

Chapter 13

Squatting

By Colin Moynihan

Passersby who stroll down the newly gentrified blocks of Avenue C that stretch from East 14th Street to Houston Street are sometimes puzzled as they pass by an old brick tenement on the west side of the avenue just below East 10th street. The building has a weathered brick façade and a black metal door. The door has no windows and there is no intercom system. Displayed in an upstairs window of the building is a sign that reads "This land not for sale." As recently as the mid-90s many of the people who now pause to gaze at this building and wonder aloud what goes on inside, would have been unlikely to venture deep into the Lower East Side. But these days, the same new restaurants and shops that lure visitors from other areas provide a heightened contrast that makes the unusual building stand out more than ever.

The building in question is a squat. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, dozens, perhaps as many as hundreds of squats dotted the Lower East Side. During those decades, countless buildings in the neighborhood were abandoned by tenants and landlords. Fires, some set accidentally, others the result of arson, were a common occurrence. Rubble strewn lots dominated parts of the landscape. On some blocks, detritus and crumbled brick and mortar filled the majority of the lots with only an occasional, solitary building standing intact. Some of the buildings that remained became occupied by drug dealers or were turned into shooting galleries. At the same time corner drug bazaars operated openly throughout the day and night.

While many buildings were destroyed or otherwise uninhabitable, landlords shut down still more. They were employing a practice known as "warehousing," in which buildings in a blighted area are held empty until a time in the future when their value might rise. The City of New York also took over control of hundreds of properties in the neighborhood, most of which were seized through tax foreclosure, and kept them vacant. The result of this combination of factors was to create a housing shortage on the Lower East Side, while increasing rent in the existing housing stock.

Then the squatters came. They were inspired by a range of influences, including the Dutch Provos of the 1960s, who took over empty buildings, and further back to 19th Century utopian communes such as those organized in France by Charles Fourier. Other influences were more contemporary: a punk rock-style approach that extolled the virtues of DIY (or "do it yourself") culture, combined with a natural stance of anti-authoritarianism, both driven by a desire for affordable housing.

The squatters were a mixture of working families, artists, skilled tradesmen and anarchists. They used sledgehammers to knock down bricked up doorways to city-owned buildings and

then moved in. Most of the buildings were in poor shape. There was no heat or hot water. The roofs were punctured by holes or nonexistent and often pigeons had taken to nesting inside. At times entire floors had been removed or had caved in, leaving behind only ghostly joists spanning the width of a building on upper floors. The squatters repaired the buildings as they lived inside, patching roofs, repairing drainlines and repointing brick facades.

But as the squatters proliferated, they drew unwelcome attention from the city. Officials considered the squatters little more than trespassers and during the '80s and '90s evicted dozens of buildings. Some of the evictions involved prolonged sieges and conflicts. In 1995 the evictions culminated on East 13th Street when hundreds of police wearing visored helmets and supported by an armored personnel carrier flooded onto the block between Avenue A and Avenue B and evicted residents from three squats there. The eviction was broadcast on television and reported the next day in newspapers.

In August 2002, the City of New York made a startling announcement. The Department of Housing Preservation and Development, which held the deeds to the thirteen remaining squats on the Lower East Side, said that they had reached an agreement with the squatters and with the Urban Homesteaders Assistance Board, a non-profit organization. The agreement stipulated that the city was turning over ownership of twelve of the buildings to UHAB. After the squats were brought up to code, UHAB would then turn possession over to the squatters, with the proviso that the buildings would be maintained as low-income dwellings.

The squats were to be turned into a specific style of low-income housing co-op, known as HDFCs. Such buildings were established throughout the city in the late 1980s and the 1990s under the aegis of the Housing Development Fund Corporation. Strict income guidelines governed who was eligible to live in those buildings. The buildings payed low tax rates, and maintenance charges for those who live in them is also low — generally ranging from \$300 to \$600 per month.

HDFC buildings are also different from more conventional co-ops in that they are not intended to be speculative investments. Owners of apartments in such buildings are expected not to sell their dwellings at market rate. They must also use such apartments as their primary residences, which means they must stay there at least 183 days per year. Many HDFC buildings also do the work of managing the building — paying water bills and taxes, organizing repairs, making decisions on who will move into available apartments — on their own, without the help or guidance of a management company.

In most respects the proposed transfer was welcomed by the squatters. Although there were those who opposed legality on philosophical grounds, thinking that ownership of private property is wrong, there were many others who said their goal as squatters all along had merely been to establish low-income housing that could be sustained for generations. The fact that the HDFCs, with their emphasis on community, democratic decision-making and commitment to remaining outside the mainstream real estate market, seemed to operate already in ways the squats could easily adapt to, made the plan seem logical to them.

A Radical Political and Social History of the Lower East Side

106

It comes as little surprise that squatters who had spent years living under the threat of eviction, some of whom went to bed each night with a packed knapsack of clothes and valuables next to their mattresses, would greet the city's proposal with relief. It's an altogether more interesting and complex question, however, to wonder why the city was motivated to enter into a compromise with the squatters.

Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, city officials, real estate developers and local landlords regularly criticized the squatters as criminals, saying that their raffish, disorderly presence kept property values low and impeded the rejuvenation of the neighborhood. Some of the most ardent enemies of the squatters were the non-profit housing groups that competed with them for city-owned buildings. The local political champion of these interests was Antonio Pagan, a conservative Democrat who represented the neighborhood on the City Council, and helped funnel many buildings into programs controlled by political allies. In response, squatters held angry demonstrations at local community board meetings. One squatter hurled a cream filled cake into the face of the board chairman. Others lit off stink bombs at a meeting, then after rushing outside, secured the exits behind them with bicycle locks. One of the most significant disturbances occurred at a community board meeting at the Great Hall at Cooper Union, the same hall where Abraham Lincoln delivered a famous campaign speech in 1860. There in 1993, a melee took place after squatters protesting the eviction of the Glass House squat on Avenue D ignited a smoke bomb and pulled a fire alarm. A dozen people were arrested, including a board member named Margarita Lopez, who later beat Antonio Pagan in an election and took over his city council seat. While the city negotiated with UHAB over the future of the squats, Lopez was one of the council members who helped to hammer out the resulting agreement.

Theories about the city's eventual change of heart abound, but there is little hard evidence to support any of the ideas. The transfer was not announced formally by the city. Instead it was leaked by UHAB, in the form of an internet story on the website of City Limits magazine, which shares an office with UHAB. That day, a spokeswoman for the Department of Housing Preservation & Development, the agency that had official control over the squats, explained the decision to make the deal to a reporter by saying that the squatters who lived in the buildings at the time of the agreement were different from the ones who had clashed with the city in earlier times. The statement was inaccurate, as the official who made it perhaps knew, but the nature of the falsity underscores the fact that the city was not eager to broadcast their agreement with former foes.

There are some familiar with the squatter community who insist that the only reason that any squats remained into the year 2000 was through the promise of disruption and the threat of violence. That is to say, the squatters of the Lower East Side had for years made evictions a difficult, expensive and unpopular exercise for the city. By barricading themselves inside their buildings, rather than surrendering peacefully, the squatters ensured that blocks surrounding their buildings would be blocked off and filled with police, emergency services officers, ambulances, arrest vans and various heavy-duty trucks containing police equipment. The drama entailed in the evictions also made the events newsworthy. And while reporters were not partisans working on behalf of the squatters, there are few readers or viewers who take kindly to the idea of armed evictions, no matter how grungy in appear-

ance the evictees. Not to mention the fact that it's difficult for any police department to seem sympathetic when rolling an armored personnel carrier through the streets.

107

The thought follows that as the once blighted blocks of the Lower East Side, where drug bazaars, stabbings and arson were formerly common, came to be dotted by restaurants and boutiques, as rents rose, and as politically disconnected residents were replaced by those with a more developed capacity for official-style outrage, it became less viable for the city to shut down entire blocks in the area. A populace that once suffered such spectacles without loud complaint was replaced by a populace that while not entirely sympathetic to the idea of sweat equity, might sum up their discontent with evictions by declaring "If I'm paying \$1,800 a month to live on this street I damn well want to be able to come and go as I please. And I want to do so without cops on my roof, without angry crowds making noise outside my window"

In short, the demographic and economic changes on the Lower East Side during the second half of the 1990s created a reality in which squat evictions were no longer politically feasible for the city. The irony that underlies this idea is that the gentrification that the squatters accurately considered a threat to their own existence, might in the long run have played a role in their preservation.

It is now certain that the squats have a future on the Lower East Side. It is not yet clear, however, what that future holds. Work has been going on slowly since the transfer of the buildings and some squats, like Umbrella House and 209 East 7th Street, now have new boilers. Others have become disenchanted with UHAB and are angry about what they perceive as a delayed timetable for the transference of building deeds.

Probably the most crucial issues that the squatters will face in the coming years will center upon how they define themselves and run their own buildings. HDFC buildings in Manhattan have notoriously been places where internecine disputes and lawsuits are common. For the squatters, who are used to making decisions outside of the mainstream legal system, it may not be easy to begin resolving differences in front of court-appointed referees or housing court judges. There are also those who fear that the squats will somehow lose their unique characteristics now that they have become legitimate in the eyes of the law. That seems unlikely, though, at least in comparison to the urban landscape that nowadays surrounds the squats.

New York City, after all, is a place of change, rebirth and evolution. And nowhere over the last decade or so has rapid, drastic change been more evident than on the Lower East Side. That the squatters have survived the gentrification that has suffused the area over the last several years is surprising. The fact that they have a history and a culture of their own to draw upon makes them unique regardless of what course they take next. In 2003, a group of squatters received a grant from New York State and began assembling an archive that aims to document and preserve their history. Included in the collection are diaries, fliers, posters, legal papers and artifacts recovered from the buildings they live in. During that time, one squatter, who lives on East 7th Street, reflected on the future and the present. "We're still here," he said. "And we're not going anywhere."