BIG CITY

The Landlord Wants Facial Recognition in Its Rent-Stabilized Buildings. Why?

By Ginia Bellafante

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Last fall, tenants at the Atlantic Plaza Towers, a rent-stabilized apartment complex in Brooklyn, received an alarming letter in the mail. Their landlord was planning to do away with the key-fob system that allowed them entry into their buildings on the theory that lost fobs could wind up in the wrong hands and were now also relatively easy to duplicate.

Instead, property managers planned to install facial recognition technology as a means of access. It would feature "an encrypted reference file" that is "only usable in conjunction with the proprietary algorithm software of the system," the letter explained, in a predictably failed effort to mitigate concerns about privacy.

As it happened, not every tenant was aware of these particular Orwellian developments. New mailboxes in the buildings required new keys, and to obtain a new key you had to submit to being photographed; some residents had refused to do this and so were not getting their mail.

In order to let neighbors who might not have seen the letter know what was potentially coming, five tenants convened in the lobby of one of the two buildings on a late October morning to spread the word. A few days later, those five tenants — like most of the residents at Atlantic, black women — received a notice from property management with pictures of the gathering taken from a security camera; they were told that the lobby was not "a place to solicit, electioneer, hang out or loiter."

New York State law, in fact, grants tenants the right to meet peacefully in nearly any location in a building as long as they are not obstructing passageways. Management maintains that tenants were getting in the way even if the pictures did not clearly indicate that. In any event, the letter went on to say that while some tenants complied when a security guard asked residents to disperse, at least one did not: "Ms. Johnnie Mae Robinson stated this was her building and she will stay there. Let me make something clear, this is not your building, you are a resident of our building."

The fact that the Atlantic complex already has 24-hour security in its lobbies as well as a clearly functioning camera system has only caused tenants to further question the necessity of facial recognition technology. The initiative is particularly dubious given the population of the buildings. Last year, a study out of M.I.T. and Stanford looked at the accuracy rates of some of the major facial-analysis programs on the market. It found that although the error rates for determining the gender of light-skinned men never surpassed 1 percent, the same programs failed to identify darker-skinned women up to one-third of the time.

The fear that marginalized groups will fall under increased surveillance as these technologies progress in the absence of laws to regulate them hardly seems like dystopian hysteria.

In November, the City of Detroit announced that it was introducing the use of real-time police cameras at two public-housing towers. The existing program is known as Project Greenlight, and it was designed to deter criminal behavior. But tower residents worried that relatives would be less likely to visit, given the constant stream of data collected by law enforcement.

This kind of heightened monitoring has become a global phenomenon. By the end of last year, 47 public housing projects in Beijing were using facial recognition technology, and plans were underway to expand use.

It is not an accident that these systems would arrive in otherwise low-tech, disadvantaged communities like Atlantic Plaza Towers. Previously part of Mitchell-Lama, a state-run affordable housing program for middle-income families begun in the 1950s, the complex sits on the border of East New York, a real-estate frontier where the city and developers are investing lots of money. Tenants, many of whom have lived there for decades, look around and see change and imagine what landlords are envisioning. At a tenants' association meeting on Wednesday night, residents expressed the feeling that changes made to the buildings were not intended for them but rather for new types of residents to come, when certain apartments became eligible for market-rate rents.

Even though Nelson Management, the owner of the buildings, has said that no data will be shared with outside parties, tenants don't believe it. They perceive the threat that the information collected from science-fiction technologies will ultimately land in housing court to advance eviction proceedings.

When I spoke with Robert Nelson, the president of the company, he insisted that the safety of residents was behind all of this and said that he was "taken aback" by the negative feedback his ideas had received.

Last month he met with tenants to talk about the technology. "He said that he was trying to make modifications to the building," Fabian Rogers, who has lived in Atlantic for 11 years, told me. "But he was pitching to the future, not to any of us, and we came away offended. Security issues were not on the agenda of tenants. Security is the least of our concerns."

Ultimately, a state housing agency will decide whether Nelson Management can install the software or not. Housing lawyers at Brooklyn Legal Services are helping tenants in their opposition. A flyer from Nelson Management promoting the technology was conceived to persuade the doubters: "Your daily access experience will be frictionless, meaning you touch nothing and show only your face. From now on the doorway will just recognize you!"

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