

# Block Power— The Jane Street Story

By JONATHAN BLACK

**B**REEEEP!  
The tiny gold peephole flips open and an eye peers out. The eye stares at Michelle Sandberg's yellow laminated nameplate. The nameplate reads "Jane Street Block Association."

"We'd like to talk about the guard patrol," says Michelle. "And we'd like your support. It's \$28 for six months."

"We've already paid."

"Oh."

The peephole flips shut.

"These cards are a mess of macaroni," mutters Bob Herron, Michelle's teammate.

Michelle titters. She is retired; used to work in personnel training and co-managed a pet store. Bob is an Off-Broadway playwright and superintendent of a Jane Street walk-up. The three of us move down the dark corridor of The Cezanne, one of the high-rises on Jane Street, and halt at the next door.

Breeeep!

"Yah? . . . Yah? . . . Yah? . . . No, not interested . . . buncha ultraliberals. Get rid of Lindsay, why don't you?"

Breeeep!

"No, not now . . . I'm sick . . . I'm not dressed . . ."

"It's only five dollars a month."

"My business checks are all at the office . . . come back, why don't you?"

Bob sighs.

"Maybe the other team's having better luck," encourages Michelle.

"Mmmmm," inhales Bob more cheerfully. "That's a wine-based stew!"

Ther, we luck out.

Breeeep!

A toweled head and a hand sticks out the door with a check.

Breeeep!

"We're here to get your subscription for the guards."

"You already have it."

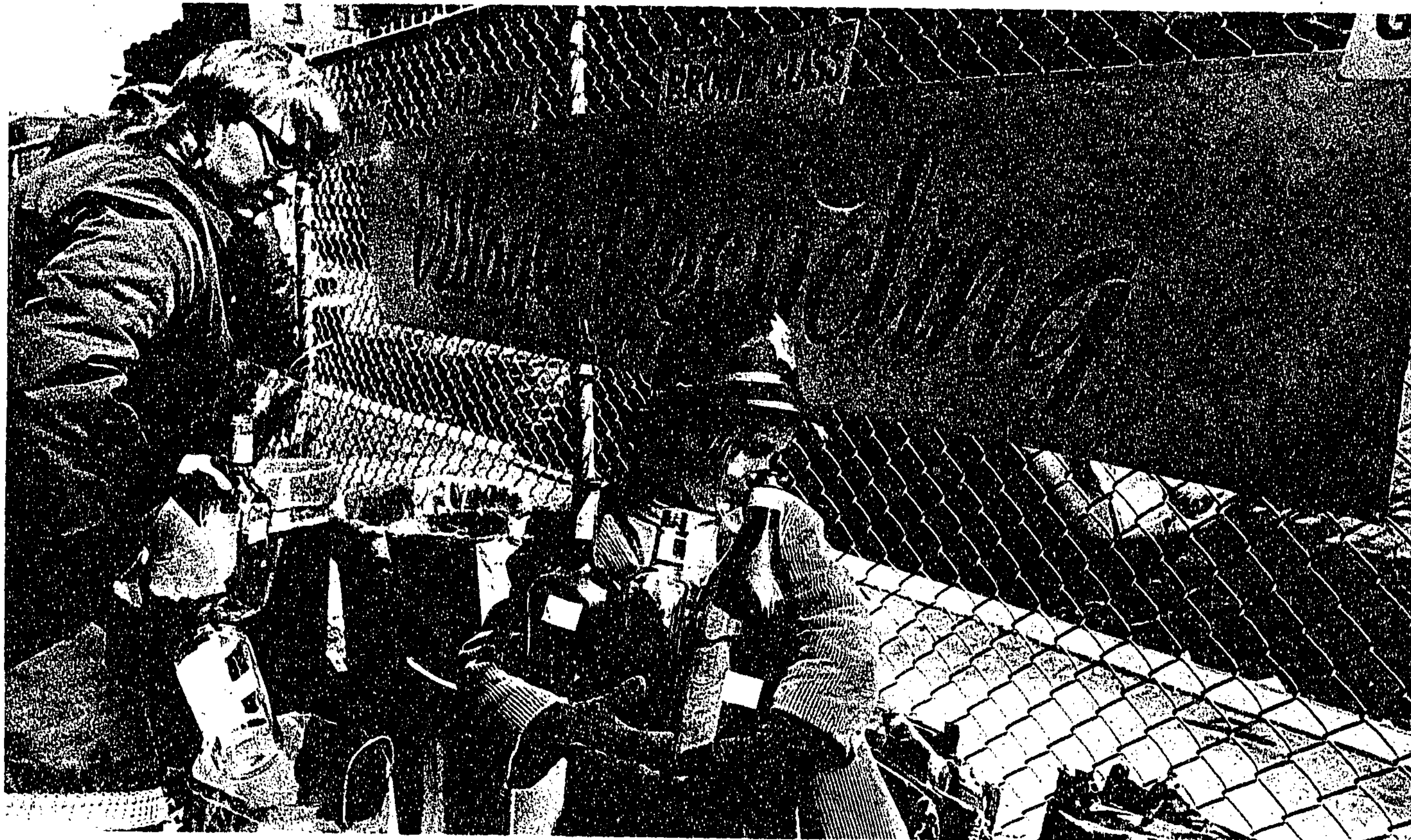
Bob scowls. "These cards!"

"But let me tell you I'm very pleased." The man knots his paisley bathrobe. "Before the guards, Jane Street used to be full of panhandlers and drunks and beggars. Now I see hardly any."

Jane Street is five blocks long, slashing west from the chic boutiques

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**BLOCK-BUILDING**—The city's 4,000 block associations organize everything from security patrols to baby-sitting pools. Above, volunteers from the Jane Street Block Association bring trash to a recycling project, while, below, members of the Bank-Bethune Block Association demonstrate the "whistle security system" — whereby a crime victim blows a whistle, alerting neighbors to blow their whistles, all to scare off muggers.



## **Block power**

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of Greenwich Avenue to the pier-side decay under the West Side Highway. It runs past a typical West-Village mix of plush townhouses, broken-up brownstones, two high-rent high-rises and the landmark home of Alexander Hamilton; it ends in a gloomy stretch of parking lot, warehouses and small factories, graced by a decrepit hotel. It has 29 trees, a rich and varied dog population and about 2,500 humans. And for the last year and a half, it has boasted a very lively block association.

The other night I stopped in at the association's regular meeting, held in a classroom of the Herzliah Hebrew Teachers Institute. It is raining, and people are straggling in late. Finally Bob Herron taps his miniature gavel on the front desk. "First," he says, "the block party. That fuzzy-haired young man over there is the block-party chairman." A fuzzy-haired young man stands and scans the assembled 30 faces. "Any volunteers?" he asks.

"I have a suggestion," says an older woman from the back. "The rock band at last year's party was so . . . percussive. This year, maybe it could be a little . . . softer."

"Right," waves Bob. "Last year we were the first to announce, but several other blocks squeezed in their parties ahead of ours and it sort of took the blush off the rose. Charlie?"

Charles Levinsohn, a Village real-estate broker, is executive secretary of the association. "The theme this year," he says, leaning over the table, "is money. Last year our purpose was to get to know each other. Now we've got to pay for the guard patrol. That's our pitch."

Bob nods. "Is there a report from Traffic?"

"We're working on a petition to reroute the trucks."

"Say, does anyone know anything about the barricade down at Washington Street?"

Bob grins mischievously. "Part of Jane Street caved in," he whispers. "But we're keeping it a secret. As long as that hole is there, we don't get any trucks."

"It's being fixed," a voice calls, and there are several moans. "One of the other blocks reported it. They complained they were getting all our traffic."

"Recycling?"

"Allison's not here," says

Michelle, standing, "but she asked me to report that everything is going on as usual, despite the weather. So far we've collected more than 21 tons of newspapers—that's almost 400 trees saved." She glances down at her notes. "And also about 20 tons of glass, which is about 40,000 bottles kept out of the landfill."

"Beautification?"

New trees and lights are being investigated.

"Communication?"

The newsletter is coming out as usual.

"O.K. Next time," calls out Bob, "we expect to have a special program from the Fire Department. Good night, everyone."

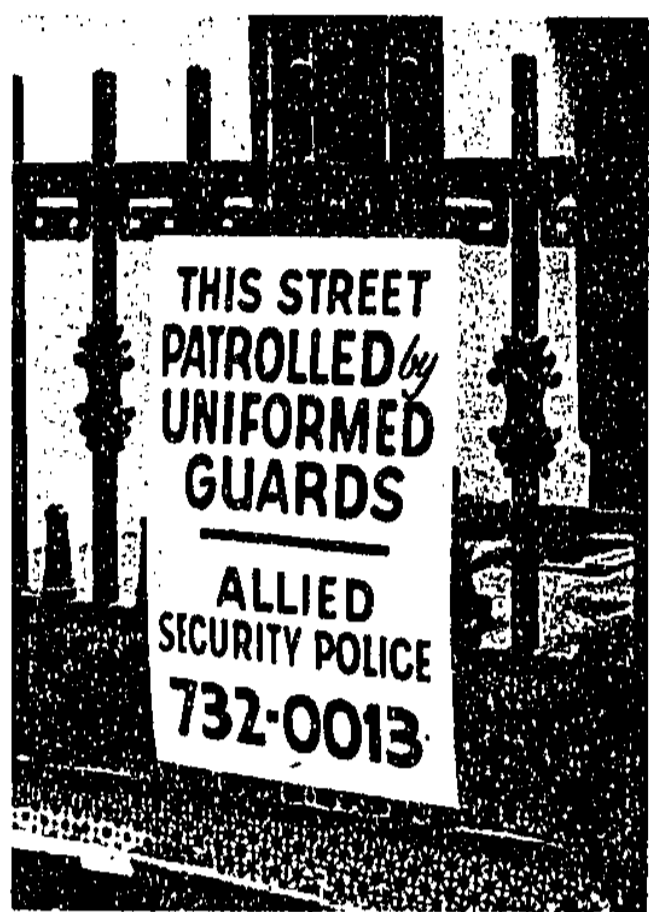
**I**T was a year and a half ago that 30 of these Jane Street residents gathered in the spacious townhouse living room of Charles Levinsohn for a gripe session. It seems that there was a bedspring sitting in the middle of the block; no one from the Sanitation Department could be bothered to pick it up. An abandoned lot was an eyesore and a peril to children. Papers and garbage flew all over the street. The garbage trucks, in fact, arrived at a different hour each day, and their schedule remained a closely guarded secret. Trees were few and far between. Burglars, and burglaries, were not. Heavy trailer trucks appeared to be using Jane Street as a drag-strip as they rumbled toward the river. And no one on Jane Street really knew anyone else on Jane Street.

"At that very first meeting," recalls Arthur Stoliar, one of the original malcontents, "we found out we all had the same problems. People were talking to each other. We even found out what the burglars looked like. It was really incredible."

Also incredible were the postmeeting results. When the Sanitation Department found out that it was a block association complaining about a bedspring, the bedspring disappeared. The landlord of the abandoned lot was approached by a city inspector; the lot was cleared. Soon, a sanitation official even showed up at a Jane Street meeting and revealed the garbage-truck schedule. It was all very inspiring.

At the second meeting, 60 people showed up, and then the Big Gripe was out in the open. Everyone seemed to have a complaint about the Jane-West Hotel. Bums and winos tottered all the way from the hotel to a liquor store on Eighth Avenue, residents com-

plained. Many said the winos were drunk, disorderly; they littered. The entire Village was then in the throes of a crime wave, and everyone at the meeting seemed to assume that the Jane-West was just another grim infestation of addicts who preyed on the community. A committee was formed to take some sort of action, but when it investigated the hotel, there was some startling news to report: The Jane-West, it seemed, was not a breeding ground for



**JANE STREET'S** message to potential muggers.

crime and drugs at all. Rather, it housed a population of sick, derelict old men, men who themselves were the helpless victims of addicts.

So the third meeting of the Jane Street Block Association was held in the hotel. Five or six men from the hotel attended. One, a retired lion-tamer, began to serve as the police liaison for the block association. Local cops were persuaded to return stray winos to the hotel, instead of carting them off to St. Vincent's Hospital or the nearby Sixth Precinct. A Jane-West committee was formed. The block organized clothing and furniture drives. Its Christmas party was a gay, sumptuous feast attended by 200—at the hotel. "We'd say 'Hi' on the street," Stoliar beams proudly. "We got to know the men. They became people, not problems. And I'm proud to say we were the first community not to reject such a hotel."

**A**S on Jane Street, most block associations are born out of a pet project or gripe. The variety of such projects is as staggering as the number of block associations: There are roughly 25 block associations in the West Village; hundreds throughout the borough of Manhattan; and, according to Harold Jones, who heads up the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Gov-

ernment, more than 4,000—yes, 4,000—in the entire city. Jones just throws up his hands when I ask him to describe a typical project. “You name it,” he smiles, “and there’s a block association doing something about it. Sprucing up, narcotics, baby-sitting, art classes, hockey leagues, patrols, stop signs, parties, repaving, bulldozers—”

“Bulldozers?”

“Sure. There’s a group in Queens that bought its own bulldozer. They got tired of waiting for the city to clean out some swamp so they went ahead and did it themselves. The kids take turns riding on it.”

And there is a block in the Bronx, I discover, that runs its own ambulance service. It purchased a battered second-hand ambulance, persuaded the Red Cross to train residents at a nearby hospital, and now provides tenants of Co-Op City with a service that was sorely needed in that area.

Some blocks have built their own vest-pocket parks. Others have relit entire streets. Hardly a block association exists that has not catered a huge carnival. Block beautifiers can be found pruning and planting

and spraying, as well as urging delinquent dog owners to “scoop the poop.” The Urban Improvements Program of the privately run Parks Council has some other novel ideas. In a jolly green booklet entitled “The Livable New York Catalogue,” the council offers up a garden of easy-to-buy delights. A tree costs \$150 for a 2- to 3-inch caliper. A planter with Baltic ivy runs around \$60. For several thousand dollars, you can have a piece of sculpture (“Be a Medici,” the booklet urges). There are benches to buy, lights, playground equipment, trash cans, bike racks, cobblestones, even a monstrous sweeper (the “Giant-Vac”) which can be easily rented.

**B**UT there is a grimmer reality. In September of 1971, a well-known, well-liked young Jane Street woman was found murdered, and the energies of the block association were permanently deflected. An emergency meeting was immediately called. Instead of the 40 familiar faces, however, a tense crowd of 300 showed up, and the decision to hire private uniformed guards was reached quickly and unani-

mously. “We had the Police Neighborhood Patrol Team, all right,” says Levinsohn bitterly, “but they’re all east of Sixth Avenue on the ‘Gold Coast,’ where the judges and politicians live. It’s not the fault of the police. They’ve got only so much manpower. But over here we’re stripped. We’re wide open!”

The private guards are without authority to arrest. They carry no sidearms, only clubs and handcuffs and walkie-talkies. Their technique is to collar a suspect, handcuff him, and hold on until the police arrive. In the first month of the new year, they chased away a dozen car thieves, prowlers and loiterers, according to their duty log. They nabbed one mugger and sat on him until the police arrived. On their rounds—they start at opposite ends of the street and criss-cross every 15 minutes, 16 hours a day—they have discovered numerous unlocked doors and several lost keys. No one knows how much crime their presence has deterred. Among other services, they will cordially escort residents or visitors to and from the door, or to and from a nearby taxi. On at least one

occasion they rescued a woman from a mugger on an adjacent street when they heard her screams for help.

Some residents, however, grumble about the “samurai” on their street, about mugging hysteria and vigilantism. One woman who recently called up the Sixth Precinct to report a crime-in-progress says she was told by the police operator, “Don’t bother us, you have your own police force.” But the precinct commander comments: “You can always find one clown or knucklehead at the switchboard at the end of a long day. In fact, we welcome the guards. The block associations are doing a terrific job. They’re our eyes and ears on the street, and we appreciate it.”

While more than half of Jane Street has already paid its dues—\$28 for six months of private protection—the guard fund is still short, and the executive committee got together for a strategy session at Charlie Levinsohn’s.

“Forty more subscriptions,” announced Levinsohn, “and we’re over the top.”

“Another panic letter,” urged

Rachel, his wife. “Stuff the mailboxes!”

“How about Joe?”

“Joe on the corner?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s moving. But what about the house across the way?”

Levinsohn sighed. “After his burglary? He must have a \$500,000 alarm system, but two pros just walked in and out with a TV set, a stereo and a \$40,000 fur coat. It took them 10 minutes. The Pinkertons arrived in 15. That’s all they can promise . . . .”

“Say, did anyone see that Bess Myerson busted the restaurant on the corner the other day.”

“For filth.”

“*Mouse excreta*, you mean,” supplies Herron.

**U**NTIL recently, Jane Street was the only block in the Village to have hired its own guards, though numerous other blocks throughout Manhattan do so. Horatio Street, Jane Street’s neighboring block to the north, had worked out a volunteer patrol. “But we’re not vigilantes,” emphasized one Horatio Street patroller. “In fact,



**BEAUTIFYIN'—**A Jane Streeter spruces up. Residents are urged to clean and paint; dog owners are asked to "scoop the poop."

we're quite timid. Our single function is to alert the police to trouble." But the Horatio Street patrol had a hard time finding volunteers, and, as a result, provided only four hours a day of protection. Impressed by the success and financial feasibility of the Jane Street patrol, it, too, started hiring private guards.

On the blocks to the south, there is the ever-popular whistle. "We have the whistle system," Joan McClure, chairman of the Bank-Bethune Block Association, tells me. "It's a mechanical device to show love and concern. It's based on the concept of helping your neighbor." The "system" requires that each resident carry a small police whistle; when someone is either a victim or an observer of a crime, the whistle is blown furiously. After the sounding of the first alarm, all others within range go for their whistles, and with any luck, the air is soon filled with deafening tweets. Just recently, a Westbeth man walking Bank Street was mugged and stomped—he later required eight stitches. The stomping was observed from several windows, and within seconds both mugger and victim were startled by an eruption of noise—the clamor of "screeching angels," the Westbeth man later described it. Apartments emptied, and the mugger was pursued down the street by a ferocious stampede of Bank Street whistlers, and driven into the astonished arms of the police.

Mrs. McClure is also sensitive to accusations of vigilantism. "We're eyes and ears on the street," she says, "not vigilantes. And we do so many other things. Just look at this!" Her hand sweeps out to emphasize the swarm of activity around us. We are standing,

in fact, at the corner of Jane and Washington Streets, in a dirt parking lot, under the abandoned tracks of the New York Central; it is an unlikely depot of the Village Recycling Project. A troop of ecologists is cheerfully carting in bundles of paper, magazines, phone books, bottles, tin cans and even lowly rags. The project is actually a joint effort of several block associations, though it grew under the aegis of Jane Street.

**S**OMETIMES, however, cooperation is not so happily achieved. The impetus behind the formation of most block associations is the street, not the neighborhood, and once in a while block enthusiasm becomes block chauvinism. Dogs, for instance, can be a fierce catalyst, and it is not unheard of for dog-owners whose block consciousness has been raised to devotedly lead their animals around the corner to an adjacent block. When the adjacent dog owners return the compliment, an impasse results. "With the guards," moans Herron, "we're the most popular block around. Now everyone feels safe here." So far, only one Jane Street resident has demonstrated any kind of a solution: She follows her dogs around with two pieces of shirt cardboard.

Although blocks occasionally clash over other obsessions, certain problems, such as traffic and crime and pollution, demand unity on a larger-than-block basis. Even the hiring of private guards has raised some neighborly eyebrows; muggers may steer clear of Jane Street only to prey on adjacent blocks.

So block organizations have begun to cluster. Not only does amalgamation head off block-vs.-block imbroglios,

but it means more power. And power, after all, is what most block associations are all about: power to plant a tree, power to catch a thief, power to sweep up litter. And it makes sense that if one block association has power, then two have twice as much power, and a group of 10 wields a considerable quantum of clout. In areas less comfortably serviced than the Village, the problem is not the irregularity of garbage pick-ups, but rather the *number* of pick-ups. On Jane Street there are five a week. A block association in Brooklyn has labored for months to persuade the city to increase its pickups from two to three a week. But that kind of shift requires real power, and single blocks are less persuasive than larger groupings like block federations.

In Brooklyn, half a dozen such federations have already formed—clumps of 10, 20, 30, 40 blocks; entire neighborhoods. Several federations are forming in the Bronx. Queens has fewer, organized as it is primarily in homeowner civic groups. As for Manhattan, it counts a number of super-organizations, including the Federation of West Side Block Associations, which covers the area between 59th Street and 110th Street; the Neighborhood Environmental Action Team (NEAT), covering the sub-area between 60th and 73d Streets; and The Alliance, a group of more than 50 block associations located between 59th Street and 96th Street, from Central Park to the East River.

Although most of these groups describe themselves as "nonpolitical," it is not so easy to remain nonpolitical. Elected officials are rather adept at smelling out the potential for power, and not a few have begun alerting themselves to the activities of block associations and the federations; with great vigor, politicians have taken to attending meetings and assigning special assistants to handle "block problems." Mostly, such interest is helpful. It gives blocks more direct, sophisticated ties to city government, and it keeps representatives in closer touch with their constituency.

**S**OMETIMES, however, a particular constituency may not be represented by a block association—or several organizations may contend for the honor. In the Village, for instance, the validity of the "Confederation of the North Village" is hotly contested by other block associations. Although the confederation claims to represent the area

between University Place and Eighth Avenue, from 11th Street to 13th Street, most of the block-association chairmen I talked to within that ambit wanted no part of the confederation. They, in fact, were pushing their own group. Each side accuses the other of having a "paper constituency" and hints at "ego trips" and "political motives." Eleventh Street has split into no fewer than three separate block associations. And civil war has broken out on a short stretch of West Fourth Street that is "represented" by two warring factions. When the going gets tough in the battle for representation, each side cites the success of its block party. The chairman of the North Village Confederation described its party last spring as "the most successful the city has ever had." It raised more than \$5,000, he told me; this spring, the confederation is planning a city-wide conference of block associations.

It is easy to understand the origin of such confusion. Most block associations are not very tightly structured. Jane Street, for instance, is typical, guided by a small, benevolent executive committee which makes the phone calls, calls the meetings, deposits the money—and every once in a while, submits itself to re-acclamation. There are almost a thousand mailing addresses on Jane Street, but rarely do more than 40 or 50 familiar faces attend the block meetings. There are no dues, there is no strict "membership," and while most Jane Street residents go along with the association's project, it is hardly a "constituency."

**B**LOCK associations grew out of despair, the despair of urban complexity and bureaucracies that never listened. No city agency could be bothered with the loose top of a trash can, or a planter of Baltic ivy. But block associations do care. In their brief history, they have made remarkable gains, giving some New Yorkers the faith that the city might still be habitable for human beings.

As Bob Herron explained it to me, city government just doesn't work any more. It's only a matter of time until New York breaks apart into real, decentralized power units, similar to the London borough system. Or the "demes" of ancient Greece. There are 2,500 people living on Jane Street. There were 6,000 in ancient Athens. "That's not such a difference," smiles Herron. "We're going to be the Jane Street Deme." ■