

This zine accompanies the exhibition *Through Padlocks, Behind Barricades* Margaret Morton's *Glass House* and the *Squats of the Lower East Side*, a collaboration between Interference Archive and the Margaret Morton Archive. The exhibition explores the squatter movement on New York's Lower East Side in the 1990s, featuring Margaret Morton's photographs of life in *Glass House*, an abandoned glass factory at the corner of Avenue D and East 10th Street. In October 1992, a group of squatters displaced from a squat called *Foetus* began a community there, which survived until February 1994, when the police evicted the residents. Morton's in-depth portrait of one squat is presented with an array of printed materials that explore the public debates over squatters' rights. The project builds upon two previous exhibitions at Interference Archive: *We Won't Move: Tenants Organize in NYC* (2015), and *Building for Us: Stories of Homesteading and Cooperative Housing* (2019).

Through Padlocks, Behind Barricades will be on view from October 17, 2025 to January 5, 2026. Interference Archive will also host three public programs. On November 11, artists close to the squatting movement in Loisaída will discuss how they used drawing and photography to shape public opinion and contest city-ordered squat evictions. On November 18, oral historians and archivists will discuss housing and sweat equity as seen in the archival record. On December 2, we will screen two films: *Survival Without Rent* (2025, Katie Heiserman and Elana Meyers) and *Viva Loisaída!* (1978, Marlis Momber).

Through Padlocks, Behind Barricades

A Brief History of Squatting in New York

In the early 1970s, white flight and deindustrialization transformed New York's demographics. Over 800,000 residents left in search of economic opportunities no longer available in the city.¹ Facing high vacancy rates and unable to make a profit, landlords abandoned thousands of buildings en masse, leaving low-income New Yorkers to adapt to a new landscape of dereliction.² The city seized buildings after landlords stopped paying their property taxes, but wasn't equipped to make them livable. Realizing they could profit more from insurance claims than rent rolls, some property owners turned to arson in search of a payout. Basing their recommendations on dubious mathematics, the Rand Corporation advised the U.S. Department of Housing

Emily Drane, Justin Han

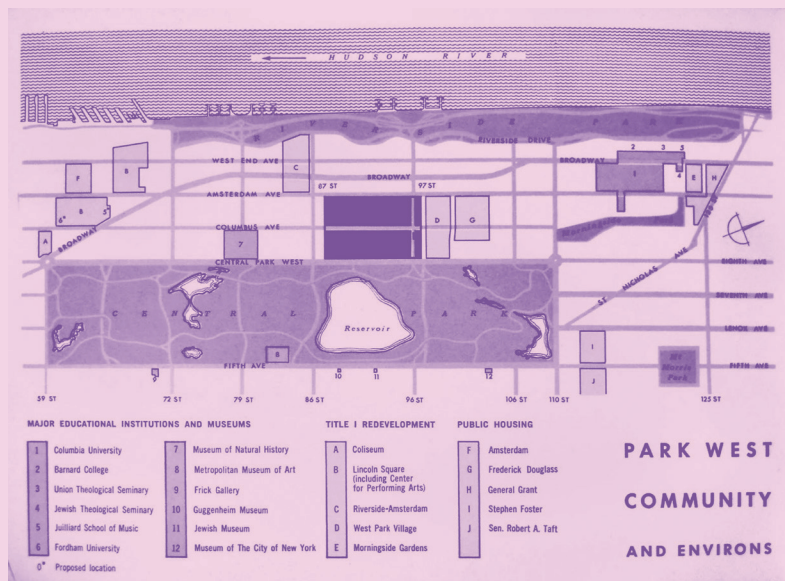
As anyone who lives in New York City knows, finding and holding on to a decent, affordable place to live presents an absurd ordeal. The housing crisis feels both relentless and deliberate because it is just that. Landlords warehouse rent-stabilized apartments, Eric Adams orders the destruction of homeless encampments, and hyper-gentrification hollows out one neighborhood after the next. While past decades saw mayoral administrations sympathetic to rent controls and tenant protections, many of our institutions have become beholden to landlords and a powerful real estate industry, backing policy that displaces and disempowers low-income tenants.

Displacement, inhumane living conditions, artificial scarcity, and outrageous profit are the horrors produced by a system that prioritizes housing as a vehicle for profit rather than a fundamental right. Against this backdrop, we revisit the work and actions of tenacious squatters on New York's Lower East Side. In the late twentieth century, squatters seized abandoned buildings and made homes outside the market and in defiance of city opposition, insisting that shelter was a right, not a commodity. They re-



A
Artist unknown, Squatting Hotline,
date unknown.

- 1 Michael Oreskes, "New York Turns Squatters into Homeowners," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1982
- 2 Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Picador, 2018).



B
Urban Renewal Board, West Side Urban Renewal Plan Map, 1959.

and Urban Development to reduce fire services in disadvantaged neighborhoods.³ Images of buildings burning, especially in the Bronx, quickly became symbolic of the era's devastation.

Squatters were precarious tenants, unhoused people, artists, organizers, and punks who, dissatisfied with the city's paralysis, revived these burnt and decaying shells to make new homes. This was a movement born of necessity and in defiance of the targeted neglect of their neighborhoods. While politicians insisted that widespread homelessness and rent burden boiled down to some complex stew of economics and policy too complicated for ordinary people to understand, to squatters the math was simple: people were living on the streets while apartments sat empty. Why wait for a system that had already counted you out?

As New York City faced bankruptcy in the 1970s, banks and President Gerald Ford declined to bail it out. In doing so, the federal government hoped to teach the nation at large a lesson about the indulgences of the welfare state, which the city had come to exemplify. Ford issued an ultimatum: the city would have to cut its generous social welfare programs to achieve a balanced budget. Austerity and pri-

vatzation became ascendant forces, as advisers from finance and business pushed for the elimination of almost 70,000 city jobs and the shuttering of hospitals and libraries. Low-income communities saw their basic services singled out for elimination, and they quickly recognized policies like "planned shrinkage" to mean targeted neglect.⁴ This transformation cleared the way for private interests to reshape the city, at the expense of tenants and the industrial workers who had once comprised its political base.

Squatting (the occupation of derelict buildings outside the law) and homesteading (legal citizen renovation supported by city and federal funding) challenged the primacy of these political currents. Citizens claimed city-held property in neighborhoods like Harlem, the South Bronx, the Lower East Side, and East New York, and pioneered different methods for rehabilitating vacant buildings in the hopes of averting displacement.

In 1970, Black, Puerto Rican, and Dominican residents of the Upper West Side or-

3 Deborah and Rodrick Wallace, "Benign Neglect and Planned Shrinkage," Verso Blog, March 25, 2017.
4 Roger Starr, "Making New York Smaller," The New York Times, November 14, 1976.

ganized "Operation Move-In," occupying abandoned buildings slated for demolition in protest of the city's "West Side Urban Renewal Plan."⁵ Enlisting several hundred families to squat entire buildings, organizers helped those in precarious and uninhabitable housing resist evictions, demolitions, and displacement. In 1979, a court decision gave squatters in a few of these buildings city leases.⁶ The movement could not prevent the broader gentrification of the Upper West Side, but it served an instructive role, mobilizing constituents and their allies to squat while presenting "sweat equity," ownership interest gained through physical labor on a property, as a viable tool in the fight for city-wide affordable housing.⁷

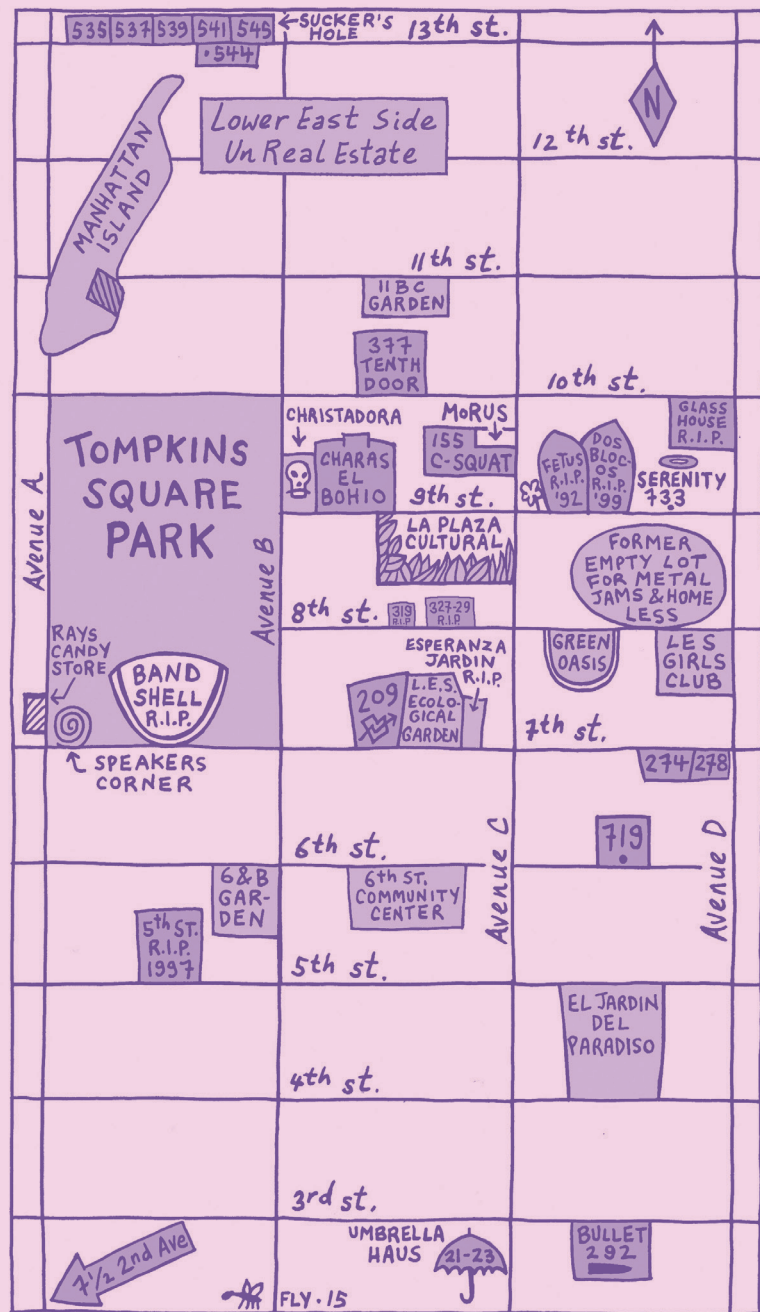
Efforts like Operation Move-In, along with sweat equity projects in the South Bronx, encouraged President Jimmy Carter to initiate an Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program in 1977, inviting citizen rehabilitation of city-owned abandoned buildings in 23 U.S. cities.⁸ In the South Bronx, the Banana Kelly Community Improvement Agency squatted three buildings and saved them from demolition between 1977 and 1982.⁹ In Brooklyn, the housing nonprofit Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) urged East New York community members to squat 25 abandoned, city-owned buildings during the summer of 1985.¹⁰ By 1988, an umbrella organization called the Mutual Housing Association of New York (MHANY) represented those same squatters' interests before the city, and won title to their buildings along with \$2.7 million in grants and low-interest loans for renovations.¹¹

If squatting was once generally understood as the illegal counterpart to state-sanctioned homesteading, the distinctions would become increasingly arbitrary. Where squatters could operate outside the law to pressure for housing reform, homesteading was an official channel developed in response — one that city government perhaps hoped would diminish squatting's appeal. With conservative politicians eager to defund federal homesteading, identification with one or the other became more a matter of political strategy. Would it be best to emulate the homesteaders of the past, hoping to win in court the right to remain, or to frame squatting as direct action, an insurgent tactic resistant to state absorption?



C
Eric Drooker, Untitled [Illustration for the Manhattan Mirror], ca. 1995.

5 Rose Muzio, "The Struggle Against 'Urban Renewal' in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Emergence of El Comité," *Centro Journal* XXI, no. 2 (2009): 109-41.
6 Ibid., 125..
7 Oksana Mironova, "'The scythe of progress must move northward': Urban Renewal on the Upper West Side," *Urban Omnibus*, June 10, 2015.
8 Sarah Ferguson, "The Struggle for Space: 10 Years of Turf Battling on the Lower East Side," in *Resistance: A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Clayton Patterson et. al (Seven Stories Press, 2006), 147.
9 Joel Schwartz, "Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark D. Naison (Rutgers University Press, 1986), 190.
10 Amy Starecheski, *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 72-3.
11 Steven Erlanger, "New York Turns Squatters into Homeowners," *The New York Times*, October 12, 1987.



D

Loisaida on the Frontlines

The Lower East Side, or Loisaida, stood at the vanguard of struggles over who the city really belonged to, with consecutive waves of immigrants fighting for housing rights there. Jewish immigrant women organized the first large-scale rent strike in New York City in the Lower East Side in 1904, and it eventually spread to 2,000 families and lasted nearly a month.

Loisaida's borders are often loosely defined as E. 14th Street and Houston Street from north to south, and Avenues A and D from east to west. Much of its Puerto Rican population came to New York City in the wake of Operation Bootstrap, a post-war federal industrialization initiative that aimed to transform Puerto Rico's agrarian economy into an industrial one. Decades later, as the same forces that propelled deindustrialization elsewhere in the U.S. threatened manufacturing jobs in Puerto Rico, thousands left the island, many settling on the Lower East Side. By the late 1970s, Puerto Ricans made up over 50 percent of the Lower East Side population, and a 1974 poem by activist Bimbo Rivas popularized Loisaida as the Spanglish name for the neighborhood.¹² As artist Marlis Momber's short documentary film *Viva Loisaida!* (1978)

Soon after taking power in 1981, President Ronald Reagan ended Carter's federal funding for homesteading. New York City continued to fund homesteading projects through its own Urban Homestead Program, which ran from 1980 to 1989, and the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB), which supported buildings' conversion into cooperatives by taking on debt on behalf of tenants.¹³ Whether or not they utilized these official channels, the residents of Loisaida recognized squatting as a means of claiming housing as a fundamental right. In burned-out tenements, padlocked walk-ups, and vacant lots, residents staked their claim to urban space.

Taking on tactics introduced largely by Puerto Rican homesteaders, squatting became an expansive phenomenon across the Lower East Side. In 1984, squatters opened up city-owned buildings on E. 13th Street between Avenues A and B.¹⁴ Glass House was formed on E. 10th Street in 1992, while E. 9th Street was home to Foetus Squat, Dos Blocos, Serenity, and C-Squat (now home to the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space). Other squats, gardens, and community centers dotted the blocks below, down to Umbrella House and Bullet Space on E. 3rd Street.

Squatters used their tactics not only to build residences but also to cultivate cultural and community space. CHARAS, an organiza-



Eric Drooker, *Untitled [City Hall Demonstration Poster]*, 1984.

illustrates, Puerto Rican residents adapted to landlord disinvestment by homesteading, starting community gardens, and establishing community centers, tactics that the next decade's squatters would embrace as their own.

¹² In the early 1970s, Bimbo Rivas and Chino Garcia (who would later become two core members of CHARAS) wrote a series of theatrical skits playing off of the 1972 film *Man of La Mancha*, which was where they first used the Spanglish "Loisaida". See Leyla Vural, Interview with Carlos "Chino" Garcia, New York Preservation Archive Project, November 13, 2017.

¹³ In Loisaida, UHAB supported the sweat equity rehabilitation of buildings like 519 E. 11th Street, purchased by tenants with its help in 1974. 519 E. 11th became mythical for the windmill its tenants built on the rooftop, effective enough to produce an energy surplus reabsorbed by the grid. The building won an unprecedented court victory against Con Edison, which had to reimburse the homesteaders for their electrical contributions. Malve von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City, 1978-1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida* (Praeger, 1996), 60.

¹⁴ Starecheski, 100.

← D Fly Orr - URE; Lower East Side UnReal Estate, 2015.

tion of Puerto Rican progressives named after its founders' first initials, worked to address housing insecurity, access to education and job training, and environmental issues. The organization initially operated out of the Christadora House, a former settlement house in which the Black Panthers were also active. In 1979, the city devised an agreement with CHARAS that it would squat and renovate the building that formerly housed P.S. 64, allowing the private developer who had bought the Christadora to convert it into luxury condominiums. CHARAS named the new headquarters "El Bohío" ("the hut"), and for the next 20 years offered classes, meeting space, a bicycle recycling program, concerts, film screenings, and theatre. In one of its programs, CHARAS collaborated with architect R. Buckminster Fuller to build geodesic domes that could shelter the unhoused. Part of the network of politicized community spaces that also included the neighborhood's community gardens, like the nearby La Plaza Cultural, El Bohío earned a reputation as an irreplaceable Loisaida resource.

In the mid-1980s, Lower East Side housing activists fought Mayor Ed Koch's efforts to auction off vacant buildings for private development. The battle eventually yielded a compromise known as the 50/50 Cross Subsidy Plan, which promised the construction of affordable housing in exchange for the sale of city land for market-rate development. The value of that affordable housing would be deregulated within 15 years.¹⁵ It was this plan that set into motion new private-sector visions for beautification and profit, and began to alarm residents attuned to the looming threat of gentrification. With the rise of proposals requiring their eviction, squatters became fierce and creative advocates for their right to remain.

Tompkins Square Park as Squatter Epicenter

All of these frictions over affordable space colored the Tompkins Square Park riot that erupted on August 6, 1988. A diverse, working-class populace took to the park to oppose a 1 a.m. curfew proposed by Community Board 3, which represents Chinatown and the Lower East Side. The curfew sought to clamp down on squatters, drug dealing, noise, and homeless use of the park as shelter. But this proposal was issued

during a time of mounting gentrification, and the riot became a symbolic site of resistance. The Lower East Side boasted a legacy of resisting transformations imposed from above: it blocked tenement demolitions for a motorway as advised by the Regional Plan Association in 1929, and the Cooper Square Committee famously halted Robert Moses' urban renewal plan in 1956.¹⁶

As residents gathered to peacefully protest the curfew, police on horseback beat bystanders indiscriminately and made nine arrests. Victims lodged more than 100 complaints of police brutality, and the resulting media firestorm resulted in the curfew's withdrawal. Even those initially most concerned with the image of the park were appalled. As the story became internationally newsworthy, squatters and activists proclaimed the park a "liberated zone," but this moment of optimism soon evaporated. In December of 1989, a police raid evicted several hundred unhoused park residents in 18-degree weather, and in 1991, Mayor David Dinkins closed the park for a two-year renovation. The mayor's critics shamed him by proclaiming the shantytowns that soon emerged "Dinkinsvilles", harking back to the "Hoovervilles" of the Great Depression.¹⁷

No Easy Solidarity

While the city struggled to identify appropriate responses to landlord disinvestment, squatters looked to make themselves indispensable to one another. Learning how to construct stairs, tap into the electrical grid, and devise waste management systems, drifters, punks, former addicts, and previously unhoused people found agency in the daily work of sustaining community. In the words of Donny, one of the residents of Glass House, at the southwest corner of E. 10th Street and Avenue D: "Basically, the family mattered more than the building. I mean, we were always working on the building, but we were always working on the community too."¹⁸

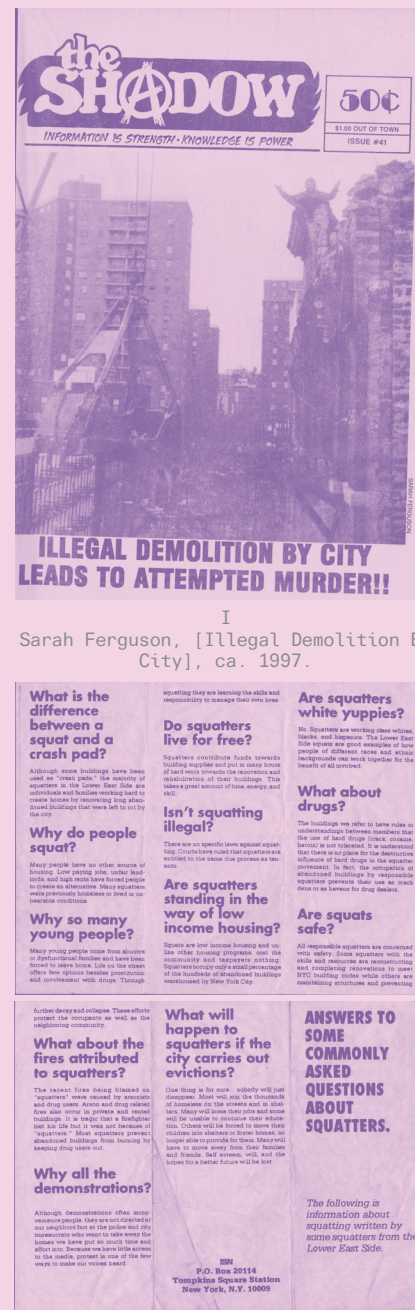
Photographer Margaret Morton was permitted to photograph and record Glass House

15 Starechski, 89.

16 Ferguson, 145.

17 Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), 5-6.

18 Margaret Morton, *Glass House* (Penn State University Press, 2004), 26.



J
International Squatters' Network (ISN),
Answers to Some Commonly Asked Questions
About Squatters, date unknown.

and its residents. As her book *Glass House* attests, the residents of Glass House functioned as a collective, running weekly house meetings and scheduled work days. The 2,000 square foot community room was the heart of the squat, where residents gathered to discuss politics, share meals, or resolve disputes. A community bulletin board posted weekly sign-up sheets for watch shifts: night watch, bike watch, eviction watch, barricade crew. Everyone was expected to follow the rules of the house, and everyone was expected to do their part. At times frictions arose over property, private space, or conduct. Difficult conversations produced collective agreements concerning drug use, pets, privacy, and firearms.¹⁹ Glass House residents arrived with difficult pasts and personal struggles, but their ability to work through conflicts and find consensus directly confronted mainstream narratives that pegged them as dysfunctional freeloaders. Against incredible odds, they turned decay into shelter and made homes where there were none, building a way of living that placed collectivity above individual ownership.

This ethos extended beyond Glass House. Community structures within squats varied, but a commitment to collective survival and mutual aid united them. Glass House members on Bike Watch ran reconnaissance missions across the neighborhood, looking out for any evictions that might be in progress at other squats. When evictions hit, squats rallied through Eviction Watch, spreading the word through phone trees—where each building receiving an alert would pass it along to other designated squats—and rushing crews to barricade doors and offer aid.

The stakes mounted in 1985, when the city moved to sell off its inventory of foreclosed housing to private developers in exchange for a token offering of temporarily affordable units. Squatters at large found themselves in renewed conflict with the city, which had tolerated them throughout the preceding decade but would now expel them for redevelopment. The squatters saw themselves as filling the gap left by the city, which had neglected the housing it now sought to recoup. Committing years of their labor and, at times, thousands of dollars in construction material, they had raised property values and

19 Ibid., 30-38.

prevented buildings' collapse. Now city evictions would nullify their contributions. As Glass House's lawyers William Kunstler and Ron Kuby wrote in a letter to the director of Pueblo Nuevo, the AIDS nonprofit which was to be built after their eviction:

²⁰ "A project which uses over one million taxpayer dollars to make 40 people homeless while housing 45 different people does not seem to make much sense."

As part of its campaign against the squatters, the city sought to obscure the realities of class by emphasizing ethnic differences between squatters and other poor residents, painting them as entitled Midwestern delinquents. In a letter responding to a segment on Dateline NBC about squatters in 1994, a representative of housing nonprofit LES Coalition Housing Development wrote vitriolically of city buildings as "a community resource that has been stolen from us by a bunch of well educated, well connected white kids," concluding the letter with a joke whose punchline collapsed "squatter" and "yuppie" into "squappie".²¹ The earlier generation's homesteaders, like some of the founding members of CHARAS/El Bohío, would occasionally agree, looking upon young squatters in the 1990s as "irresponsible, revolutionary wannabes playing a game in a place where the stakes were too high ... parasites dancing amid the truly urban poor."²² Yet in Glass House, many squatters came from working class homes, and their squat provided a refuge from lives marked by abuse, alcoholism and neglect. None were homeless for their amusement.

When the city adopted this same rhetoric, it attempted to separate the "deserving" (poor families abiding by the rules of waitlists) from the "undeserving" poor. This ideological playbook aimed to pit neighbors against one another while the city itself created the imminent threats of displacement they experienced. Lower East Side squatters were keenly aware that the fight to appropriate housing was the fight to preserve the neighborhood's multicultural, working-class character. While divisions did exist between squatters and longer-standing members of the community, there was a widespread awareness of the common threads linking class, racism, disinvestment, and the struggle for affordable housing. But new developments in city politics would threaten this coalition.

The Fate of the Squats

The city began to mount its final battles against squatters and community centers after Rudy Giuliani's election in 1993. The ascendance of the Giuliani administration and the New York City real estate machine marked the start of a relentless city-led campaign of evictions escalating through vacate orders, code violations, and SWAT-style raids. While Eviction Watch organized the physical defense of the squats, squatters also fought a rhetorical war. In flyers, pamphlets, and exposés in publications like *The Shadow*, *Piss Bucket*, and *Street News*, they unmasked city politicians' conflicts of interest and caveats in city housing policy. In court, they sought to prove collective discipline and continued occupancy, while fending off accusations that their actions were at the expense of immigrants and the working class.

Antonio Pagán, a city council member with ties to nonprofit developers, became one of the squatters' chief antagonists.²³ He cam-

²⁰ William M. Kunstler and Ronald L. Kuby to Roberto Caballero, June 03, 1993, Fly Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.

²¹ Lyn Pentecost to Dateline NBC Producers, ca. December 13, 1994, Peter Spagnuolo Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.

²² Ferguson, 159.

²³ Pagán also advised the city's attempted eviction and closure of CHARAS around 1998. Despite a legendary protest that year of an auction of public land including El Bohío, in which activists unleashed 10,000 crickets upon One Police Plaza, developer and Giuliani campaign contributor Gregg Singer purchased the building for over \$3 million. The building has stood empty ever since, with Singer failing to develop it either as dorms for Cooper Union or for the Joffrey Ballet School and becoming mired in intractable disputes with collaborators and the city. Loisaida residents continue to fight for its restoration as community space. See Amy Waldman, "Cricket Invaders Turn an Auction into 'Madness'", *The New York Times*, July 21, 1998, or Julian E. Barnes, "HUD Vows Suit Over Charas Renovation Money," *The New York Times*, August 01, 1999.

→ K CHARAS, Dome Construction, August 1974.

→ L Artist unknown, *Speak Out to Save CHARAS!*, 1999.



K

SPEAK OUT TO SAVE CHARAS!

RECLAIMING FREE TERRITORY ON LOWER EAST SIDE

Charas is a unique organization, grounded both in the struggles of the Lower East Side and the citywide Latino community. Over the years, the combined artistic, performance and meeting space has been host to struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia, age-ism and police brutality. It has been an organizing center: tenants, squatters, labor feminist and national liberation support groups, most recently Vieques. It has been an irreplaceable host to a myriad of events and meetings. It has also saved many lives in communities all over the city by providing facilities to efforts to overcome the ravages of alcoholism, drug addiction and other deadly problems tearing our communities apart.

Charas has helped all of us. Now Charas needs our help.

Charas now stands threatened with closure and eviction by a combination of a corrupt landlord and the maniacally reactionary lame-duck Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Speak out!

Revive a fighting Lower East Side tradition!

Fridays, July 20th and July 27th
From 6:30 p.m. until ???

Speakout Corner: 7th Street and Avenue A

L



M
Peter Spagnuolo, [Home Sweet Home], 1995.

OPERATION SHATTER!

WHY WE ARE DOING THIS ACTION:

OVER 2 YEARS AGO THE CITY EVICTED SQUATTERS FROM "GLASS HOUSE," AN ABANDONED GLASS FACTORY ON AVENUE D. THE CITY SAID THEY WERE EVICTING PEOPLE IN ORDER TO MAKE HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH A.I.D.S.. INSTEAD, THE CITY LEFT THIS BUILDING EMPTY. NOW THE CITY IS EVICTING MORE SQUATTERS AND SAYING THEIR PURPOSE IS TO MAKE "LOW INCOME HOUSING." THE PURPOSE OF OPERATION SHATTER IS TO SHATTER THE CITY'S LIES.

¿PORQUE ESTAMOS HACIENDO ESTO?

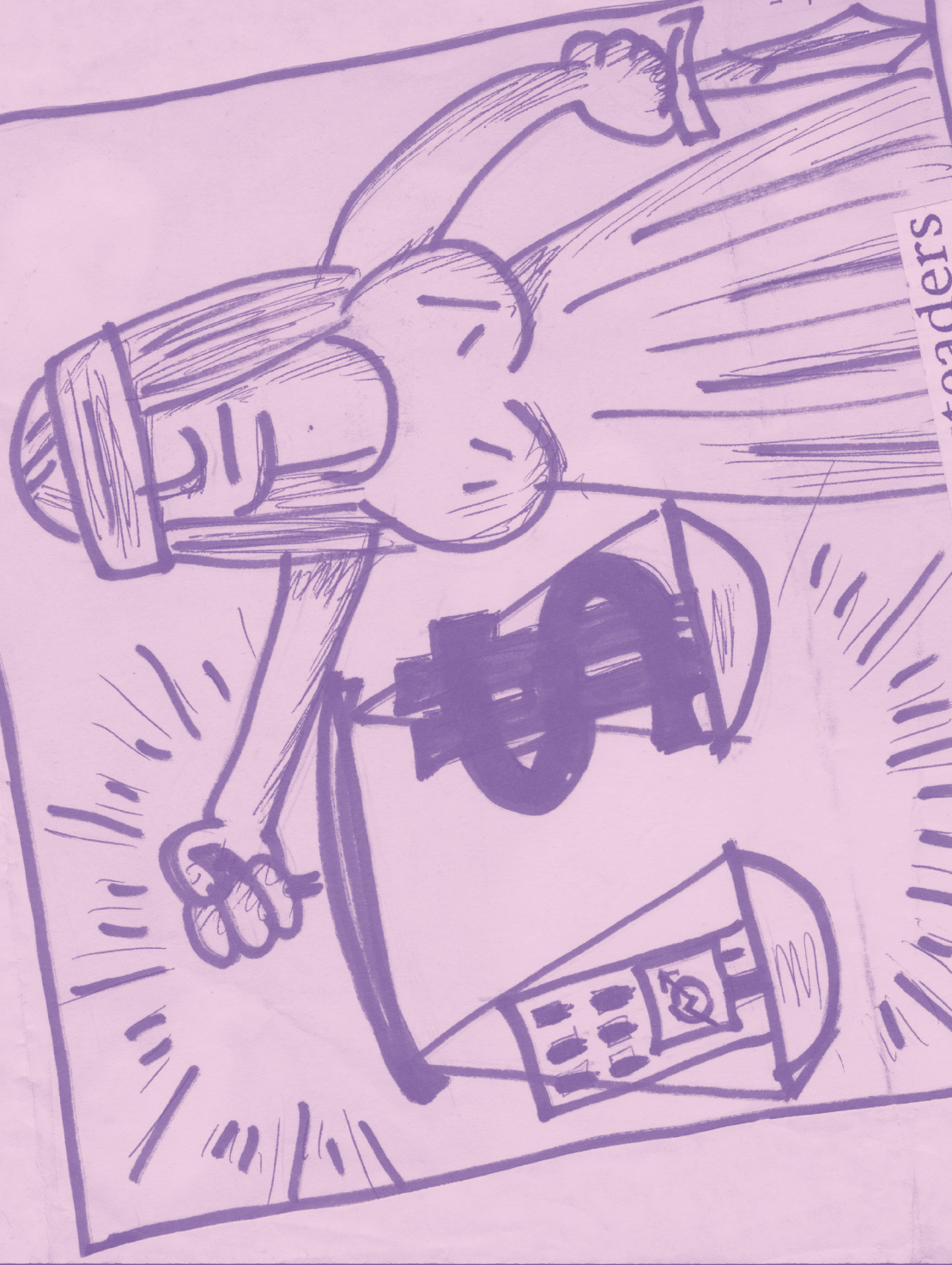
2 AÑOS ATRAS LA CIUDAD DESALOJO GENTE DE "LA CASA DE VIDRIO" UNA FABRICA DE VIDRIOS ABANDONADA, EN LA AVENIDA "D". LA CIUDAD DIJO QUE EL MOTIVO HERA PORQUE QUERIAN CONSTRUIR VIVIENDAS PARA GENTE CON SIDA. EN CAMBIO, DEJARON ESTE EDIFICIO VACIO. AHORA LA CIUDAD, ESTA DESALOJANDO MAS GENTE, CON LA EXCUSA DE QUE QUIEREN EDIFICAR, PARA GENTE DE BAJOS INGRESOS.

EL PROPOSITO DE ESTA OPERACION ES DE DESTRUIR LAS MENTIRAS DE LA CIUDAD!

N
Seth Tobocman, Poster for Operation Shatter, ca. 1995

TIRED OF O.J.?

Come watch the hearings that really



Judge Wilk Hears the Homesteaders

State SUPREME CT.

60 Centre St.

Room 341

10am-5p, M,Tu,Th,F, May 22-

When taxes are too high,
people go hungry.

When the government is too intrusive,
people lose their spirit.

Act for the people's benefit.
Trust them; leave them alone."

--The Tao, v. 75.

Come out and show your support

for the hardest working attorneys in the

business! This case is for all of us...

SEE the skulking Antonio Pagan show his face at last!

HEAR know-nothing pencil-pushers try to justify the eviction of hundreds on the L.E.S.!!

THRILL to the tales of ten years of sweat equity!

East 13th St. Homesteaders go head-to-head with HPD!



John Penley, Untitled [13th St. Squats Eviction], May 1995

paigned on “cleanup and revitalization,” winning a seat on Community Board 3 (CB-3). In 1991, he unseated incumbent Miriam Friedlander from City Council, running against her support for the unhoused residents of Tompkins Square Park’s “tent city.” Once elected, Pagán urged “storm-trooper-style” evictions of squats, according to his critics. Anatomy of an Eviction, a cartoon by Seth Tobocman, lambasts Pagán’s conflicts of interest, among them his stake in the nonprofit housing developer LESCHD, which Pagán positioned to develop the buildings he had squatters evicted from, and he returned to its board after his time on City Council.²⁴

Unable to remove squatters with force alone, city government established a pattern of pitting other organizations against squatters and homesteaders. In 1993, the city revealed its support for a plan by nonprofit Pueblo Nuevo to renovate Glass House as housing for adults living with AIDS.²⁵ Squatters from Glass House and other buildings showed up to meetings hosted

by Community Board 3, where they were barred from speaking but nonetheless questioned boardmembers’ dismissive assertions that they were “not neighbors” and did “not exist”. They also did their best to point out policy inconsistencies: why did the board sanction the Pueblo Nuevo plan but not another by Housing Works/ACT UP?²⁶

- 24 Nancy Drew, Chris Flash, and A. Kronstadt, “Antonio Pagan Pushes Housing Scam; City Council Vote Ignores Public Hearings,” The Shadow #42, 1997.
- 25 To provide another example, consider the city’s 1997 proposal to evict ABC No Rio from its performance space at 156 Rivington Street and have the nonprofit organization, Asian Americans For Equality, take over. See Andrew Jacobs, “What a Difference Two Decades Make,” The New York Times, January 12, 1997.
- 26 Defend Glass House!, ca. 1994, Margaret Morton Papers.

[Prev Page] Peter Spagnuolo and Philippe Van der Ryken (Flip), Tired of O.J.?, 1994.



Seth Tobocman, CB3 + HPD GLVE “SITE CONTROL” OF SQUATS!, from The Shadow, Issue #14, 1990.

Listen Up, Squatter!

So you think what happened this summer on East 13th Street can't happen to your house? You think "squat politics" don't really concern you? You don't turn out for demos or actions because you're too busy? You think what happens to one squat doesn't mean much to the rest of them?

Or maybe you haven't really thought much about it at all--after all, it all went down so damn fast, hundreds of cops, choppers in the sky, armored vehicles in the street. And now our tight little community of resistance is just a little smaller, a little "tighter"....

Have you squatted long? Weeks? Months? Years? Then you know what this community is worth--it's time to give something back, for the health and continued survival of more than a decade of work. If you only go to one squatter action a year, this is the one:

ABC No Rio, a fifteen-year success story of squatting, love and art, is set up on the sacrificial altar of real estate greed. Just as on 13th St., a local housing group, **A.A.F.E.**, intends to take the building, within months, using NYPD/HPD muscle. We have to draw the line now, or they'll come after Umbrella, Bullet, 7th St., and the whole enchilada in the coming years. We desperately need you, as squatters and homesteaders, to get involved with this struggle. If squatting is something that has made a difference in your life, now is the payback--turn out to defend No Rio this week: they've always been there for us, with music, performance, benefits, and poetry.

Tuesday, 17 Oct.
Squatters Strike A.A.F.E.
111 Division Street
12-2 p.m.

Thursday, 19 Oct.
Squatters Pack C.B.3
200 East 5th St.
7 p.m.
(Agenda includes vote on No Rio)

DEFEND ABC No Rio! No More Evictions!

Eviction Watch

For Info Call 254-3097

Eviction Watch, Listen Up, Squatter!, ca. 1997.

Over a hundred squatters gathered at Cooper Union to protest the renovation plan. When a stinkbomb was released, police jumped at the opportunity to make arrests. In February 1994, firefighters and police evicted the residents of Glass House into the ice and slush of the New York winter. In 1995, squatters celebrated the news that Pueblo Nuevo had ousted its director Roberto Caballero on account of “financial and personnel mismanagement”, and 1998 saw the dissolution of Pueblo Nuevo altogether.²⁷ Only in 1999 did another nonprofit, the Bowery Residents’ Committee, renovate the building as a residence for people with HIV/AIDS, which it remains today.

Attending Community Board meetings where they were sidelined and dismissed, squatters acquired frustrating insights into the kind of public-private graft that sought to govern affordable housing construction. Along E. 13th Street between Avenues A and B, five squats facing eviction published flyers highlighting corruption inherent in the project, Dora Collazo Plaza, that would replace their homes: a massive profit incentive for its nonprofit developer (“[LESCHD] actually stands to make 6 million dollars over the first 12 years of the project”); a lead contractor who had donated to the Pagán campaign; and a lack of truly affordable housing “only 3 of the 41 squatters that were evicted on June 1st have yearly incomes high enough to qualify them to live there”.²⁸

Simultaneously, David Boyle and Peter Spagnuolo, two squatters from 537/541 E. 13th Street, were in court seeking to prove adverse possession and win the right to remain. In New York State as of 1994, an adverse possession claim required proving 10 years of continuous possession, with no attempt by the owner (in this case the city) to eject the occupants.²⁹ This was meant to encourage property owners towards a certain kind of civic responsibility: to inspect, maintain, and use what they possess.

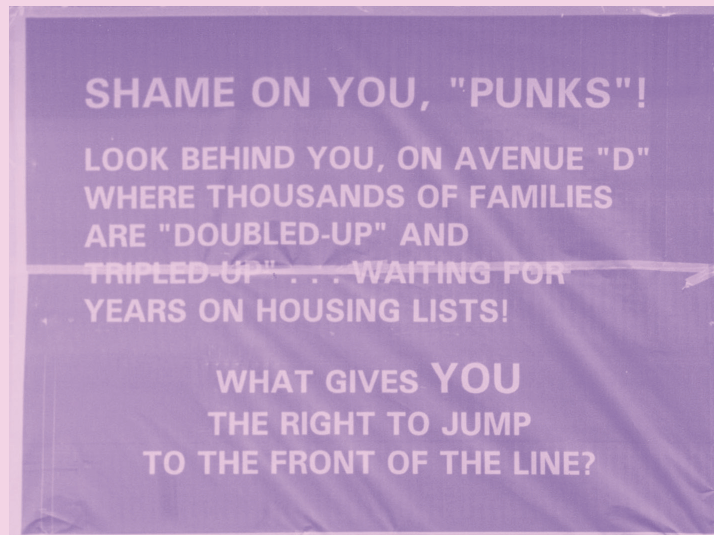
27 Colin Moynihan, “Years After Emerging to Help a Building, a Manager Is Accused of Theft,” The New York Times, February 20, 2012.

28 Lower East Side Eviction Watch, “Local Non-Profit to Make Millions Out of Squatter Evictions,” ca. June 1994. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

29 Starecheski, 93.



© Fly Orr 1993



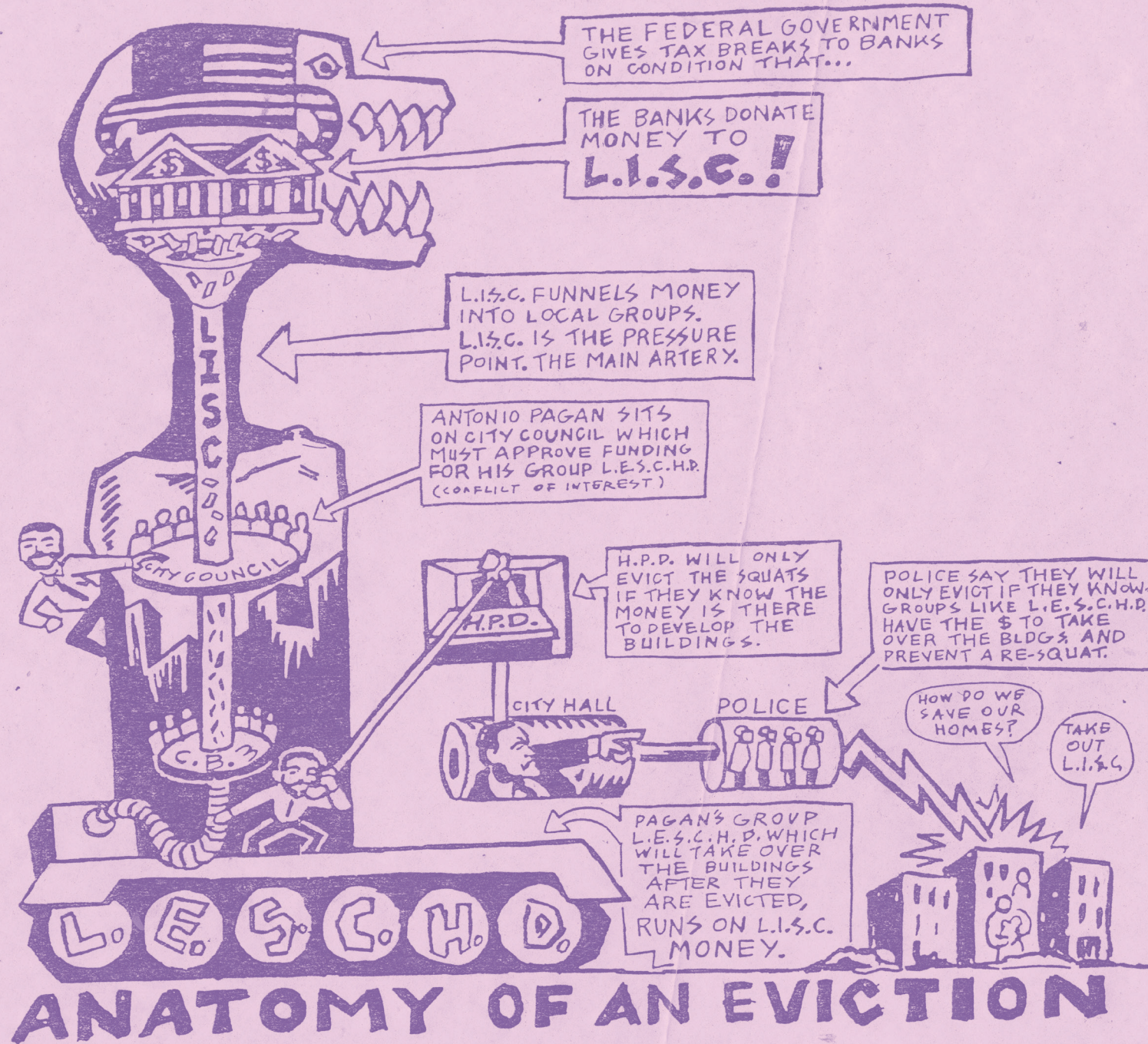
R Fly Orr - URE; E.13th St. Squatters locked out of rescheduled CB3 Meeting - July, 1993.

S Fly Orr - URE; Untitled [Shame On You], 1993.

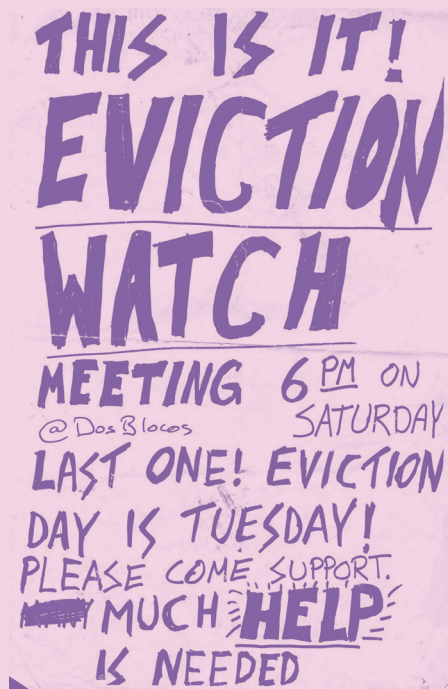


T.1 John Fekner, Broken Promises/Falsas Promesas, 1980.

T.2 John Fekner, Last Hope, 1980.



Tobocman



U
Artist unknown, Dos Blocos Eviction Watch
Flyer, ca. 1999.

Some squatters responded uneasily, fearing that a loss in court would in fact accelerate their eviction. One squatter, who had published a paranoid exposé suggesting Boyle colluded with police,³⁰ publicly assaulted Spagnuolo.³¹

After extensive proceedings, the squatters won their case before Judge Elliott Wilk in 1994, but his momentous ruling was undone by city appeal in 1996. Even before the appeal was settled, the city violently evicted 541 and 545 E. 13th Street, issuing a vacate order with the familiar refrain, “imminent danger of collapse.” Resisting this extra-legal action, squatters did not go gently. As police in riot gear arrived on site with an armored vehicle, dozens of allies protested, and the squatters barricaded themselves inside, welding steel doors shut. News reports later indicated a taxpayer expenditure of approximately \$5 million on the eviction. In 1997 at 537-539 E. 5th Street, the city mounted an eviction and rushed to demolish the building under the disingenuous premise of

structural instability, which squatters knew to be untrue. Squatter Brad Will, who would later live at Dos Blocos, stood on the squat’s roof even as a wrecking ball swung, immortalizing his image in the papers. The city defied a court order to stay the demolition, and in their haste showered the block with toxic dust. As one resident described it:

³² “The way they’re supposed to take down a building is by hand: go in, make an on-site inspection, remove the asbestos, the lead, and then take the building down. This was a hit, a mafia-style hit, where they killed the building. It was an assassination.”

The last of the city’s high-profile squat evictions took place at Dos Blocos (713 E. 9th Street) in 1999. As oral historian Amy Starecheski recalls from a conversation with squatter Brad Will, the city had offered squatters the option to take on debt and acquire the building, but some living there could not afford to pay the rent that would be charged. The squat made the collective decision to hold onto the building until eviction rather than have to cast out “some of their neighbors.”³³

In 2002, Mayor Michael Bloomberg turned over 11 Lower East Side buildings to the few squatters who had persevered. Staving off future court battles over adverse possession, the city sold the buildings to squatters for a dollar apiece. With the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB) representing them, homeowners were obliged to bring the buildings up to code but were not permitted to sell them for a profit.

The storefront at the squat Bullet Space (292 E. 3rd Street), which opened in 1986, exhibited artists making politically outspoken artwork, among them David Wojnarowicz and Raymond Pettibon. Bullet Space was the earliest of the squats to complete the city’s conditions for its legalization after the 2002 UHAB deal. C-Squat or See Skwat (155 Avenue C) was another, and its preservation as a co-op allowed for its punk

30 The 13th St. Times, Vol. 1, #2, Peter Spagnuolo Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.

31 Starecheski, 108-10.

32 ABC No Rio Survives, “Fifth Street Buried Alive,” Paper Tiger Television, 1997.

33 Starecheski, 19.

[Prev Page] Seth Tobocman, Anatomy of an Eviction, ca. 1995.



V
Fly Orr - URE; Dos Blocos Eviction, 1999.

shows and the operations of the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space to continue. Umbrella House (21-23 Avenue C) earned its name from the tarps draped below the ceiling to prevent the rain from infiltrating the squat, when it was found derelict after squatters broke in. Evicted once in July 1995, the squatters countered in court, and a judge ordered their residences restored. The 2002 UHAB deal protected these squatters’ housing for the long term, but it was also a compromise that would inhibit future legal battles over adverse possession: a concession and a victory for the city, wrapped up in one.³⁴

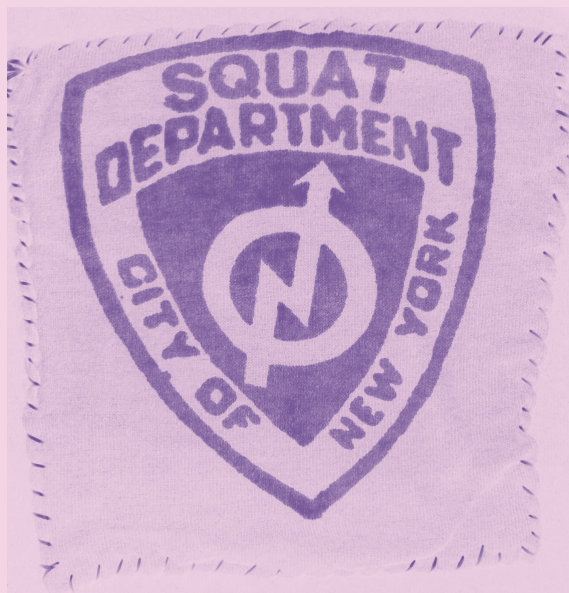
Currents of Resistance

This twilight of the squatting movement in the late ‘90s and early 2000s marked a turning point. Most squats were either evicted or legalized under strict oversight. As the real estate industry further entrenched itself, there was little city-owned housing stock left to be squatted. Much has changed since squatters waged their war for the right to the city. Today, we live in cities economically and spatially restructured around

a speculative and globalized real estate market, where housing precarity and alienation are now exacerbated by the rise of Property Technology (digital platforms that accelerate real estate speculation and rising rents) and AI. Using these technologies of extraction and surveillance, neighborhoods are increasingly marketed as commodities to be consumed by a transient creative class. As New York weathers a new era of hyper-gentrification, the material conditions that initially necessitated squatting have inverted themselves.

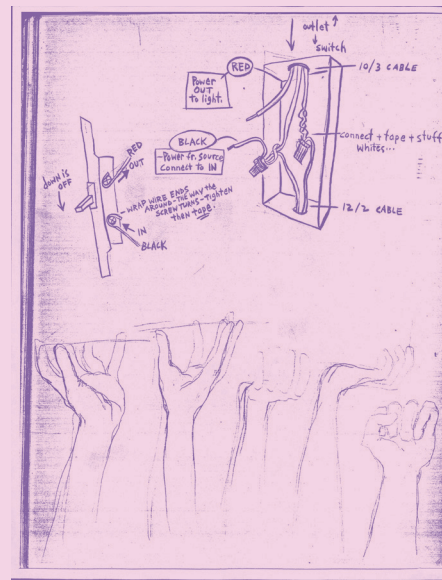
The battleground has shifted. Where the enemy was once landlord and city abandonment, it is now the predatory force of speculative investment, a system that self-reproduces through dispossession. Housing development today is as much about storing capital as it is about housing people, and the city has become a well-oiled conduit for luxury development. But while the physical presence of squatting has faded, its politics haven’t disappeared. The conviction that housing is a right continues to animate growing tenant movements across the

34 Starecheski, 9-13.



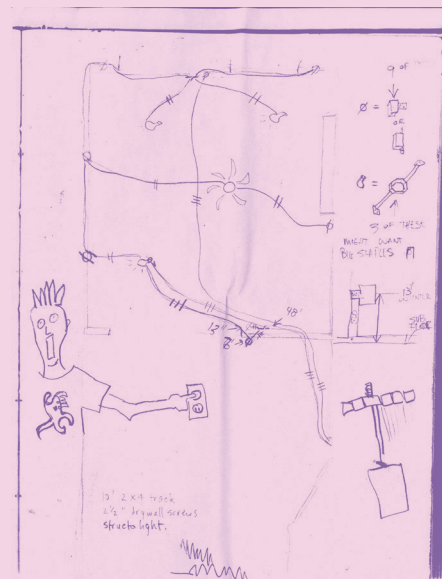
W Fly Orr - URE; Untitled [Glass House Eviction], 1994.

X Fly Orr - URE; Squat Department, City of New York (Patch), 1995



Y

Fly Orr - URE; Instructional Diagram for Connecting Light Switches and Outlets, Electrical Wiring Instructor Michael Shenker, ca. 1994.



Z

Fly Orr - URE; 209 E 7th St., 3E - Front Room Wiring Schematics, 1994.

city. Tenant organizations work³⁵ with residents to propose community-led development plans, aiming to preserve affordable housing for diverse, working class communities. Groups like the Crown Heights Tenant Union and Flatbush Tenant Coalition organize tenants against predatory equity schemes, where new landlords hike rents, cut services, or push out long-term residents to attract higher-paying tenants. In South Williamsburg, Los Sures works directly with residents to educate and organize tenants against extreme luxury gentrification and dispossession. Across the city, communities confront rezoning and mega-development projects that threaten historically low- and moderate-income neighborhoods.

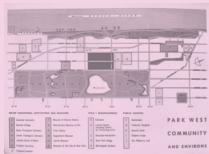
These contemporary struggles against displacement, policing, and extractive development carry forward the legacy of the Lower East Side squatters. Just as squatting once asserted the right to housing against neglectful city policies and profiteering landlords, today's tenants use collective organizing and legal tools to defend their homes and their right to the city. As we remember the squatting movement in this specific moment, we recall the enduring power of grassroots, community-driven action to shape cities, challenge systemic inequities, and embolden new generations to join the fight for housing justice.

³⁵ In Chinatown and Astoria, Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, now Organizing Asian Communities (CAAAV); in Loisaída, Tenants United Fighting for Lower East Side (TUFF-LES), and Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES).

p.3 A Artist unknown, Squatting Hotline. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



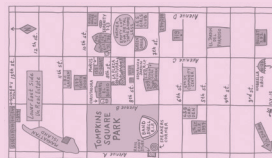
p.4 B West Side Urban Renewal Plan from West Side Urban Renewal Plan: Preliminary Plan, Urban Renewal Board, 1959.



p.5 C Eric Drooker,Untitled [Illustration for the Manhattan Mirror]. Courtesy of Eric Drooker.



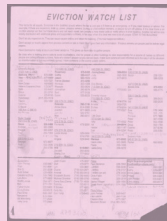
p.6 D Fly Orr - URE, Lower East Side Un-Real Estate. Courtesy of Fly Orr - UnReal Estate Archives



p.7 E Eric Drooker, Untitled [City Hall Demonstration Poster]. Jerry "the Peddler" Wade Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



p.8 F Eviction Watch, Eviction Watch List. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



p.9 G,H John Penley, Untitled [Affordable Housing Protest]. John Penley Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



p.11 I Sarah Ferguson, Untitled [Illegal Demolition By City]. Jerry "the Peddler" Wade Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



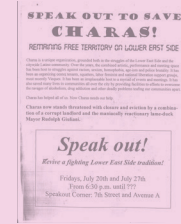
J International Squatters' Network (ISN), Answers to Some Commonly Asked Questions About Squatters, Peter Spagnuolo Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



p.13 K CHARAS, Dome Construction, August 1974. CHARAS/El Bohío Cultural and Community Center Records. Archives of the Puerto Rican Diaspora, Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, CUNY.



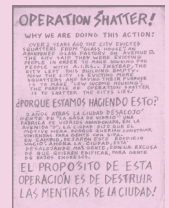
L Artist unknown, Speak Out to Save CHARAS!. Jerry "the Peddler" Wade Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



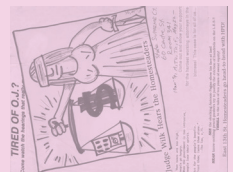
p.14 M Peter Spagnuolo, Untitled [Home Sweet Home]. Courtesy of Peter Spagnuolo.



p.15 N Seth Tobocman, Poster for Operation Shatter. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



p.16 Peter Spagnuolo and Philippe Van der Ryken (Flip), Tired of O.J.?. Peter Spagnuolo Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



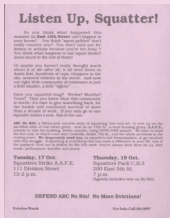
p.18 O John Penley, Untitled [13th St. Squats Eviction]. Seth Tobocman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



p.19 P Seth Tobocman, CB3 + HPD GIVE "SITE CONTROL". Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



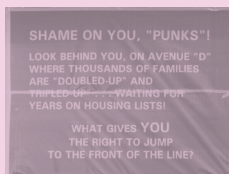
Q Eviction Watch, Listen Up, Squatter!. Peter Spagnuolo Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



p.20 R Fly Orr - URE, E.13th St. Squatters locked out of rescheduled CB3 Meeting. Courtesy of Fly Orr - UnReal Estate Archives



S Fly Orr - URE, Untitled [Shame On You]. Courtesy of Fly Orr - UnReal Estate Archives



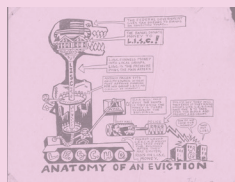
p.21 T.1 John Fekner, Broken Promises/Fal-sas Promesas (Charlotte Street Stencils). Spray paint on concrete wall, South Bronx, NY. Assisted by Josa Colmere, Paul Harrison, and William Scott / Fashion 27 Moda 27272. Photo: © 1980 John Fekner



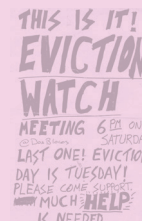
T.2 John Fekner, Last Hope (Charlotte Street Stencils). Spray paint on concrete wall, South Bronx, NY. Assisted by Don Leicht & Robert Long. Photo: © 1980 John Fekner



p.22 Seth Tobocman, Anatomy of an Eviction. Peter Spagnuolo Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



p.24 U Artist unknown, Dos Blocos Eviction Watch Flyer. Fly Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



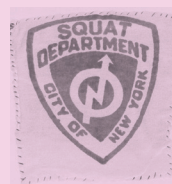
p.25 V Fly Orr, Dos Blocos Eviction. Fly Papers on Squatters' Rights, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU Special Collections.



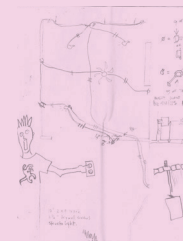
p.26 W Fly Orr - URE, Glass House Eviction. Courtesy of Fly Orr - UnReal Estate Archives



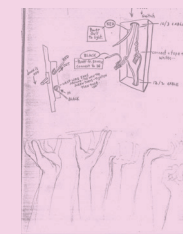
X Fly Orr - URE, Squat Department, City of New York (Patch). Courtesy of Fly Orr - UnReal Estate Archives



p.27 Y Fly Orr, 209 E 7th St., 3E - Front Room Wiring Schematics. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



Z Fly Orr, Instructional Diagram for Connecting Light Switches and Outlets. Fly Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



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