

# The New York Times

RENTERS

## For a Mother and Son, Life Above a Brooklyn Library

When Miguelina Minier heard that her local library was being renovated with affordable housing added on top, she applied. It was about the 40th time she had tried a housing lottery.



Miguelina Minier and her son, Ian, moved into their apartment in January 2023. There is a public library on the ground floor. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

By D.W. Gibson Feb. 24, 2025

Ian Avilez can't get enough of books. So much so that the first-grader is reading at a third-grade level. "I used to read to him when he was a baby," said his mother, Miguelina Minier. His kindergarten teacher asked about Ian's expansive vocabulary. "Why does Ian know words that I didn't even teach him?" I'm like, "We live on top of the library," Ms. Minier said.

It's true. Ms. Minier and her son live in the Sunset Park Library and Apartments in Brooklyn, which opened in 2023 with the residential part built above the library. The first library on this spot opened in 1905, and it lasted until 1970, when it was torn down. A new one opened in 1972, although, in time, it needed a lot of love.

Ms. Minier remembers it well. She's lived in the neighborhood for 20 years and she's been going to the library since she was a teenager. "It was dark, very, very dark and it was small," she said. "Sometimes they didn't have the book that you were looking for." When she developed an interest in criminal justice, she wanted to check out reference books about police academy exams. "They didn't have them," she recalled.



The Sunset Park library is vastly different from how it looked when Ms. Minier spent time there as a teenager. "It was dark, very, very dark," she said, "and it was small."  
Graham Dickie/The New York Times

By the time her son was born, the building needed repairs — to a broken air-conditioner and an outdated electrical system, to name just two. The Brooklyn Public Library couldn't afford the necessary work. So it partnered with the Fifth Avenue Committee, a nonprofit developer, to renovate the library and add 49 units of the affordable housing.

To qualify to live in the building, Ms. Minier had to have an income between 30 and 80 percent of the area median income, which was \$86,380 when she applied. The number of units includes eight apartments that benefit from a project-based Section 8 subsidy program and nine apartments set aside for families and individuals who formerly experienced homelessness.

“I didn't realize that it was going to be a building on top of the library,” Ms. Minier recalled. “I thought they were just going to renew the library and that's it. But then, the building came and I was like, ‘Oh, I got to apply for that.’”

It wasn't Ms. Minier's first time trying her luck at a housing lottery. “I've had more than 38 applications. But this one was meant to be.” She was selected out of 60,000 applicants.



The apartment gave Ms. Minier her first opportunity to have a room to herself. “This place is a blessing.” she said. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

The apartment she and her son moved into has two bedrooms. It is the first time that the 6-year-old and the 34-year-old each have a room of their own. “Imagine,” she said, “33 years living with somebody else, not having your own space. This place is a blessing.”

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\$1,350 | Sunset Park, Brooklyn

## Miguelina Minier, 34

**Occupation:** Relationship manager for a nonprofit bank

**On popularity:** Because Ms. Minier has come to know so many people in the neighborhood through the work she does, it’s rare that she can go out without being recognized. “Every time I walk down the street I hear, ‘Hi, Miguelina. Hi, hi, hi, hi — like the president,” she said, laughing.



When Ms. Minier’s son, Ian, isn’t downstairs at the library he’s often in his bedroom, reading the titles he’s checked out. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

**On leaving New York:** Even though Ms. Minier hopes that she and Ian stay in the apartment for years to come, she does sometimes wonder what it would be like to live in

a house. “I want to have a yard where I can make barbecue,” she said. “My son tells me that he wants to have a trampoline to jump and I want to give him that.”

Ms. Minier, born in the Dominican Republic, came to the United States as a child and her living conditions have always been tight. “I’m from a foreign country,” she said, “and when you come here, you don’t have your own space. Even though you’re 13, 14, you’re still sleeping with a cousin or somebody else. Ian, thank God, he’s lucky. He has something that I never had before. He has his own space.”

Ian, born in Sunset Park, had grown up in crowded apartments for the first few years of his life, so getting his own room was enough to make him excited about the move — and that was before he found out about the library downstairs. “That came later on,” Ms. Minier said. “When the library was about to open, we had the opportunity to have a tour in the library for the tenants. When he saw that, I explained to him, ‘We are the first ones seeing the library because we live on top of it.’ He was like, ‘Oh, mommy. Oh my God, oh my God!’”



Each room in the apartment comes with large windows, affording the home ample light.  
Graham Dickie/The New York Times

If it were up to Ian, he and his mother would go to the library every day. “I’m the one who’s like, ‘Not today, Ian, mommy’s tired — let’s go another day,’” Ms. Minier said. Still, they make it at least three times a week.

Ms. Minier reads to Ian every now and again, but these days it’s mostly him reading to her from favorites like the “Pete the Cat” series and “Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!”

When her son is in school, Ms. Minier spends her own time in the library. She works from home and it’s helpful to have access to the library work spaces.

“They have chargers,” she said, “they have the Wi-Fi for you to connect, and they even have plugs for you to connect your device. To me, personally, the library means a lot. The staff are all very, very helpful. You ask them for any resource, anything, and they will help.”



Ms. Minier appreciates the fresh feeling that comes with being the first resident in a new unit. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

Ms. Minier works for a nonprofit bank that lends to entrepreneurial women, many who live in the neighborhood. “The work that I do focuses on the people that we see sometimes on the train selling churros or selling chocolate or sometimes you see them

in the street selling mangoes and stuff like that. We give out a small loan to help them get their business started.”

The best part of the work is seeing a transformation in her neighbors. “When they text me and say, ‘Hey, Miguelina, look, now I have my own churros cart,’ I get happy because it’s something that they achieve, same as me, that they come from a different country and they achieved something.”



Ian asks his mother if they can go to the library nearly every day. Graham Dickie/The New York Times

It isn't just the Wi-Fi and books and quiet space that the library provides Ms. Minier and her son. It's also pride. On a recent field trip with his classmates to a nearby fire station, Ian had the chance to point out the library. “He told all his friends, “That’s where I live. I live on top of the library.”

Upstairs, he told them, is where he has a room of his own with a shelf for every book he checks out.