

# “Improve, Don’t Move”: Sweat Equity Homesteading In New York City During the Fiscal Crisis of the 1970s

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## Introduction: Say Goodbye to Rats, Roaches, and Junkies

*The door was not open  
 It was locked, tinned, cinderblocked, nailed, spiked, cemented.  
 They thought it was this way to keep the house empty and silent  
 And to keep us in the street and in the gutter.  
 But we came -- quietly in the evening--  
 Boldly in the morning--  
 Through the tin-the cinderblocks-the nails-  
 The spikes and the cement  
 Through the locked door.  
 And the house welcomed us-  
 It sheltered and embraced us.  
 The laughter of our children echoed in the hallways-  
 Love entered the house, and the house rejoiced  
 To hear again the long forgotten words-  
 Mi casa. Home!<sup>1</sup>*

Posted anonymously on a community bulletin board, this poem captured a distinct moment in New York City’s housing history: Operation Move-In. In 1966, the neglected tenants of the Upper West Side were sick of paying for “rats, roaches and junkies,” and saw no choice but to create their own housing alternative.<sup>2</sup> The young families of Operation Move-In began to enter and seize nearby buildings that had been left abandoned by both the landlord and the city. They rehabilitated building interiors using their own savvy, and ultimately claimed these condemned buildings as their homes. The primarily Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Black tenants squatted in the seized buildings to protest the city’s existing housing institution. They rejected housing’s value as a commodity by dismissing its capital value in favor of a moral economy built on sweat equity. They asserted tenant power in a city that was facing bankruptcy. Perhaps most

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York Housing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

significantly, the families of Operation-Move-In demonstrated that low income people were not to be forgotten, and that they were entitled to the same urban citizenship as their middle class counterparts. They were capable of claiming their right to the city, defined by David Harvey as “the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> These squatters believed that by taking control of their built environment, they were taking control of their own lives.

The bold squatting movement quickly gained legitimacy, not only through networks of liberation movements like the Black Panther Party and fellow activists, but also with the city’s housing officials. Squatting movements throughout the city were growing organized. By the mid-1970s, the squatters had built alliances with religious groups, non-profit organizations, and housing officials who shared the common goal of creating affordable housing in the city.<sup>4</sup> Together, they worked creatively within the city’s legal framework and developed the sweat equity urban homesteading model in 1973. This municipally sponsored homesteading program allowed those who lacked the financial resources to own property to build their home equity using their own labor or “sweat.”<sup>5</sup> The unique conditions that emerged in New York City during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s forced the city to rethink affordable housing, ushering in new and experimental ideas. It was in the midst of abandonment, unemployment, and precarity that low-income urban homesteaders found a pocket of opportunity.

This thesis explores how squatting and homesteading were used by low-income Puerto Rican communities to assert their right to the city. It was the articulate rights-based agendas of

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<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review*, 53 (2008): 23.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Starecheski, “What Was Squatting, and What Comes Next?: The Mystery of Property in New York City, 1984-2014” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2014), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Malve von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City 1978-1993, the Divided Heart of Loisaida* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 2.

Puerto Rican youth gangs that established the rhetoric and moral basis for a municipally supported homesteading program. These youth gangs also served as important community organizers who eventually developed the networks and expertise that allowed low-income families to navigate bureaucratic tape and eventually become legitimate homeowners. By tracing the intertwined histories of urban homesteading and Puerto Rican activism, this thesis demonstrates how the backdrop of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s created genuine opportunities for low-income people to take control of the city's built environment in a way that would no longer be possible in the neoliberal city that emerged after the crisis.

The urban homesteading model that emerged during the crisis of the 1970s uprooted traditional conventions of homeownership and expanded who could become a homeowner. Squatters and homesteaders emphasized the emotional and moral attachment one had to a property when investing work into it. One Operation Move-In squatter defended her right to a home on the Upper West Side by stating, "we are the people who built this city. We work here. Here we work in the factories, hospitals, subways, banks. So we are the city."<sup>6</sup> Although the legitimacy of the moral-based claims of squatters have been consistently questioned, the Rural Homestead Act of 1862 set the precedent for labor as a valid claim to the land.<sup>7</sup> The Rural Homestead Act of 1862 promised ownership of unsettled lands in the American West to U.S. citizens who were willing to work and improve the land for five years. The act codified the Lockean belief that people could earn the exclusive right to appropriate the resources from their property when they mixed their own labor with the land.<sup>8</sup> Pioneers of the 19th century and low-

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<sup>6</sup> *Rompiendo Puertas*, made and distributed by Newsreel Films. (1971; New York: Newsreel, 1971), Film.

<sup>7</sup> Von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Starecheski, "What Was squatting, and What Comes Next?" 94.

income homesteaders in the 1970s alike were eager to use their own labor as a means towards property ownership and to expand their privileges as citizens.

The labor that urban homesteaders put into their properties was officially termed as “sweat equity.”<sup>9</sup> From the point of view of homesteaders, sweat equity allowed people to build their home equity through investing labor instead of capital, expanding homeownership opportunities to people who otherwise could not afford it. From the point of view of the city, sweat equity was seen as a way to minimize municipal responsibilities while also mandating the active participation of citizens in a neighborhood. Scholars have argued that self-help initiatives like homesteading could transform marginalized people from “passive users of services to active participants with a degree of control over their own lives.”<sup>10</sup> In this light, it is clear how sweat equity and self-help practices were attractive to low and middle income people who were seeking more autonomy in their living conditions, as well a city administration hoping to unload some of its duties as a landlord. Once a building was rehabilitated through sweat equity homesteading, its fate continued outside of the conventions of the private market. In New York City, sweat equity units could not be sold for a profit, but were to be regulated as permanent affordable housing units for future tenants. To low-income groups who suffered from city-sponsored displacement in the urban renewal era, sweat equity homesteading offered an important long-term solution to the housing crisis.

Squatting and sweat equity homesteading emerged as legitimate housing solutions in New York City only as urban conditions deteriorated. The combined forces of capital flight as

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9 Von Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City*, 2.

10 *Ibid.*, 33.

well as deindustrialization manifested in widespread urban poverty and fiscal crisis.<sup>11</sup> The light manufacturing jobs which employed generations of immigrants and working-class people were leaving the city. Meanwhile, service-sector jobs were not providing employment opportunities to the city's poor, and the city's tax base continued to shrink as middle-class suburbanization and white flight took its course. The result was a growing proportion of the population stuck in poverty as well as a municipal budget that could no longer afford the services that defined the city during the postwar era. The climax of crisis hit the city in 1975, when private banks and the city's unions had to raise the necessary funds to avoid default and bankruptcy in the brink of time.<sup>12</sup>

The most visible sign of crisis in New York City was its growing stock of abandoned buildings. In the late 1960s, the compilation of high interest rates, rising property taxes, and pressure to improve building conditions often resulted in tax delinquency, building neglect, and even abandonment. In some cases, desperate landlords would turn to arson, intentionally burning their buildings in hopes of at least collecting some insurance money.<sup>13</sup> When a landlord defaulted on a building, the city would inherit it, requiring additional city-supported services that had to be provided on a budget that was already dangerously thin. By 1977, the city was in possession of an estimated 10,000 landlord-abandoned buildings.<sup>14</sup> Visible and widespread building abandonment pushed the private housing market out of business, and presented a seemingly contradictory housing crisis.<sup>15</sup> In non-white, working class neighborhoods in the South Bronx,

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<sup>11</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York City: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (New York City: Oxford, 2011), 190.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*, prepared by Howard Burcham, Josh Hill, Peter Judd, Charles Laven, and Philip St. Georges, (Washington D.C., 1977).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Rogin, "'This Place'" *New York Times*, 28 March 1971.

deindustrialized Brooklyn, and Manhattan, Black and Latino residents would exist in a patchwork of overcrowded and unsafe tenements next to abandoned yet structurally sound buildings. These conditions represented the paradox of the housing in New York during the long 1970s. On the one hand, there was a great shortage for decent affordable housing, and on the other, the city's housing stock represented no shortage of vacant units. White middle-class "pioneers" as well as the urban poor turned to these abandoned structures and saw opportunity. As the city was desperate to unload its abundance of abandoned units, low and middle income people were eager to rehabilitate the vacant structures and transform them into new homes.

Building rehabilitation through squatting and homesteading practices were elements in a collage of self-help, do-it-yourself, and community control initiatives in the city. A shared distrust of centralized power and belief in localized, participatory democracy united liberation movements in Black and Latino communities with white-collared gentrifiers who sought to restore the city's decaying buildings, parks, storefronts, and lots in the years following the fiscal crisis. The DIY ethos of self-help was welcomed by the increasingly fiscally conservative city. In *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, historian Suleiman Osman described how "volunteerism, sweat equity rehabilitation, neighborhood power, cultural heritage, and historic preservation replaced modernization and renewal on the urban agenda."<sup>16</sup> Middle class brownstoners, guided by "Jane Jacobsian ideals," turned to grassroots self-help practices as solutions to the urban crisis. In this emergent DIY city, white-collared homesteaders moved themselves into primarily African American and Latino neighborhoods not to further displace low-income residents, but to challenge the race-based and class-based segregation that had been produced by redlining.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 15.



The possibilities and challenges of homesteading have been a subject of study for scholars on the national, city, and neighborhood scale. In *Homesteading in Urban U.S.A.*, Anne Clark and Zelma Rivin hypothesized that homesteading was an attractive option for cities who were looking to unload their abandoned housing stock, incorporate them back into the city's taxable base, and minimize the cost to do so. Their 1975 study of eleven cities' homesteading programs, taking the shape of "dollar-homes" campaigns, ultimately concluded that homesteading could be seen as a catalyst for further neighborhood stabilization and investment. However, creating policy that was feasible for local governments and met the needs of homesteaders had yet to be accomplished.<sup>18</sup> Published in 1977 and drawing heavily from government publications, this text embodies how most cities perceived homesteading as a middle-class initiative.

In New York City, Malve von Hassell's fieldwork in *Homesteading in New York City* served as a staple text which described how families and community groups organized on the Lower East side to pursue formal homesteading projects in the late 70s and into the 90s. The argument is focused on how organizations like the Lower East side Catholic Area Conference (LESAC) and Rehabilitation in Action to Preserve Neighborhoods (RAIN) were instrumental in sweat equity homesteading. The ethnographic study ultimately concluded that homesteading success was largely based on the capacity of homesteading organizations and the availability of funds, but did not dismiss how community-based housing and community control of property had the potential to transform neighborhoods.

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<sup>18</sup> Anne Clark and Zelma Rivin, *Homesteading in Urban U.S.A.*, (New York, Praeger Publishers, 1977), 2.

The Lower East Side was a hotbed for squatting and homesteading movements, as further explored in Amy Sarecheski's book *Ours to Lose*. This compiled collection of oral histories from squatters who voiced the neighborhood's continuous campaign for non-commodified housing and traced the process of transforming the illegal squats on East 13th Street into a legal housing cooperative. Beyond painting the socio-political squatters landscape of the Lower East Side, Sarecheski argued how deeply private-property ownership is still rooted in the American notion of citizenship. Her sharp critique of housing in a commodified, capitalist system ultimately suggested that the debts and payments associated with traditional homeownership could put people in a position of further precarity rather than security.

The existing scholarship focuses on the theoretical and ideological framework for homesteading and outlines the legal processes of homeownership. While these texts acknowledged how Black and Puerto Rican residents of the city participated in homesteading, it is still documented and remembered primarily as a “do-it yourself bootstrap neighborhood rehabilitation” movement lead by “white-collar proponents of mini-planning and local control, countercultural artists, and do-well activists.”<sup>19</sup> While white-collar grassroots groups were crucial in serving their neighborhoods and forming the tenant associations, community boards, and non-profit groups still active in the city today, the history of homesteading would be incomplete without considering the instrumental role of the liberation movements who brought homesteading to low-income people. This new generation of activists, often organized as youth gangs, rejected the current welfare system, centralized power, and considered self-determination to be the best alternative for transforming their environment and their lives.<sup>20</sup> Guided by the

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<sup>19</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 244.

principles of community control and an anti-colonial mindset, Puerto Rican youth gangs like the Young Lords, the Harlem Renigades, and Real Great Society lead homesteading efforts in Manhattan neighborhoods neglected by the city. They argued that the city lost its control of a building once it was left condemned, abandoned, and deteriorating. Through homesteading, they reclaimed and liberated these buildings for themselves, and ultimately reclaimed and reasserted the urban poor's right to the city. By tracing the community-building efforts lead by Puerto Rican youth gangs, one can begin to see how squatting and homesteading were tools used by young activists to reinvent the identity of second-generation Puerto Ricans in the city, while also working with the city to tackle housing abandonment and stabilize neighborhoods.

The following chapters aim to highlight different youth gangs, and their unique takes on homesteading. Chapter one looks at Operation Move-In and the civil-rights based squatting movement on the Upper West Side lead by the Young Lords in 1969. This highly visible movement exemplified the urgency and effectiveness of community control of housing, while also demonstrated the need for an organized squatters' movement and the alliance of other housing advocates. Chapter two looks at the history of municipally-supported homesteading in East Harlem and the alliances between homesteaders and non-profit organizations that made it a reality. Municipal funds were appropriated for building rehabilitation as early as 1967, and by the time the Renigades were building a new headquarters in 1973, homesteading had emerged as a fully institutionalized, federally supported, homeownership program. Finally, chapter three focuses on how homesteading tactics in the Lower East Side, pioneered by the Real Great Society (eventually known as CHARAS), not only provided the community with homes, but also community gardens, a cultural center, and worked to create a distinct cultural identity in the neighborhood that would emerge as the Nuyorican movement. Combined, their stories and

efforts demonstrate how through creative cooptation of the resources at hand, the Puerto Rican community was able to challenge their role as a colonized people within the city, carve out their own distinct spaces and cultural identity, and assert their right to the city in a moment of crisis.

## Operation Move-In: Militant Activism and Squatting for Civil Rights

In 1970, the production company Newsreel Films spent over six months working with the tenants and organizers of Operation Move-In, documenting their struggles and efforts to secure housing for poor people in New York City in their film, “Rompiendo Puertas.”<sup>1</sup> The film, unlike the press or the police, did not depict the squatters of Operation Move-In as troublemakers, trespassers, or thieves but rather as activists who challenged New York City’s history of destruction, displacement, and dispossession that had been drawn upon lines of race and class.<sup>2</sup> It opens with a montage of demolition crews stripping tin off of broken windows, of furniture being precariously hoisted up to the third floor of brownstones with ropes, and young children patiently waiting on stoops in front of abandoned buildings, all juxtaposed with images of glossy new Manhattan skyscrapers. These images are voiced over with a woman saying, “Landlords, just because they have money, they think they have the right to throw us out. Well, they ain’t.”<sup>3</sup> Challenged by the luxury redevelopment of the Upper West Side, the tenants and organizers of Operation Move-In saw housing as a civil right, and worked to claim the right to the city for poor people through militant tactics.

Operation Move-In took place over the spring and summer of 1970, when over 200 primarily Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Black families moved into abandoned buildings on the Upper West Side and established new homes.<sup>4</sup> This movement was led by a handful of individuals representing a variety of organizations, who all worked to resist urban renewal, fight displacement, turn tenants into home owners, and secure low-income housing for their

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth McCormick, “Break and Enter and The People Arise,” *Cineaste*, 4,4 (Spring 1971): 24.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City; A History of Urban Squatting* (London: Verso, 2017), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Rompiendo Puertas*, made and distributed by Newsreel Films. (1971; New York: Newsreel, 1971), Film.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Starecheski, *Ours to lose: When Squatters Become Homeowners in New York City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 66.

communities.<sup>5</sup> Although not the exclusive founders of Operation Move-In, the Young Lords Party, a Puerto Rican youth gang modeled off of the Black Panthers, established key ideological tactics and frameworks that grounded the objectives of Operation Move-In. This chapter examines how the Young Lord's civil rights agenda became the underpinnings for Operation Move-In, and how its outcomes set the stage for the emergent urban homesteading movement.

### The Young Lords Party

Inspired by Cha-Cha Jimenez and the work of Chicago's Young Lords Gang in resisting urban renewal during the previous decade, a group of young, first-generation, college-educated students launched their own chapter of the group in New York City in 1969.<sup>6</sup> The Young Lords Party quickly made a name for themselves in El Barrio, or East Harlem, just days after their formation. In response to the "sporadic, and sometimes invisible, activities of the Sanitation Department," members of the Young Lords Party began to sweep their own streets during the hot months of July and August.<sup>7</sup> Middle class and affluent Manhattan neighborhoods regularly saw their garbage being picked up, while the piles of garbage accumulating in El Barrio were seen as a gradual manifestation the city's neglect of poor communities, becoming the basis for the party's first offensive.<sup>8</sup> On Sunday, August 17, their efforts escalated; rather than just sweeping up the garbage, the Young Lords piled garbage in the middle of street intersections. They turned over abandoned cars and furniture and set fire to these mounds in El Barrio, disrupting the traffic

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<sup>5</sup> Rose Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity - Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Clarence Taylor, "The Young Lords and the Social and Structural Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism," in *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Fried, "East Harlem Youth Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstration," *New York Times*, 19 August 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 129.

flow coming from downtown Manhattan.<sup>9</sup> The Young Lords' piling and burning of garbage continued for another two weeks and became known as the Garbage Offensive.

In response to an article published about the Garbage Offensive titled "*The Young Lords Rampage in East Harlem*," the Young Lords acknowledged "... everyone that was there, including t.v., news people who filmed the whole scene, know that this is an act of insurrection, a political act of rebellion by the Puerto Rican people against the mother country forces that are determined to run our neighborhoods like a colony."<sup>10</sup> The mindset that even Puerto Ricans born in the United States were subject to colonization differentiated the Young Lords from the previous generation of activists who advocated for further Great Society and War on Poverty reforms as solutions to neighborhood problems. Instead, the Young Lords consistently saw the city as the oppressor, and sought liberation by challenging existing social and welfare services, creating their own oppositional alternatives, and restoring "power in the hands of the people, not Puerto Rican exploiters."<sup>11</sup>

The Young Lords employed confrontational, militant tactics in order to help their Puerto Rican neighbors fight for the city services and urban rights that their middle class counterparts received. They believed that their protests were a way to educate and engage their own community about the urban issues that the working class and people of color faced.<sup>12</sup> David Perez, the party's Minister of Defense wrote, "we had to SHOW our people what we were all about, and not TALK so much."<sup>13</sup> Aside from educating their own community, the Young Lords were also highly aware that making an appearance in the presses and developing a media

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>10</sup> Richie Perez, "Insurrection!" *Palante* 2(6), 3 July 1970, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>13</sup> David Perez, "Free Clothes For The People," *Palante* 2(3), 22 May 1970, 8.

presence would attract the attention of local officials who would have no choice but treat El Barrio like the middle-class sections of the city.<sup>14</sup> By 1970, the *New York Times* commented on how the Young Lords Party had perfected their technique of confrontation tactics and “has proved a master of radical choreography.”<sup>15</sup> This type of highly visible and confrontational activism piloted by the group would prove to be vital in the later success of Operation Move-In.

Confrontational activism was not only a matter of restoring city services to El Barrio, but rather a step towards gaining community control. Beyond the Garbage Offensive, the community control initiatives also included door-to-door lead testing for children in the community, an occupation of Lincoln Hospital, and the conversion of a church into a daycare center. To the Young Lords, these campaigns signified that a community’s economic class should not determine how well their institutions served them. Boldly, Ray. A. Lopez commented how “‘community control of all our institutions and land’ will become a reality only if the people in our communities seize, by any means necessary, control of their own destinies. The Young Lords Party supports the righteous struggle of our people for decent housing.”<sup>16</sup> The demand for community control of the housing institution would see itself taking form through Operation Move-In and the eventual development of a city-supported homesteading program.

Through the lense of the Young Lords’ liberation ideology, Operation Move-In was seen as a rejection of the urban renewal schemes that displaced the poor and squatting was an alternative solution when the city failed to provide adequate housing. The Young Lords reminded their followers,

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<sup>14</sup> Jose Yglesias, “Right On With the Young Lords,” *New York Times*, 7 June 1970.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Montgomery, “Young Lords Take Up Arms for ‘Defense,’” *New York Times*, 25 October 1970.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



“You have a choice. You can allow yourself to be pushed slowly into your grave; drink, smoke, or shoot up to blot out the shadow of racism and genocide that hangs over our lives. Or there’s the alternative. Don’t pay rent to slumlords; instead, organize rent strikes. Pool the rent money and make repairs with your brothers and sisters in the building, Take over the building. Fuck the greedy landlords.”<sup>17</sup>

Seen as a whole, the Young Lords played a foundational role in developing the tactics and ideologies that framed Operation Move-In. The actions of the Young Lords during the Garbage Offensive and other community control initiatives demonstrated the effectiveness and importance of visible protests, established a language of liberation, and introduced the possibility of creating alternative solutions for folks who had been marginalized by the city. The Young Lords also established that they were fighting for more than immediate neighborhood improvements, but also for civil rights and full urban citizenship of the oppressed.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, Operation Move-in can be viewed as a continuation of the reclamation of the rights and services that city had failed to provide to Puerto Ricans, and a cornerstone movement in establishing the idea that housing should be a right, rather than an investment or a commodity. Through squatting, the poor people who participated in Operation Move-In were able to claim their right to the city in a system that had disenfranchised them.

### Squatting as Protest

Jimmy Santos was a 15 year old boy who died from carbon monoxide poisoning in his home on West 106th Street.<sup>19</sup> A neighbor of the Santos family remarked, “We don’t only blame the landlady. We blame the city, because this family had already been asking for better housing, and they had been denied.”<sup>20</sup> In line with the culture of highly visible protests established by the

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<sup>17</sup> Ritchie Perez, “The South Bronx Time Bomb,” *Palante* 2(7), July 17, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

Young Lord, the Santos' neighbors initiated a funeral march in his memory to reclaim justice and a safe home for the Santos family. After the march, the neighbors all followed the family back to Jimmy's house, took all of their furniture, and moved the family into one of the vacant buildings the city had closed off (Fig 1.1 & 1.2).<sup>21</sup> Squatting and the self-help housing movement were now underway in the Upper West Side.



Fig. 1.1 & 1.2: Images of the funeral march and moving furniture into the Santos' new home.<sup>22</sup>

Squatting and urban homesteading were necessitated by a lack of affordable housing, but made possible by an abundance of vacant city-owned buildings. In the late 60s, landlords with property tax delinquencies would abandon or sometime even burn their buildings in order to avoid making the city-mandated repairs.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes this meant that tenants could stay, leaving the city to take on the role of the negligent landlord, continuing to fail to properly maintain and service the building.<sup>24</sup> Other times, tenants would be displaced and offered inferior housing options in the Bronx or Brooklyn, while the city would intentionally keep the newly acquired

<sup>21</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein. *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 40.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Goldstein, *The Roots of the Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and Struggle over Harlem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 154.

building vacant until it was ready to be redeveloped.<sup>25</sup> Just four years prior to Operation Move-In in 1966, the city was newly in possession of 4,000 residential units that were planned to be demolished as a part of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, displacing a great fraction of long-term residents and “warehousing” the empty buildings until developers were ready to break ground.<sup>26</sup> This area of the Upper West Side was intended to be redeveloped under the Mitchell-Lama program, which would prioritize rent-controlled housing options to middle-income earners in order to “stabilize” the neighborhood. By 1970, many of these city-owned properties had not been demolished, but simply boarded up and left empty (See Fig. 1.3 & 1.4). Inside, rooms were filled with dust and debris, but structurally sound.<sup>27</sup> These abandoned structures seemed like the perfect place to house new self-help practices.



Fig. 1.3 & 1.4: Squatters claiming boarded and vacant buildings in the Upper West Side.<sup>28</sup>

The squatters of Operation Move-In were moving into abandoned structures and claiming them as theirs under the notion of achieving full citizenship. Viewing the role of the government as intentionally oppressive made the issue of inadequate housing not merely about the

<sup>25</sup> Interference Archive, *We Won't Move!: Tenants Organize in New York City* (Brooklyn: Interference Archive, 2015), Exhibition Catalogue.

<sup>26</sup> Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Goldstein, *The Roots of the Urban Renaissance*, 159.

<sup>28</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

shortcomings of the city's urban planning agenda, but also a matter of the services and rights Puerto Ricans would receive in comparison to their white counterparts. Operation Move-In's fight for citizenship was not only rooted in challenging the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the U.S., but also class structure. The reason that Operation Move-In united groups like the Young Lords, the Black Panthers Party, old War on Poverty reformers, and other community organizations was because they shared the common belief that poor people were treated like secondary citizens. Tenants who had been dispossessed, or were fearing dispossession, did not need to be highly educated to know that "whenever the city sets up urban renewal programs, it removes poor people and working people from their homes and replaces them with rich people and big businesses."<sup>29</sup> For the economically disadvantaged, squatting and the physical take-over of buildings thus became a form of self-defense against the aggressive state that had too often deemed Puerto Ricans and African Americans unworthy of city services.<sup>30</sup> By claiming these vacant spaces, squatters were asserting their citizenship, as well as claiming the rights that liberal reform policies had deprived them of.

The claims that Puerto Rican tenants had to the city as well as their frustrations with the city's lack of action manifested itself as string of building seizures known as Operation Move-In. The day after Jimmy Santos' funeral march, nine more buildings on Columbus Avenue and the West 80s were seized by squatters overnight.<sup>31</sup> By April of 1970, about 180 families had moved into six buildings on Columbus Avenue, between 90th and 91st streets.<sup>32</sup> These six buildings, designated as Site 30 of a Mitchell-Lama development, had been emptied and scheduled for demolition in order to make way for more middle-income housing in an increasingly upscaled

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Fried, "East Harlem Youths Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstration."

<sup>31</sup> Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Goldstein, *The Roots of Urban Renaissance*, 159.

neighborhood.<sup>33</sup> A third wave of building seizures happened a few months later in July. This time around, an additional 54 families moved into two buildings scheduled for demolition and transformation into a luxury nursing home on 112th and Amsterdam.<sup>34</sup> These building seizures during the cusp of redevelopment can be seen as the poor's rejection of being displaced in favor of the middle class. By investing their efforts in rehabilitating a building the city saw as condemned, the squatters were challenging the meaning of blight in the context of slum removal. Their actions asserted that the urban conditions in areas of widespread abandonment were not caused by poor people, but rather were a product of disinvestment. Moving into these buildings via squatting was seen as a last resort effort when community groups were convinced that there were no other alternatives to get the city to respond to their demands for safe housing in the neighborhood they called home.

### Squatting as an Opportunity

Operation Move-In offered an alternative solution for safe housing when the existing housing institution had failed them. Rather than putting up with the technocratic red-tape that had disadvantaged Puerto Ricans in the city for decades, Operation Move-In envisioned an alternative Upper West Side to middle class gentrification that was slowly unfolding. For instance, working class families like the Marcanos who had been priced out by the private market and neglected by the city now had the opportunity to claim a space as their home. The Marcano family had 11 children, and could not find a landlord that would be willing to house the family of 13, forcing them to stay with relatives. The Operation Move-In family decided to move into a vacant 12 room apartment. Mr. Marcano reflected, "Yes, I knew it was illegal, but I felt

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity*, 34.

something right would come out of it... It was the only way our family could stay together.”<sup>35</sup> Despite these risks, families were compelled by the self-help movement because it secured what the city could not; housing and autonomy. Following the precedent set by the Young Lords and other third-world activist organizations, Operation Move-In enabled families to operate outside of conventional legal institutions in the face of a crisis. Their alternative, yet illegal, squatting in abandoned buildings produced more democratic control over the urban environment, and demonstrated how it was possible for marginalized people to organize and reclaim their right to the city.<sup>36</sup>

Operation Move-In also offered alternative ways tenants could gain access to housing when capital was not available by helping establish the notion of sweat-equity. Opposed to investing capital into the buildings they moved into, the tenants invested their own labor or “sweat” to assert their moral right to long-term residency. The activists in *Rompiendo Puertas* were very proud of their labor. One said, “We’re working for ourselves here. We’re working for poor people. We took this apartment, and now we’re liberating the whole building.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the Young Lords documented how “The squatters are beautiful brothers and sisters who have reclaimed what belongs to them by right, after working year after year to pay for rat and roach infested apartments... The people are working hard to fix up the apartments, put in window panes, plaster, paint, and repair the plumbing.”<sup>38</sup> Sweat equity as an alternative to capital offered families and homesteaders greater control over their living conditions by allowing them to not

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<sup>35</sup> Linda Grover, “A Large Family of Squatters Finds Risks Worth Taking,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1970.

<sup>36</sup> Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

<sup>38</sup> Micky Agrait, “The Land Is Ours! We’re Taking it Back!” *Palante* 2(9), August 1970, 3.

have to rely on a distant landlord. Additionally, any labor was reinvested back into the homes of the families, and not accumulated by landlords or developers.<sup>39</sup>

Squatting also offered an alternative to the antagonistic and oppressive relationship between landlord and tenant by instating community control. Operation Move-In carried its own risks and challenges, but was an attractive option to people whose landlords cultivated uninhabitable living conditions. A mother of two had had relocated her family to a hotel because of the conditions of her old apartment said, “we’ve been living in horrible places with horrible people for a year. This is nice because it’s a nice community and you know the people can’t mess over you like they mess over you in other places.”<sup>40</sup> The solidarity among the community reflected in her statement embodied itself in the institutions and community that the squatters of Operation Move-In worked to create. The mothers of Operation Move-in cooperated to establish a daycare run by fellow mothers where they could drop off their kids knowing that they would be supervised and warm, allowing women to go to work with more peace of mind. A community kitchen was established for people living in units without stoves, pro-bono doctors offered emergency medical aid, and current tenants worked in the office where people who were in need of housing could go for information about self-help practices.<sup>41</sup> These informal institutions demonstrated the squatters’ commitment to not only their homes, but a greater community building effort.

### Organizing the Spontaneous Squatters

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<sup>39</sup> Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 2.

<sup>40</sup> David Shipler, “Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings,” *New York Times*, 24 April 1970.

<sup>41</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

Once the network of squatters had moved into the abandoned buildings, the following months were oriented towards making sure that the city recognized their claims too. An Operation Move-In squatter recalled, “Once we moved in, we realized we had to defend our buildings from the city and the cops.”<sup>42</sup> Following the precedent established by the Young Lords, Operation Move-In was able to generate media attention that raised awareness and sympathy for their cause. In addition to the press, nearby churches and already established tenant movements were in support of Operation Move-In, making the city cautious about how it would proceed with the squatters and how it would protect its own public image.<sup>43</sup> It began by preventing further seizures; police entered nearby vacant buildings, removed appliances and fixtures, undid electrical wiring, changed locks, and made the empty apartments undesirable sites for squatting.<sup>44</sup> One Operation Move-In organizer said, “They were smashing them, so that the poor people could not use them.” (See Fig. 1.5 & 1.6)<sup>45</sup> Police ultimately arrested 35 squatters, but Operation Move-In organizers proudly remarked, “We’re still holding 38 buildings, and we are not paying rent.”<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 1.5: Police standing in front of a vacant building, preventing further move-ins.<sup>47</sup>

Fig. 1.6: Bathroom in vacant building after police destroyed the amenities.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Starcheski, *Ours to Lose*, 67.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Newsreel, *Rompiendo Puertas*.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



It became apparent to the squatters that in order to proceed with the movement, they would need to organize. Surprisingly, this effort was not fronted by the experienced housing activists or Young Lords leaders, but rather previously apolitical members of the community who were becoming increasingly concerned and involved with the issues in their neighborhood. In July of 1970, a group of softball players broke into a storefront and began to meet daily to talk about how they could sustain the momentum stirred by Operation Move-In. Soon enough, these softball players began to call themselves El Comité. They represent a shift from squatting being a spontaneous movement to an organized and systematic one that had new nodes all across the city.<sup>49</sup> El Comité and other grassroots organizations that formed as a result of Operation Move-In launched door-to-door campaigns to raise awareness of the squatters movement, created waitlists for families in need of new places to live, identified potential squatting sites, and eventually helped squatters obtain leases for their new homes from the city over the course of three next decades.<sup>50</sup>

### Confronting the City

Not all families were able to stay in their new homes, as eviction was used as a tool used to protect the middle-class destiny of the neighborhood. The buildings that were seized on Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street already had Mitchell-Lama Site 20 residents lined up for occupancy, so the city evicted the Operation Move-In squatters who had entered the vacant building a few weeks prior.<sup>51</sup> Their occupation delayed move-in day for the new Site 20 residents by six months, but not without generating some middle-class sympathy for the movement. As a

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<sup>49</sup>Rose Muzio, "The Struggle Against 'Urban Renewal' in Manhattan's Upper West Side and The Emergence of El Comité," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies*, 21(2) (2009): 124.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

result of the backlash from the Site 20 evictions, the evictions and demolitions for Mitchell-Lama Site 30 on 87th Street were delayed until the city could relocate the squatters.

Additionally, a handful of organized protests and strategic street blockings lead by El Comité catalyzed a verbal agreement between the developer and the city to make sure that at least 30% of the newly constructed units would be reserved for low income residents.<sup>52</sup> This agreement can be viewed as Operation Move-In's usage of squatting as collateral to open up more low-income housing to people in the Upper West Side. However, the discrepancies regarding income levels and average rent skewed the number of units that would actually be viable options for the displaced community.<sup>53</sup>

The competing demands of working class squatters, developers, and the city on the Mitchell Lama sites was illustrative of the greater changes in the urban-economic landscape. In the late 60s, deindustrialization was taking its toll on working class neighborhoods while suburbanization was leading to a shrinking tax base for a city that was growing increasingly stratified and segregated. The Lindsay administration's focus on catering to the middle class seemed to result in an ambivalence, or even apathy, towards the urban poor. On the one hand, this ambivalence was responsible for the lack of services and poor conditions in El Barrio that mobilized the Young Lords in the first place, but it is the same hands-off approach by the city that allowed for grassroots organizations to pursue effective self-help and community control campaigns that led to immediate improvements in low-income neighborhoods. In the context of Operation Move-In, the city's ambivalence towards vacant buildings provided squatters with

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Murray Schumach, "Segregated Slum 'Threat' Fought on West Side," *New York Times*, 21 July 1970.

some security and allowed them to stay in their new homes as long as they were not previously marked for demolition or already acquired by a developer.

Operation Move-In made the housing needs of the poor more visible to a wider public, and helped mark the stage for an organized indictment of the City of New York. The Housing Crimes Trial took place in December of 1970 when the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, El Comité, and other organizations like I Wor Kuen (a radical Asian-American political collective) and the Metropolitan Council on Housing organized a trial where tenants and squatters testified about the lack of housing available to low-income residents.<sup>54</sup> The mock trial charged Mayor Lindsay, his housing aids, and institutional landlords for sanctioning slums, evictions, demolishing sound homes, and spiraling rents.<sup>55</sup> On the ideological level, the trial was a deep critique of how capitalism, imperialism and racism were “interlocking institutions of exploitation” that the city had consented to.<sup>56</sup> The Housing Crimes Trial was a way for numerous entities to express the clear shortcomings and injustices of a capitalist, landlord-oriented housing market, and to suggest how rehabilitation, sweat equity, and community land trusts were alternative means to securing housing as a right.

More tangibly, Operation Move-In and the Housing Crimes Trial united groups of different races and generations, as well as united radical tenants and squatters with liberal housing professionals and city officials who would eventually help alter the city’s housing policy.<sup>57</sup> In the following months, the city became increasingly aware of the moral claims to vacant buildings the squatters of Operation Move-In had made, while also juggling rising rates of

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<sup>54</sup> Interference Archive, *We Won't Move!*, 16.

<sup>55</sup> “A Mock Trial Here On ‘Housing Crimes’ Censures Lindsay,” *New York Times*, 7 December 1970.

<sup>56</sup> Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 173.

<sup>57</sup> Gold, *When Tenants Claimed the City*, 208.

landlord abandonment and a shockingly unbalanced city budget. These factors set the stage for March of 1971, when the city agreed to pursue the “novel idea” of supporting and subsidizing building rehabilitation through low-interest loans offered through the Municipal Loan Program.<sup>58</sup> Over the next few years, philanthropic and federal funds would compliment the city’s interest in rehabilitating its housing stock in the midst of fiscal crisis, creating a legitimate avenue for squatters to claim home ownership through the process of homesteading.

What began as a radical protest in the name of housing rights was slowly transforming into the experimental implementation of legal urban homesteading. Self-help housing would lose the attitude of aggressive and confrontational attacks on the city’s failures to adequately serve people of color and the poor, and would be oriented towards working within the legal framework of sweat equity homesteading. Legal homesteading efforts pursued by Puerto Rican youth gangs in other Manhattan neighborhoods demonstrated how they no longer saw themselves as an oppressed colony seeking self-determination, but seeking to transform their built environment in order to weave themselves into the city. Municipal authorities were viewed not through the lens of opposition, but through the lens of resource and accommodation. The next chapter will examine the unconventional relationship that existed between Puerto Rican homesteaders, housing policy, and non-profit housing advocacy that emerged from the Operation Move-In offensive.

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<sup>58</sup> Ronald Lawson, “Tenant Responses to the Urban Housing Crisis, 1970-1984” in *The Tenant Movement in New York City 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 5.

## The Renegade Housing Movement: City-supported Self Help

Operation Move-In launched the city's self-help housing campaign, and transformed a band of squatters on the West Side into an increasingly organized and politicized group in the city. The Young Lords Party continued to fight for the rights of third world people into the mid 70s, but their campaigns and focus shifted increasingly towards issues of colonization and oppression from an international point of view, opposed to the localized and community-oriented campaigns that defined their media presence a few years earlier.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, radical-minded organizations focused on community control like El Comité faced the dilemma of actualizing their anti-capitalist, anti-institution ideology within a civic framework where municipal power was their main source of financial support. Carmen Martell, a former member El Comité questioned, "Why would you get funds from that structure? You would be letting people down... Our organizations were battling government and you did not want to be a part of it."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the overarching discontent with a city that continued to fail to provide its residents with adequate housing, the years following Operation Move-In demonstrated that in order to achieve change in the City's housing policies, neighborhood groups, tenants associations, and youth gangs would have to collaborate and creatively coopt, rather than resist, the city's existing housing framework. In the 70s, homesteaders demonstrated their creative ability to reappropriate federal funds, municipal grants, and housing policies to serve their needs. They worked with housing advocates and each other to get earn legal recognition of their sweat equity and claims to land. This chapter will look at homesteading through the lens of a different

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<sup>1</sup> Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Rose Muzio, *Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity - Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 111.

youth gang; one that did not rely on militant protests to take over buildings, but rather took on tedious loan applications, intensive trainings, and a partnership with the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board to achieve their civil right to a home.

### New Homesteaders on the Block: The Renigades

The Renigades' turf covered the area between 117th and 121st Streets, between First and Third Avenues, and according to Pablo Ortiz, an original Renigade, "it was just another youth gang, terrorizing the community, collecting protection money from the merchants, things like that."<sup>3</sup> There were about a dozen members, and some like Eulogio Cedeno were painted by the press as a "drug addict serving time for the possession of stolen goods."<sup>4</sup> The young men of the Renigades, like minority youths all over the city, were suffering from the consequences of urban recession and neighborhood abandonment. It was not surprising that these young men found themselves unemployed and with few economic opportunities. One day, Thomas Foskolos, a construction worker and former resident of 251 East 119th Street in East Harlem approached the Renigades, "since he found out that we were the controlling force in the area."<sup>5</sup> Foskolos was encouraging the youth gang to rehabilitate the now abandoned building through sweat-equity homesteading and turn it into a new headquarters for the gang and their families. "We looked at him like we was crazy." said Ortiz, "But he came back, and we got into it."<sup>6</sup>

By the time Foskolos reached out to the Renigades, homesteading had already made an appearance in East Harlem. In 1968, Monsignor Robert Fox, an associate pastor of St. Paul's church in El Barrio provided the funds and recruited experts for the renovation of 175 East

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<sup>3</sup> David Rubel, "N.Y. Gang Goes Straight - Into Housing," *Washington Post*, 23 October 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Fried "Gang Turning Slum Housing Into Co-op," *New York Times*, 25 January 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Rubel, "NY Gang Goes Straight - Into Housing."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

102nd Street.<sup>7</sup> He established partnerships with a volunteer architect, volunteer plumbing and wiring experts, and community members willing to provide the “sweat” that the building needed in order to be restored. Msgr. Fox secured funds for his rehabilitation project through the city’s newly developed Housing and Development Administration (HDA).<sup>8</sup> While most of the staff at the HDA were concerned with the potential building and tax violations of Msgr. Fox’s project, one of the interns in the office, Philip St. Georges, was immediately attracted to the possibilities of sweat equity rehabilitation, and negotiated the compromises necessary to help the tenants of 175 East 102nd Street receive the necessary loans from the city.<sup>9</sup>

Through his collaboration with Msgr. Fox, Philip St. Georges began to make sense of how the city’s resources could be reappropriated to support similar rehabilitation projects.<sup>10</sup> St. Georges championed the squatters of Operation Move-In, and helped the squatters navigate the sweat equity rehabilitation process until they ultimately earned legal ownership of their buildings on Columbus Avenue in 1973. Upon ending his internship with at the HDA, St. Georges co-founded the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, known as UHAB, “a non-profit housing service which assists low-income New Yorkers with the self-help rehabilitation of abandoned buildings.”<sup>11</sup> The private non-profit organization aimed to engage young people in sweat equity programs, provide free technical assistance and job training to homesteaders, and ultimately “clear the pipeline” between the people and the multiple agencies and governments involved.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> David Bird, “Msgr. Robert J. Fox, 54, Dies; Aide to Hispanic Community,” *New York Times*, 30 April 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Goldstein, *The Roots of the Urban Renaissance: Gentrification and Struggle over Harlem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 174.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>10</sup> Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, *The Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, 1974-1984: A Retrospective Report and Review* (New York: The Board, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Urban Homesteading Assistance Board, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*. (New York: U-HAB, 1976).

The same year, the Renigades approached St. Georges about an abandoned building on East 119th Street. Together, the 22-year-old former intern and a handful of youth gang members launched the Renigade Housing Movement.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the collaboration between the Renigades, a traditional street gang, and Philip St. George's new organization, UHAB, illustrated a major shift in what homesteading would viably look like to low-income people in New York City. The Renigade Housing Movement was influenced by the radical rhetoric of the Young Lords, but ultimately lacked the confrontational and militant protest tactics that defined Operation Move-In. Rather, the Renigade Housing movement demonstrated a new alliance among neighborhood groups, non-profit organizations, and the city's housing policy to reimagine a shrinking city devastated by fiscal crisis. The Renigade Housing Movement became the ultimate example of low-income communities navigated the bureaucracy of homesteading and transformed the politics of the housing landscape in New York City by the end of the decade.

### Working with the Working Poor

By 1973, homesteading was not only being pursued in New York City, but had been a part of the national housing conversation as a solution to both building abandonment and the social challenges faced by the urban poor. In 1968, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD,) sponsored a study of self-help programs to tackle the national housing crisis. The final report suggested that properly implemented, self-help housing and the use of sweat equity could help improve the housing stock and alleviate poverty and homelessness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Malve von Hassel, *Homesteading in New York City 1978-1993, the Divided Heart of Loisaida* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1996), 19.



Optimistic in the possibilities of urban homesteading as a solution to blight, the HUD implemented Section 810 legislation. This program worked to allow municipal governments to allocate Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to a variety of self-help initiatives.<sup>15</sup> Despite federal support of homesteading as an innovative housing solution, local implementation in each city resulted in varied outcomes of the program. For example, the city of Baltimore was aggressively pursuing self-help to revitalize areas characterized by an ageing housing stock. The city sold over 400 homes for \$1, hoping to expand affordable housing options for Blacks with perceived limited economic opportunity in Baltimore's disinvested neighborhoods. However, the city failed to provide the initial financial support required organize co-op members, obtain construction materials, and hire plumbing and wiring experts. The resulting homesteading program was one that gave middle class couples and not poor Blacks a new ingress into homeownership.<sup>16</sup>

New York City's homesteading program was unique in the national context because of programs like UHAB who reached out specifically to low-income families. When UHAB was formally launched in 1973, the non-profit echoed some of the confrontational rhetoric of Operation Move-In in their skepticism of the city. In their second annual report, UHAB acknowledged "the void left by the dozens of defunct official programs" and said that the only way for low-income communities "to save their homes, block and communities will be their own initiative, determination and sweat."<sup>17</sup> Moreso, UHAB understood that "the participants in the homesteading program are often the city's most oppressed" and participated in these projects

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Johnnetta B. Cole, "Sweat Equity: A Study of Housing Systems by and for the People in the United States and Cuba," *The Black Scholar*, 11(2) (1979): 45.

<sup>17</sup> UHAB, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*.

because of “an absolute lack of alternatives.”<sup>18</sup> Beyond the Renigades, UHAB partnered with numerous organization that represent the city’s oppressed, including squatters from the West Side Urban Renewal Area, inmates from Greenhaven State Prison, the Bronx League Against Slum Tenancies, and the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood.<sup>19</sup> The language used by UHAB established them as an ally of third-world people who understood that homesteaders are people who have been structurally disadvantaged by the city itself.

However, the reason that UHAB was successful at making sweat-equity homeownership for low-income people a reality was attributed to their proximity to the city’s housing administration. The UHAB staff consisted of people like Donald Turner, Philip St. Georges, and Charles Laven; highly educated men with their own technocratic expertise, social connections, and political clout in the city’s housing programs. More specifically, Donald Turner and Philip St. Georges had personal ties to Robert Schurr, an important figure in the HDA.<sup>20</sup> Eventually, St. Georges himself was hired by the city in 1978 to manage the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (DAMP), which was responsible for the Tenant Interim Lease Program, a program still active today to help establish low-income cooperatives.<sup>21</sup> The UHAB staff thus served as an important middle man that was able to appeal to the disenfranchised poor, advocate for them in the face of municipal doubt, and provided critical assistance in navigating the bureaucratic tape that was often prohibitive to low-income homesteaders in other cities. UHAB was instrumental in building an alliance between the city and the East Harlem community, transforming their relationship from one of opposition to one of cooperation.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Goldstein, *The Roots of the Urban Renaissance*, 174.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 180.

## Housing as a Verb

The homesteader's commitment to pursuing building rehabilitation through municipal cooperation was just as important as UHAB's expertise. Homesteading was anchored on the notion of sweat-equity, and required people who were committed to investing significant time, energy, and resources into the building. Notions of "sweat" and "self-help" have carried connotations of poverty, inadequacy, and hardship. But within the framework of urban homesteading, "sweat" and "self-help" actually were "taken to be *identity, security, and stimulus* or more importantly in the present context, *opportunity*." <sup>22</sup> Self-help offered the poor a chance to reclaim some of the power lost to negligent landlords and assert control over their built environment. This process of physical rebuilding was reflective of J.C. Turner's argument that housing should be thought of as a verb opposed to a noun. Whereas housing as a noun referred to a home as a commodity, housing as a verb "describes the process or *activity* housing."<sup>23</sup> In other words, thinking of housing as a verb challenged one to consider the role that housing plays in people's lives, and framed it as something accomplished by investing human activity and time. The Renigades were more than ready to invest in self-help practices. In a flyer for the Renegade Housing Movement, they informed their community that in order to rebuild their block, "all it takes is time, hard work, and commitment."<sup>24</sup> The same flyer asserted that "The Renigades Housing Movement wants to help you help yourselves. You can rebuild your block, your homes, and your lives." Like other low-income homesteaders, the Renigades looked to sweat-equity as an opportunity to alter their dismal living conditions that relied on the dedication of their own

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<sup>22</sup> John Turner, *Freedom to Build* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 165.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>24</sup> Flyer for Renigades Housing Movement, January 1974, *The Ronald Lawson Research Files for the Tenant Movement in New York City*, Box 20, The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York, New York.

people, and not the contracted labor of someone else. In this sense, self-help and the process of changing one's built environment could be seen as something empowering, and not simply a consequence of a lack of wealth.

Likewise, Philip St. Georges was a supporter of sweat equity and self-help projects not only because of how they could transform abandoned buildings, but also the people who worked to transform them. St. Georges's account of Carmelo Soria, or Zorro, depicted a heroin-addict-turned-plumber and ultimately a homeowner through his involvement with the Renegade Housing Movement. Zorro saw the Renegades cleaning up the abandoned building "which he frequently used as a shooting gallery," said St. Georges, and eventually joined the housing group.<sup>25</sup> Stories like Zorro's reflect how "it's not just buildings we are talking about in this effort, the human redevelopment aspect is equally if not more important."<sup>26</sup> Homesteading offered an avenue to a home, in addition to teaching people who were often unemployed or underemployed valuable construction skills and even some bureaucratic expertise in regards to applying for grants and loans. As a 1976 survey concluded that exactly half of homesteaders working with UHAB were high school dropouts who were making only about 30% of the city's median income, these new skills and knowledge were valuable in improving their long term economic standings.<sup>27</sup> On-the-job training provided homesteaders with the skills required to rehabilitate buildings, but also opportunities for social mobility after the project was completed.

### Legal Scaffolding

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<sup>25</sup> Goldstein, *The Roots of the Urban Renaissance*, 169.

<sup>26</sup> Rita Reif, "Self-Help Housing: Within Limits, It Works," *New York Times*, 11 July 1976.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*, prepared by Howard Burcham, Josh Hill, Peter Judd, Charles Laven, and Philip St. Georges, (Washington D.C., 1977).

Beyond on-the-job training, the Renegade Housing Movement demonstrated how homesteading was a source of income for the urban poor. Thanks some seed-money contributed by the Consumer-Farmer Foundation, the Renigades who were working on the rehabilitation of 251 East 119th Street earned an hourly stipend.<sup>28</sup> In 1976, when the Renigades were pursuing the rehabilitation of two other buildings, they were working to secure funds from the federal government's Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) in order compensate the homesteaders.<sup>29</sup> Established in 1973, CETA was a cornerstone of the Nixon administration's goal of granting more localized control over federal funds by employing low-income people in positions determined by local government.<sup>30</sup> Although the program was not specifically intended for sweat-equity projects, CETA stipends of \$2.85 to \$3.50 per hour could ensure that homesteaders were financially stable enough to pay the "rent" charged by the cooperative once the rehabilitation was finished. To homesteaders, "rent" referred to the money that was required to pay back the construction costs and interest accumulated by the rehabilitation. CETA was ultimately used to stipend about 90 disadvantaged and unemployed residents working on over 170 dwellings in the city.<sup>31</sup> The Renigades successfully tapped into this source of federal money to fund their projects, demonstrating how the poor did have feasible avenues to pursue homesteading and that it was not a practice exclusive to the middle class.

The Renegade Housing Movement was unique in regards to the fact that UHAB used their budget to create additional avenues of employment by hiring and paying members of the Renigades as full time staff members. Eulogio Ceden, Vice President of the Renigades, became the project's go-to field coordinator and Director of the Renegade Housing Movement. In this

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<sup>28</sup> UHAB, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Smothers, "CETA Cutbacks Leaving Thousands Unemployed," *New York Times*, 11 April 1981.

<sup>31</sup> HUD, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*.

position, Cedenó was responsible for creating summer programs for the youth, voter registration drives, blood donations, community clean-ups, confronting drug-abuse problems, and organizing further housing projects to be funded by CETA funds.<sup>32</sup> These initiatives echoed the Young Lord's demands for community control. However, unlike the militant offensives and acts of protests that defined the neighborhood a few years ago, East Harlem was now organizing and consenting to the the legal framework the Young Lords rejected.

In order for homesteading projects to acquire funding, they had to consent to and meet the very specific requirements of the HDA. People could no longer take over and claim abandoned buildings like the squatters of Operation Move-In, but rather had to form a legal corporation. Cenedo ran the Renegades Housing Movement Inc., a non-profit Housing Development Fund Corporation that complied to Article XI of the Private Housing Finance Law, meaning that participation in the group was limited to low-income people, expecting monetary profits from selling the property was prohibited, and that the HDA could appoint new members as it deemed necessary.<sup>33</sup> Once a corporation was formed, the organization had to hire an architect, estimate the cost of the project, appraise the value of their sweat-equity and the feasibility of labor in the neighborhood, apply for a loan, attend hearings, secure liability insurance, negotiate mortgages and contracts, apply for building permits, create pull schedules, collect payments, and "work through the endless piles of paperwork and garbage."<sup>34</sup> Funds allocated by the city and legal recognition of sweat equity ownership was what homesteading advocates had been fighting for, but it was certainly tedious and challenging.

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<sup>32</sup> UHAB, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*.

<sup>33</sup> HUD, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*.

<sup>34</sup> Flyer for Renegades Housing Movement, *The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives*.

The Renigades ultimately managed to tip-toe the line between a street gang and technocrats. By 1976, the Renigades had successfully completed 99% of the construction at their 251 East 119th Street property. They had secured a loan for \$320,000, contributed an additional \$150,000 in sweat equity, and were ready to house families in the 23 units restored at an estimated \$140 per month.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, they had acquired two more properties; 312 and 316 East 119th Street. They had secured seed money from the Consumer-Farmer Foundation and were expecting another \$200,000 in municipal loans. Additionally, “members who have acquired the necessary skills for rehab while reconstructing 251 East 119th Street will now train others to construct and maintain the new building.”<sup>36</sup> The Renigades demonstrated a newly acquired expertise in working with the community, navigating the constraints of the HDA, and securing funding. They had positioned themselves in a sustainable homesteading system; as long as low-interest loans, CETA stipends, and seed money were available, the Renigades had transferable bureaucratic and construction knowledge that could revitalize their community. Cenedo told the *New York Times* that “It’s still a street gang, but its goals have changed -- we’re a street gang for the people.”

When a bus tour dedicated to city planners passed through East Harlem and the Bronx, Cenedo had the opportunity to share the work that the Renigades had been invested in. The participants of the tour, likely delighted to experience the novelty of homesteading, got to view the interior of 251 East 119th Street. Cenedo explained that renovating the building “demonstrates that people can work together to improve the community themselves. We hope that by our example, other groups will do the same.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, St. Georges of UHAB

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<sup>35</sup> UHAB, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Tony Tiller “Planners Bus Tour Inaugural,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 September 1976.

understood homesteading to be more than a novelty. In fact, he believed that, “homesteading efforts often have a kind of ripple effect. Even in neighborhoods where abandonment and fire are widespread,” he said, “for every building renovated three or four more are soon under reconstruction.”<sup>38</sup> St. Georges and Cenedo articulated an alternative vision of the city based on widespread citizen participation and rebuilding. Applied on a larger scale, homesteading could restore entire communities facing displacement and abandonment.

Widespread abandonment was devastating for minority communities in New York City, and a challenging reality that working class communities all throughout East Harlem, the South Bronx, and deindustrializing Brooklyn faced. Neighborhoods with high Puerto Rican and Black populations were often the target for “neighborhood euthanasia” where the city looked forward to “cutting off the umbilical cord of city services and letting the area die.”<sup>39</sup> The Renigades themselves noticed how “the buildings that were once our homes are now empty and rotting ghosts of the life they used to be.”<sup>40</sup> Residents worried about living in neighborhoods facing abandonment, and the increased drug addiction, crime, vandalism, and unreliable and unpredictable changes in services that came along with it. The trickle effects of abandonment were expressed by an East Manhattan resident who said, “you can’t exist next to a building like this. They hit your main pipe one night and your house is flooded. One building become vacant. Before you know it the block is gone.”<sup>41</sup>

### A New Coalition in the City

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<sup>38</sup> Rita Reif, “Self-Help Housing.”

<sup>39</sup> Neal R. Peirce. “Saving Tenements Difficult, Worthwhile,” *The Sun*, 14 March 1977.

<sup>40</sup> Flyer for Renigades Housing Movement, *The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives*.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Rogin, “This place: Makes Bedford-Stuyvesant Look Beautiful,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1971.



In many ways, abandonment was the key factor in why the city decided to pursue experimental homesteading campaigns. It looked like an attractive solution to the city's stock of abandoned, deteriorating, and tax deficient buildings which was expanding by the year. By 1977, there were about 10,000 abandoned structures in the city.<sup>42</sup> Parallel to the increase of abandoned structures, a scarcity of public housing in the city had led to the growth of a waiting list of about 150,000 displaced families in need of homes.<sup>43</sup> With these factors in mind, housing the poor in abandoned structures was looking like a promising solution, as it,

“provides low cost rehabilitation, is capable of generating private sector matching funds, allows the city to dispose of unwanted property, eliminates the indirect costs of abandoned buildings such as fires and vandalism, and eliminates the costs associated with sealing up abandoned buildings, and for demolishing the structure. And in addition to the above, it works.”<sup>44</sup>

In other words, while abandoned structures were seen by the city as a liability it could not afford in the shrinking municipal budget, they were also viewed as a resource for those lacking adequate housing.

In the shadows of the fiscal crisis, the city had attempted to prevent abandonment by promoting the renovation and rehabilitation of buildings. In 1970, the HDA (now the Department of Housing Preservation and Development) launched the Municipal Loan Program.<sup>45</sup> The program offered 10 to 30 year loans at 4.5%, compared to the 6% lending rate in the private

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<sup>42</sup> HUD, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*.

<sup>43</sup> UHAB, *Second Annual Progress Report and Proposal for Funding*.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ronald Lawson, “Tenant Responses to the Urban Housing Crisis, 1970-1984” in *The Tenant Movement in New York City 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 1.

sector, which is what enabled Msgr. Fox's first East Harlem rehabilitation project.<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, the Municipal Loan program was suspended in 1971, as the political landscape of the city was shifting away from New Deal Liberalism and towards fiscal conservatism.<sup>47</sup>

However, the new head of the HDA, Roger Starr still saw promise in pursuing rehabilitation efforts. In 1973, he launched the Neighborhood Preservation Program which provided tax incentives and low interest loans to local groups seeking to rehabilitate buildings.<sup>48</sup> In 1975, the city revised section J-51 of the administrative code. The updated law offered a 12 year exemption from tax increases in renovated tenement buildings, as well as a tax abatement for up to 90% of construction costs.<sup>49</sup> To the HDA, preservation, volunteerism, and sweat-equity rehabilitation were affordable and reasonable alternatives to the failing urban renewal schemes.

In New York City, the severity of the housing crisis made city council members attracted to homesteading as a fiscally conservative alternative that was "far more palatable, politically speaking, than the vision of energetic and noisy squatters demonstrating in front of boarded-up buildings or, even more embarrassing to the authorities, simply walking in and taking over."<sup>50</sup> Since the civil rights movement, tenant groups in the city had been growing increasingly organized, stirring action in the press, and turned to both conventional and alternative ways of making their demands known to the city. The city's tenants, which comprised not only of the city's poor racial minorities but also the middle class, created a sizable constituency that represented 75% of the city's population. Legislators understood their political potential, and

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<sup>46</sup> HUD, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*.

<sup>47</sup> Lawson, "Tenant Responses," 6.

<sup>48</sup> Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (New York City: Oxford, 2011), 231.

<sup>49</sup> HUD, *Sweat Equity Homesteading of Multifamily Housing in New York City*.

<sup>50</sup> Hassell, *Homesteading in New York City*, 21.

were careful to create policies that would accommodate their demands while the city's budget was unable to support the public programs it once did.<sup>51</sup>

Combined, the framework of New Federalism and the priorities of the HDA, middle class tenants, and well as low-income people in demand of better housing seemed to line up; all were inching towards the new ideal of “thinking small” and supported decentralized power, local control, and grassroots community building efforts.<sup>52</sup> The alliance between the Renigades and UHAB, which was ultimately contracted by the city in 1978 to advise future homesteaders under the Tenant Interim Lease Program, is representative of the greater, ongoing coalition that was being forged between “white-collar reformers, black power activists, small business owners” and others who reimagined a bootstraps, community oriented, DIY city.<sup>53</sup> This new coalition wedged itself in the city's development policy in the 80s, and championed homesteading, or rather “brownstoning” as a means of claiming the right to the city in face of austerity.

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<sup>51</sup> Lawson, “Tenant Responses,” 6.

<sup>52</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 231.

<sup>53</sup> Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn*, 18.

## The Real Great Society: Homesteading as Identity Making

To assert their right to the city, residents of the Lower East Side understood that brownstone homes were not the only battleground for contesting claims to urban space. Here, Puerto Rican youths were not only claiming homes for their community, but also vacant lots, blank walls, empty schools, and the neighborhood as a whole. Like in East Harlem, the severity of the fiscal crisis and the consequences of austerity were highly visible in the Lower East Side. Funds for public services like education, sanitation, police, and fire were cut by 30%, landlords and insurance companies withdrew their investments, and property was turned over to a city who would not afford to manage it.<sup>1</sup> In the five years between 1974 and 1979, the neighborhood lost about two-thirds of its total population due to both white flight and displacement.<sup>2</sup> In the 36 block area between the East River and Avenue A, between Houston and 14th Streets, there were an estimated 100 vacant lots and 150 vacant buildings.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike the South Bronx where this magnitude of abandonment was widespread, the Lower East Side was an island of planned shrinkage. Surrounded by upcoming reinvestment in SoHo, Greenwich Village, and Wall Street, the neighborhood was effectively sandwiched between the “twin forces of abandonment and gentrification.”<sup>4</sup> Residents of the Lower East Side had to act quickly to save their neighborhood.

Through the organized efforts of Real Great Society, later known as CHARAS, the young Puerto Rican community reclaimed the entire neighborhood, naming it *Loisaida* - Spanglish for Lower East Side. Through DIY initiatives, RGS took over physical buildings, altered the social-

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Schmelzkopf, “Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space,” *Geographical Review*, 85(3) (1995): 366.

<sup>2</sup> Liz Sevenko, “Making Loisaida.” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) 295.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Malve von Hassell, “Names of Hate, Names of Love: Contested Space and the Formation of Identity on Manhattan’s Lower East Side,” *Dialectical Anthropology*, 23(4) (December 1998): 379.

political landscape, and also created a space to anchor the distinct new cultural identity of puertorriqueñidad loisaideña.<sup>5</sup> This chapter explores how the Real Great Society (RGS) or CHARAS, a gang of Lower East Side youths, built relationships with influential intellectuals and non-profit organizations in order to organize their community. Much like the Renegade Housing Movement, the collaboration between youth gang leaders and non-profit experts transformed the built environment and the people who worked to build it. RGS worked to instill a widespread pedagogy of activism, rehabilitate the abandoned structures and lots nearby, and reinvent the Lower East Side from a ghetto to the fertile grounds of the Nuyorican movement. They sought a solution to the housing crisis, but also employed homesteading techniques to improve their access to education, employment, and a safe and creative environment. In Loisaida, self-help was not only a means to assert the right to a home, but also a more holistic means of reclaiming and transforming a space with a new cultural identity.

### The Real Great Society

The founders of the Real Great Society, Chino Garcia and Angelo Gonzales had spent their teen years in different gangs (the Assassins and the Dragons respectively), understanding first hand how violence, drugs, and policing were simultaneously shaping and destroying their communities. Gonzales recalled, “We didn’t like what we saw in the streets. Then again, maybe that was the only place for us.”<sup>6</sup> Eager to reinvent the gangs they grew up in, the two began to house a new informal headquarters in the vacant basement of the Bonitas Youth Hostel. The conversations in this basement led to critiques of how Johnson’s Great Society politics did little to alleviate poverty, and the two imagined an alternative vision of the future. They launched the

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<sup>5</sup> Sevenko, “Making Loisaida,” 302.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Poston, *The Gang and The Establishment* (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), 18.

Real Great Society, and fought for “the right to neighborhood space for economic security, the right to educational space, and the right to respect as human beings.”<sup>7</sup> These ideas gained traction in their community when Chino and Angelo used their own sweat and labor to transform their basement headquarters into the Fabulous Latin House, a new nightclub in the neighborhood.

The new “club” Chino and Angelo were establishing was not rooted in an oppositional ideology, but rather an alternative one that reimagined how the city could help them.<sup>8</sup> Yes, the people involved with RGS were frustrated with short-phased anti-poverty programs that forced the poor to continue to rely on “handouts.” However, unlike the Young Lords, Real Great Society did not have explicit critiques of capitalism, they did not demand new provisions from the city, nor did they stage any of their own offenses. Instead, RGS’s development was framed by the understanding that only through organized institutions could a community improve their political and economic situation.<sup>9</sup> During their University of the Streets campaign, RGS spoke to at-risk high schoolers, criminals, and gang members about the realities of their economic oppression and presented an array of anti-poverty and anti-gang alternatives to the youths, including liberal arts curriculum and practical job training.<sup>10</sup> The University of the Streets established a pedagogy of activism, or rather the understanding that those who were living in poverty were the most knowledgeable about how to confront it. RGS believed that, “we’re smart enough to come up with our own solutions or work with them... but it’s good for somebody

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<sup>7</sup> Timo Schrader, “Education as a Human Right: The Real Great Society and a Pedagogy of Activism,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 12(1) (2018): 123.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Nandini Bagchee, *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 109.

from the bottom to meet equally with some of those people.”<sup>11</sup> This human-centered, bottom-up approach to meet the city in the middle would be foundational to the widespread transformation of the Lower East Side.

By the late 60s, RGS was a well-recognized organization on the New York streets, but also in city, state, and national political circles. The activity picking up at the Fabulous Latin House attracted the attention of Mike and Fred Good.<sup>12</sup> Mike, a social worker, and Fred, a recent Georgetown graduate, were captivated by the conversations that Chino and Angelo were having in the rehabilitated basement. They connected RGS to academics like Charlie Slack, a researcher at Princeton, and Buckminster Fuller, an emerging architect. These men helped RGS secure federal and private funds for their programs and ideas.<sup>13</sup> By 1965, just two and a half years after Chino and Angelo started chatting in the vacant basement, their vision for a new kind of gang was in command of a \$15,000 grant and operating as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization: Real Great Society Inc..

Fred Good imagined that the Real Great Society could create an environment where every individual would be free to “do his own thing.” More concretely, this vision consisted of teaching trades, creating opportunities for economic growth, and supporting the needs and wants of the community using the people and materials already present in the community.<sup>14</sup> Now in command of some funding and institutional recognition, RGS envisioned a self-sustaining Lower East Side. They used the seed money to jump start a handful of local enterprises; a leather goods business, a child-care service, and to continue funding the Fabulous Latin House. Beyond just

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<sup>11</sup> Chino Garcia, interview by Leyla Vural, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*, New York, NY, 13 November 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Poston, *The Gang and The Establishment*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Syeus Mottel, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders* (New York, Drake Publishers, 1973), 25.

<sup>14</sup> Poston, *The Gang and The Establishment*, 53.

buildings and services, the members of RGS were seeking avenues for permanent social, educational, cultural, and economic change within their community.

### Doing More with Less

Seeking an all-encompassing solution to the ongoing crises in the Lower East Side, RGS turned to housing. To Angelo, “living in a place, it means a whole lot more than just living in a place. It means a whole social atmosphere. It means to a large degree one’s education, real education. It means being able to handle, to cope with the immediate situation and try to relate back to the overall because it comes from the house.”<sup>15</sup> This notion that one’s housing situation was the root of an individual’s social network, educational attainment, and outlook on daily life was actualized in the shift of RGS’s efforts from educational programing to space-claiming and building rehabilitation in the late 60s. Angelo’s very intimate and emotional understanding of housing differed from the more utilitarian, rights based framework that the Young Lords championed, but rather reflected the Renigades’ belief that self-help could be transformative force for the community. As Chino Garcia saw it, “If the Young Lords’ symbol was the rifle, ours was the hammer.”<sup>16</sup> To create the lively, human-centered community that they idealized, “RGS had to produce builders, people who didn’t just talk, but who could take real action.”<sup>17</sup>

To take concrete action, RGS reached out to Buckminster “Bucky” Fuller, an eager mathematician and architect who was interested in exploring solar energy, wind power and alternative technology by “doing more with less.”<sup>18</sup> Like Good, Fuller believed that anyone with the proper training could pick up any trade, solve any problem, and saw youth training as a way

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<sup>15</sup> Syeus, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders*, 150.

<sup>16</sup> Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> Poston, *The Gang and The Establishment*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Syeus, *Charas: The Improbable Dome Builders*, 21.



to transform communities everywhere. He was a utopian thinker and wanted to experiment with how urban space could be made the most accessible and useful to its most immediate residents.<sup>19</sup> Fuller ran the environmental committee of RGS, which eventually adopted the name CHARAS (the first letters of the names of the people involved; Chino, Humberto, Angelo, Roym Anthony, and Salvador). They began to squat in abandoned buildings, fix them up, and completely rebranded the gang as CHARAS by 1971.<sup>20</sup> Fuller thought beyond abandoned buildings, and ambitiously sought to reshape the empty nearby lot on Eleventh Street as an affordable housing complex. He taught the gang the mathematical and technical skills for constructing ferrocement geodesic domes (see Fig. 3.1.)<sup>21</sup> CHARAS and Fuller constructed two thirty-foot domes as “prototypes” for easy-to-build, affordable housing units in the lot. Ultimately, these domes were a projection of CHARAS’s self-determined attitude, as well as their participation in a greater environmental-consciousness movement.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 3.1; CHARAS members work to add cement coating to a full scale geodesic dome.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>20</sup> Chino Garcia, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*.

<sup>21</sup> Syeus, *CHARAS The Improbable Dome Builders*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 114.

Fuller also helped CHARAS make their mark on the homesteading scene when they began to work on 519 East 11th Street. In line with the goal of doing more with less, the building aimed to be entirely self-sufficient.<sup>23</sup> The building featured a solar collector, a solar powered system that would generate and recycle hot water. The solar collector was aimed at reducing utility costs for future tenants, making it both environmentally and economically sustainable. CHARAS also built a glass dome greenhouse used to grow fresh produce, a fish farm in the basement, as well as the building's trademark windmill that provided power.<sup>24</sup> A Loisaída resident recalled, "The windmill has given us a new sense of pride, because it was the unemployed and unskilled people of the neighborhood who put this 37 foot tower in the air." (See Fig. 3.2.)<sup>25</sup> It became a symbol of self-help. Chino Garcia explained in how Con Edison, the main electricity company, would often shut down electricity in the neighborhood. "We need electricity to keep this whole this running," he reported calmly, "so we figured we'd have to make our own electricity also."<sup>26</sup> It was rumored that during the city-wide blackout of 1977, the windmill on 519 East 11th Street was still generating power.

CHARAS's vision for a self-sustaining building was powered by the utopian thinking of its members, as well as help from influential homesteading advocates. Michael Friedberg, a friend of Philip St. Georges from their time together at Yale, came across the abandoned 519 East 11th Street building in the early 70s, and purchased the entire building for \$1600.<sup>27</sup> Together with Adopt-A-Building, a new non-profit organization structured like UHAB,

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Ferguson, "The Struggle for Space; 10 Years of Turf Battling on the Lower East Side" in *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 146.

<sup>24</sup> Marlis Mathews-Johnson, *VIVA LOISAÍDA 1978* (New York: Gruppe Documentation & Tyllis, 1978), Film.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Shayla Love, "The Almost Forgotten Story of the 1970s East Village Windmill," 19 September 2014, *Gothamist*, [http://gothamist.com/2014/09/29/east\\_village\\_windmill\\_nyc.php#photo-1](http://gothamist.com/2014/09/29/east_village_windmill_nyc.php#photo-1).

CHARAS was able to secure \$177,000 in federal loans and building rights. The building received CETA funds, so homesteaders were paid \$3 an hour for the first 32 hours a week.<sup>28</sup> Homesteaders would work beyond the 32 hours, continuing to build their home equity through their sweat and labor, and ultimately become owners of the building. In 1973, 519 East 11th St. was the first completed sweat-equity homesteading effort in Loisaida. Adopt-A-Building continued to sponsor homesteading projects that featured alternative energy design elements.<sup>29</sup> The Eleventh Street Movement in Loisaida was becoming a homesteading hotspot in the DIY city. By 1981, over thirty buildings were rehabilitated through sweat-equity homesteading, and over 80 buildings were represented by tenant's associations, demonstrating how the community that was physically and visibly taking control of the landscape.<sup>30</sup>

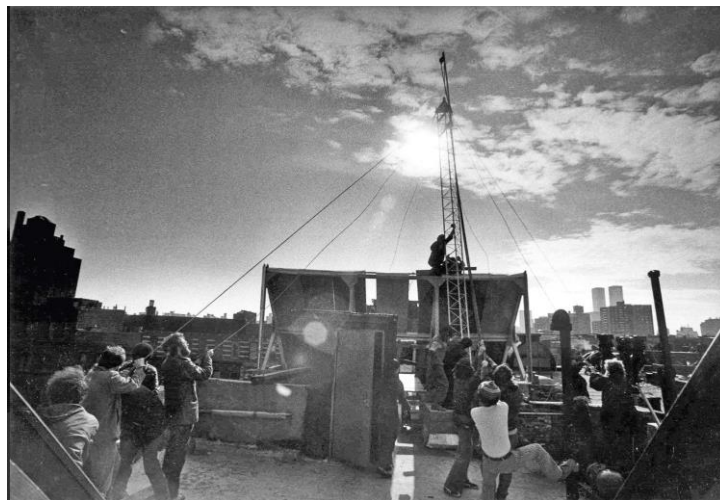


Fig. 3.2<sup>31</sup>: CHARAS members work to build the windmill on the roof of 519 East 11th Street.

The Eleventh Street Movement transformed a street that was known for stripped cars into the heart of Loisaida.<sup>32</sup> Beyond just buildings, the Eleventh Street Movement worked to convert

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Fred Good, "The Origins of Loisaida," in *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 33.

<sup>30</sup> Sevcenko, "Making Loisaida," 306.

<sup>31</sup> Love, "The Almost Forgotten Story Of The 1970s East Village Windmill."

<sup>32</sup> Love, "The Almost Forgotten Story of the 1970s East Village Windmill."

unclaimed facades into art pieces, vacant lots into community gardens, and embody a vibrant street life. Like homesteading, sweat-equity community gardens challenged the conventional ideas of private ownership and supported community control over space. An old garbage lot was converted into the Twelfth Street Community Garden, providing a safe place for people to gather with their families, produced edible crops during the summer, and featured a mural painted by CityArts Workshop. CityArts was a community arts program that aimed to bring “art out of the studio and into the street for the benefit of all.”<sup>33</sup> Their iconic murals were painted on building facades all throughout the neighborhood, and depicted common Loisaida themes.<sup>34</sup> The goal of many of these murals was to tell the story of the whole community, which meant drawing inspiration from the streets, as well as historic Lower East Side predecessors.<sup>35</sup> In Loisaida, DIY efforts extended well beyond the individual home, and into the streets of the community. The comprehensive neighborhood improvement effort demonstrated how self-help was employed to create a sense of neighborhood pride and heritage known as *puertorriqueñidad loisaidaña*.<sup>36</sup> The Eleventh Street Movement challenged the Lower East Side’s history as “stepping stone” on the way to achieving the American Dream, and recreated it as a place to stay and raise a family. This is best encapsulated in the neighborhood motto, “Mejore, No Se Muede” (Improve, Don’t Move).<sup>37</sup>

### Building A Neighborhood Heritage

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<sup>33</sup> Marlis Mathews-Johnson, *VIVA LOISAIIDA 1978*.

<sup>34</sup> Good, “The Origins of Loisaida,” 35.

<sup>35</sup> Mario Maffi, “The Other Side of the Coin: Culture in Loisaida” in *From Urban Village to East Village - The Battle for New York’s Lower East Side* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Sevenko, “Making Loisaida,” 302.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

“Old P.S. 64” was an elementary school situated on East 6th Street and Avenue B where neighborhood youths like Bimbo Rivas actually attended. In the early 70’s, the city’s fiscal crisis had forced the school to shut down, leaving the building vacant and vulnerable to vandalism for the next four years. The cooper wiring, lead pipes, and doors were all stolen from the building while CHARAS and Adopt-A-Building were trying to negotiate ownership with the city. After months of frustration, they “just decided to squat in the building and start fixing it, and demanded the City give us a lease.”<sup>38</sup> Young trainees from the Adopt-A-Building program fixed the plumbing, wired the building from scratch, and installed a tin roof after the original copper roof had been stripped. In the winter of 1979, “Old P.S. 64” was finally leased to Adopt-A-Building, and the abandoned school was transformed into a new five-story arts and culture center, El Bohio.<sup>39</sup> The rehabilitated building served as an influential anchor institution and youth center that hoped to break the cycle of poverty, violence, and demoralization through culture, education, and empowerment.<sup>40</sup>

The name El Bohio, the Taino word for “hut,” was meant to anchor the school to the community’s Puerto Rican heritage, but also proved to be instrumental in creating a distinctive new cultural identity for the Lower East Side.<sup>41</sup> The building became a hub for arts and educational programming in the neighborhood. The basement was converted into a theater for performing arts, the gym became valuable rehearsal space, the first floor was turned into a white-walled gallery space for local artists who were marginalized from mainstream galleries, and classrooms were used to host after-school programs, dance workshops, film screenings, construction trainings, as

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<sup>38</sup> Chino Garcia, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Bangchee, *Counter Institution*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

well as meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>42</sup> Community organizations like El Teatro Ambulante and Teatro Campesino rehearsed their “street theater skits,” Third Street Music School taught lessons, Recycle-a-Bicycle showed kids how to make their own bikes, Spike Lee spoke at panels, and the community’s magazine, *The Quality of Life in Loisaida* was headquartered in the old school building as well.<sup>43</sup> El Bohio, like its sister institutions La Plaza Cultural and CHARAS REcycling Center, showcased the community’s aims of not merely claiming a geographic territory, but also its goal of “endowing this urban space with an identity and an ideology that would support its residents’ needs.”<sup>44</sup> El Bohio was a physical manifestation of the creative capacity of the people, and as an anchor institution informally linked the emergent artists’ community with other creative movements in the city.

The creative explosion that came from the Loisaida extended beyond El Bohio. The Nuyoricano Poets Café in 1976 solidified the voices of artists, musicians, and poets of the Lower East Side. Miguel Algarin, Lucky Cienfuego, and Miguel Piñer, the founding poets, would write about the realities of urban life, their ethnic identity, and how they experienced New York City.<sup>45</sup> It was in the informal poetic and activist circles of the mid 70’s where Bimbo Rivas and Chino Garcia settled on the name Loisaida.<sup>46</sup> Beyond it being easier to say than “Lower East Side” for Spanish language speakers, the name was inspired by the idea of placing Don Quijote in an urban setting.<sup>47</sup> They thought that tackling the abandonment, drugs, and crime seemed like a quixotic task, but with faith and idealism, it was possible.<sup>48</sup> Naming the space connected the

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<sup>42</sup> Allegra Hobbs, “Gentrification’s Empty Victory,” *New York Times*, 1 June 2018.

<sup>43</sup> William Parker, Interviewed by Steve Dalachinsky and Jim Feast, “Land Without Lords”, in *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 580.

<sup>44</sup> Sevencko, “Making Loisaida,” 296.

<sup>45</sup> Good, “The Origins of Loisaida,” 32.

<sup>46</sup> Chino Garcia, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*.

<sup>47</sup> Chino Garcia, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*.

<sup>48</sup> Maffi, “Culture in Loisaida,” 301.

community's ideology of comprehensive neighborhood improvements to the land, and this connection was deepened through the poetry that emerged. Algarín described how “a poem describes the neighborhood of the writer for the reader ... the The Nuyorican poets have worked to establish the commonplace because they have wanted to locate their position on earth, the ground, the neighborhood, the environment.”<sup>49</sup> The work of these poets articulated the place-based roots of the puertorriqueñidad loisaideña identity to a wider audience.

### A New Frontier for the Arts

The greater Lower East Side was changing into “a hotbed of the creative arts,”<sup>50</sup> attracting newcomers who were intrigued by both the progressive politics and affordability of the area.<sup>51</sup> Along Loisaida's eastern border, Tompkins Square Park and the East Village were becoming hubs for radical political movements which attracted counter-cultural political groups including yippies, hippies, anarchists, punk rockers, and beatniks.<sup>52</sup> To the south of Houston Street, emerging musicians, poets, and artists and well established creatives frequented the new gallery scene that was popping up in the historically Italian and Jewish neighborhood. Situated in the politically progressive geography of the Lower East Side, El Bohio not only showcased and served its Puerto Rican neighbors, but a multiethnic mix of alternative technology advocates, activists, artists, and local politicians.<sup>53</sup>

CHARAS viewed the new influx of artists and anarchists as “a potential ally in the struggle against the city-developer coalition.”<sup>54</sup> Art Galleries were quickly establishing

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Lorraine O'Grady, “Letter to the Editor: Art in America” (unpublished letter to Elizabeth C. Baker, New York, New York, October 22, 1984).

<sup>51</sup> Sevchenko, “Making Loisaida,” 306.

<sup>52</sup> Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 139.

themselves along Loisaida's southern border, and were also using the "aggressive rhetoric of 'liberation,' 'renewal,' 'ecstasy.'"<sup>55</sup> New arts centers like ABC No Rio were born out of the frustrations of women and artists of color who were excluded from the city's mainstream museum and gallery scene. ABC No Rio was situated on 156 Rivington Street, just the opposite side out Houston Street from Loisaida, and was aware of the precarity of starting an art gallery in a predominately low-income neighborhood. In this context, the gallery's first exhibit in 1980, *Real Estate Show*, was aimed at building solidarity with the neighborhood's residents and showed pieces that were critical of the city's real estate scheme. Artist Becky Howland's notable installation for the show was mounted on the facade of an abandoned building on Delancey Street, and featured a giant octopus reaching for wads of cash and tenement buildings with each of its tentacles (See Fig. 3.3).<sup>56</sup> Their next show, *Animals in the City*, showcased the depictions of animals by artists, scientists, and local school children all side by side. Despite these attempts at engaging the community, other shows like *Murder, Junk, and Suicide*, did not always resonate well with the Lower East Side's longtime residents who were trying to escape poverty and raise their families down the block.<sup>57</sup>

For Rolando Politi, an Italian-born artist who had just come to the Lower East Side, the new scene was, "Yeah, apocalyptic, but also very interesting and free at the same time. Liberating. *Liberating*, that's a good word, Inviting you to be like, OK - let's get started. Where do we start?"<sup>58</sup> For some newcomers, Loisaida wasn't about defending turf from abandonment and planned shrinkage, but rather an exhilarating new frontier. The Lower East Side as a whole was looking less and less like the historic working class neighborhood it had embodied for the

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<sup>55</sup> Parker, "Land Without Lords," 92.

<sup>56</sup> Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 161.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 52.



last century and a half, but was now spectacularized into a “unique blend of poverty, punk rock, drugs, arson, Hell’s angels, winos, and dilapidated housing that adds up to the adventurous avant-garde setting of considerable cachet.”<sup>59</sup> The new galleries interested in retail space on the Lower East side raised commercial rents from \$6 per square foot to \$30 per square foot in the early 1980s.<sup>60</sup>



Fig. 3.3: Art critic and activist Alan Moore stands next to Becky Howland’s poster for Real Estate Show. Notice Chino’s name painted on the same wall.

### A Shifting Landscape of Values

Even Mayor Koch was excited by the emergent art scene in lower Manhattan. In 1981, he proposed the Artist Homeownership Program (AHOP). The program was designed to allocate \$3 million in funds to “provide artists with an opportunity for homeownership to meet their special work requirements, to encourage them to continue to live and work in New York City, and to stimulate unique alternatives for the reuse and rehabilitation of city-owned property.”<sup>61</sup> In 1982,

<sup>59</sup> Walter Robinson and Carlo McCormick, “Slouching Toward Avenue D,” *Art in America*, 72(6) (Summer 1984): 135.

<sup>60</sup> William Sites, “City Policy and The Lower East Side,” in *From Urban Village to East Village - The Battle for New York’s Lower East Side* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 199.

<sup>61</sup> Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, “The Fine Art of Gentrification,” *The MIT Press*, 31 (1984): 93.

artists and developers had been selected to rehabilitate sixteen vacant buildings on East 8th Street, between Avenue C and Avenue B. The units would house working class artists, but unlike Puerto Rican homesteaders who had agreed not to sell their property at market rates to ensure the resilience of affordable housing in the area, AHOP was hopeful that artists would eventually sell these properties for a profit, replacing the working class homes with those fit for a white, post-industrial society.<sup>62</sup> Community groups ultimately defeated Koch's plan in 1983, but it was clear that the city's plans for abandoned buildings had shifted towards promoting white middle-class and luxury rehabilitation, and creating a pro-gentrification coalition in the Lower East Side.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond the neighborhood's "funky," "alternative," and "young energy," the nearby development of Lower Manhattan's business district ultimately restructured property values in the Lower East Side.<sup>64</sup> Real Estate investors began to buy up property, hoping to market new housing options and a vibrant neighborhood to a more affluent class of residents moving into the city. As the neighborhood seemed to have the potential to generate a profit once more, the city returned to the practice of demolishing abandoned buildings and converting them into larger vacant lots that would be more attractive to private developers.<sup>65</sup> The housing stock that homesteaders looked to as a means of providing sustainable low-income housing through sweat-equity was now being re-commodified and taken for its exchange-value.<sup>66</sup>

The Department of Housing and Preservation replaced the Sweat Equity Program (1976-1980) with the Urban Homesteading Program (1980-1989).<sup>67</sup> This program eliminated the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Sites, "City Policy and The Lower East Side," 202.

<sup>64</sup> Grace Glueck, "A Gallery Scene that Pioneers in New Territories," *New York Times*, 26 June 1983.

<sup>65</sup> Sites, "City Policy and The Lower East Side," 201.

<sup>66</sup> Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 260.

<sup>67</sup> "Urban Homestead Program," Directory of NYC Housing Programs, NYU Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, <http://furmancenter.org/coredata/directory/entry/urban-homestead-program>. (19 March 2019).

possibility for low interest mortgages and limited available loans to \$10,000 per unit, making it so that interested participants had to have substantial capital to invest beyond their own sweat if they were interested in rehabilitating a building. Additionally, CETA funds from the Federal Government were no longer being offered by 1982, meaning that homesteaders would have to generate outside income during the process of rehabilitation in order to support themselves. William Parker joined a homesteading group in 1983 in order to build a home for his young family after moving to the neighborhood in 1975. Parker was critical about the accessibility of the program for people looking for affordable housing; “The whole program is like a Catch 22. You need money to complete a building, but if you’re poor, you don’t have anything. You don’t have any money. You might not have any time; you might not have any skills.”<sup>68</sup> Parker’s friends with more financial resources joined groups where they didn’t actually contribute any of their own labor, and hired construction companies to do the necessary repairs.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Parker recalls how “the group I was with I would not consider a grassroots group. I was the only Black person in the group, only minority in the group.”<sup>70</sup>

While the new Urban Homesteading Program proved to be an exclusionary measure for some, for others it was an outstanding opportunity. Although there were fewer financial resources available to homesteaders, the new law allowed rehabilitated buildings to be resold at market rate. These buildings that middle class homesteaders renovated were no longer an affordable housing solution, but a typical wealth-generating investment.<sup>71</sup> To preserve the integrity of the housing movement, a new generation of housing activists had started to set up squats for “deserving” community members, specifically targeting people suffering from

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<sup>68</sup> Parker, “Land Without Lords,” 575.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Starecheski, *Ours to Lose*, 87.

homelessness, addiction, or AIDS. These newcomers claimed buildings under the basis of “deprivation-based squatting.”<sup>72</sup> But by then, many of the marginalized long-time residents of Loisaída had already secured a stable home. The result was white housing activists inviting minorities, recent immigrants, and homeless people from other parts of the city to settle in the squats on East Thirteenth Street.<sup>73</sup> Ultimately, there was an increasingly diverse population on the block, but because these new residents were “put” in the units, it was difficult to establish the same kind of community connection and neighborhood pride that CHARAS had championed though homesteading the decade before.

Something that did connect older residents of Loisaída to the increasingly heterogeneous Lower East Side that emerged in the 1980s was the fear of gentrification. Hoping to spark private reinvestment in the neighborhood, Mayor Koch proposed a cross-subsidy plan that would sell 500 parcels of city-owned, vacant land at market rates, and reserving only 20% of the new residential units for low income households.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, federal and city funds supporting self-help projects were dwindling, making cross-subsidy look like the only option to stabilize low-income housing in an area.<sup>75</sup> Over the next two years, the coalition of community groups and Community Board 3 negotiated a new cross-subsidy plan with the city. In 1985, the city agreed to a 50/50 plan; half of the newly created housing units would be sold at market rate while the other half would be subsidized. The 50/50 negotiation demonstrated how community organizations were able to assert their right to affordable housing within limits, but this limited

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>74</sup> Von Hassel, *Homesteading in New York City*, 56.

<sup>75</sup> George Goodman, “A New Plan for the Lower East Side,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1985.

agency was overshadowed by the city administration's appropriation of what were public resources into private profit.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the rapid neighborhood change, CHARAS's presence in the neighborhood remained strong in the 1980s. Loisaida's array of DIY homes and anchor institutions kept the community in place in the face of gentrification. Beyond housing, the community spaces that CHARAS was heavily involved in including La Plaza Community Garden, 6th Street Community Center, and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe have continued to represent and serve the residents of Loisaida. These spaces "not only created public space but also produced an engaged public."<sup>77</sup> In the midst of the momentum and magnitude of the increasingly neoliberal of the city, Loisaida's homesteading legacy proved its resilience and success at claiming urban space, as well as its creating of a distinctive Puerto Rican identity that was proudly rooted in the Lower East Side.

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<sup>76</sup> Sites, "City Policy and the Lower East Side," 204.

<sup>77</sup> Bagchee, *Counter Institution*, 147.

## Conclusion

The fight for community control continues in Loisaida today. In 1998, El Bohio, the abandoned elementary school that had been homesteaded into a community center, was being auctioned off by the city. At \$3.5 million, the building was a steal for the new owner Mr. Singer, who had budgeted \$12 million for the property.<sup>1</sup> He had grand plans to convert the lot into a new 19-story student dormitory unit. By 2002, the CHARAS programs that continued to squat in the building were evicted by the city. The development process came to a halt in 2006, when the city's historic preservation landmark commission did not approve of the dormitory because the plan would not fit within the regulations of the building's landmark designation. Despite rumors of the de Blasio administration buying the building back and continued efforts by community members to reclaim El Bohio, it lies vacant today. In a 2017 interview, Mr. Singer remarked, "When people talk about this emotional tie to the building, I don't get caught up. What they're emotionally tied to is making money off someone else's back illegally."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Singer's perspective is one of the interests of private real estate, which reclaimed its dominance in the city as it recovered from the financial crisis. As neighborhoods across the city were primed for reinvestment, abandoned spaces were no longer places of possibility for the working class, but the backdrop for the real estate game. The claims of big developers and big capital outweighed the claims of the communities that worked hard to homestead and stabilize these neighborhoods when they were at their most vulnerable. The city's building ethos changed from one of thrifty building rehabilitation to luxury construction. The value that land held was not measured by the labor and love invested into it, but the potential revenue it could generate.

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<sup>1</sup> Allegra Hobbs, "Gentrification's Empty Victory," *New York Times*, 1 June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The New York that was emerged during after the crisis tightened the intimate bond between urbanization and capital surplus.<sup>3</sup> As Harvey argues, “the right to the city, as it is now constituted, is too narrowly confined, restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in the position to shape cities more and more after their own desires.”<sup>4</sup> Today, the disparity between who built the city and who the city is built for is tremendous.

New York City’s history has consistently been written by big investment, big capital, and big dispossession. The financial crisis and the DIY city that followed represent a temporary rupture in the narrative of capital accumulation. However, even in today’s reinvigorated private market, there are still some remnants of the slow-growth DIY city of the long 1970s. In an interview in 2017, Chino Garcia was asked how Loisaida faired for working class people. He replied,

“I mean the neighborhood still has a strong body of Third World people and working people in the neighborhood, even though it’s been gentrified tremendously. Thank god for the housing movements that saved a lot of these buildings for Third World people, working-class poor, which includes poor whites, poor blacks, poor Latinos, poor Chinese. A lot of them are still here mainly because of those housing movements.”<sup>5</sup>

Through homesteading movements, the poor people of Loisaida were able to build and retain a piece of New York. Today, La Plaza Cultural still serves as a community garden, Chino Garcia still lives in the neighborhood, and the Loisaida Center continues to build public programs curated to celebrate the neighborhood’s local history. The neighborhood demonstrates “not only a transformation of urban infrastructures, but also the construction of a new way of life and urban persona.”<sup>6</sup> The urban possibilities that were articulated and achieved by low-income

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<sup>3</sup> David Harvey, “The Right to the City,” *New Left Review*, 53 (2008): 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Chino Garcia, interview by Leyla Vural, *The New York Preservation Archive Project*, New York, NY, 13 November 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 28.

homesteaders challenges one to reimagine how wealth, land value, and the notion of home is appraised.

The fiscal crisis put the real estate game on hold temporarily, carving out a space for the creative capacity of working class and poor people to build the city they envisioned. The squatters and homesteaders discussed in the previous chapters not only created new homes for their communities, but also social services, cultural institutions, and a sense of place that is only possible through active participation and self-help. Although the Young Lords disbanded by 1976, the DIY city that was taking shape was an embodiment of restoring “power to the oppressed people” through seizing community control of their institutions and land.<sup>7</sup> By claiming land, Puerto Rican homesteaders were able to challenge their colonial relationship within the city. Community control and self-help efforts effectively transformed their neighborhoods and transformed how people saw themselves. The homesteaded neighborhoods were no longer emblematic of the shortcomings of municipal services, but vibrant places for families, artists, and community. What began as militant protest in the late 1960s ultimately turned into intentional and city-supported place making projects.

The rhetoric of place making, citizen participation, and local control is still in circulation today, as ongoing gentrification efforts seek neighborhood authenticity and character.<sup>8</sup> While vibrant street life, eclectic enterprises, and a sense of community are on the city’s list of values, protecting and promoting the working class neighborhood is a challenge when working class people have little agency in their built environment. The right to the city remains elusive to working class people when only those with financial power are capable of claiming space. In

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<sup>7</sup> Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, *The New York Young Lords and the Struggle for Liberation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>8</sup>Suleiman Osman, *The Invention of Brownstone Brooklyn* (New York City: Oxford, 2011), 19.



today's ultra-competitive free market environment, the sweat equity homesteading model stands no chance. However, the bold homesteaders of the fiscal crisis can still be looked to as an effective model of articulating, organizing, and building an alternative vision of the city. These homesteaders were bold enough to reject the municipal institutions otherwise taken for granted, and reconfigured them to actually serve the people. Without seemingly radical alternatives proposed at the grassroots level to the people, municipal policy will never accommodate the demands of the disenfranchised. There is no hope for comprehensive change in the city without continuous utopian thinking and creativity.

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