ceremonies are prescribed for entrance as rule at mosques,” the newspaper said. “You have to remove your shoes and wash your arms, face and feet.” It was for men only. Extra services were held on Sundays for those whose work kept them from the Friday congregational prayer.

“The chapel consists of two rooms, soberly furnished,” The Sun said. “One of the rooms is the sanctuary and the other is the audience room. As the worshipers say their prayers standing, it often holds as many as from 75 to 100.”

However, on the feasts of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, which the newspaper
called by their Turkish names, the crowd spilled into the imam’s private rooms.

Patrick D. Bowen described the masjid as “one of the earliest immigrant mosques in the U.S.” in his new book, “A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 1.”

In a three-volume 1897 account, “The American Metropolis: From Knickerbocker Days to the Present Time,” Frank Moss said there were about 600 Muslims in New York City and that they were planning to erect a mosque.

Nothing more was heard of their effort, Linda K. Jacobs wrote in her new book, “Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York City, 1880-1900.”

She said the most convincing aspect of the 1912 article was a mention of Turkish students at Columbia being among the imam’s charges, implying that the masjid “really was a place of worship attracting people from other parts of the city.”

Given the imam’s affiliation with the Ottoman government, it is difficult to say where politics left off and worship began at 17 Rector Street — if such a distinction can even be made. It is also potentially misleading to assume that the “Turks” or “Syrians” described by writers 100 years ago, when the Ottoman Empire existed, correspond exactly to those nationalities today.

What happened to the masjid is unclear, though the building lasted until the mid-1950s, when it was torn down to expand a skyscraper at Rector and Greenwich Streets that is now the Greenwich Club Residences. Its site is marked by a Dunkin’ Donuts shop and the storefront law office of Jeffrey E. Levine.

Despite all the unknowns, students of Little Syria are pleased to have expanded their understanding of the quarter.

“This story could finally be the missing key that we have been looking for,” said Carl Antoun, the collections director of the Washington Street Historical Society. “This solidifies the notion that Muslims and Christians were living side by side, not only in Lebanon and Syria but in Lower Manhattan, as well.”