Chapter 1

The Struggle for Space
10 Years of Turf Battling on the Lower East Side
By Sarah Ferguson

June 2005 -"It's one minute before midnight. The park is now closed." The tin voice bleated from the loudspeaker of a squad car slowly circling Tompkins Square's winding paths, disrupting a few amorous couples on benches, a pair of dog walkers, some drunks dozing in the surprisingly crisp summer air. But aside from a rather well dressed couple who wondered aloud, "Why do they have to close the park on such a beautiful night?" there was little objection. A clump of college kids in artsy punk attire clustered at the exit, checked cell phones, debated which bar or party to try out next. But the real punks, the crusty alcoholic travelers, had already retired to the East River to drink their spare-changed beer unfettered by police. That motley rabble of squatters and hippies, anarchist bike messengers, homeless agitators and soap-boxing radicals who'd once made this park their crucible and crusade, had long since moved on.

The cops padlocked the gates and called it a night.

There was a time when closing Tompkins Square was unthinkable. In 1988, when police attempted to impose a 1 a.m. curfew, it sparked a bloody riot. But for more than 150 years prior to that (aside from a 15-year span following the Civil War when the park was requisitioned as a military parade ground), Tompkins Square was considered a "people's park" a community living room, recreational arena, and radical stomping ground that stayed open.

From the "bread riots" of 1857 and 1874 and the draft riot of 1863, Tompkins Square earned a rep as a stage for politicking and social strife, a legacy that continued through the 1960s and '70s, when the park became a mecca for downtown bohemia, with smoke-ins and love-ins and antiwar rallies organized by the Diggers and Yippies, and free concerts with the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Charles Mingus and Sun Ra. In one infamous incident on Memorial Day in 1967, police brutally rousted and arrested a group of hippies and Puerto Ricans who were strumming guitars and beating congas, in defiance of the "Keep Off the Grass" signs. (There were 38 arrests and dozens of injuries.) A judge dismissed the charges, stating, "This court will not deny equal protection to the unwashed, unshod, unkempt, and uninhibited."[1]

Ambling through the park now, with its verdant lawns and gardens tended with the help of volunteers sponsored by corporate interests, it's hard to fathom that legacy. It's hard to comprehend a time when neighborhood people —squatters, tenement dwellers, politicos and lunatic poets — would put their bodies on the line to clash with the blue meanies over the right to occupy a four-block-square patch of earth. Or that punks from New Jersey and Long Island would actually commute to take part in the Friday and Saturday-night bottle throwing and street bonfires that became, from 1988 to 1991, something of a neighborhood rite.

In this post-9/11 moment, with the geography of oppression blown open as far as the mind can see, it's sometimes hard to remember how a turf war over a scrappy piece of green in the middle of New York City could have so captivated a movement, become its locus and spiritual center, with the battle cry of "Free the land!"

Memory intercepts hollowed-out refrain of conga drums, "Pigs outa da park . . ." a police siren echoing like graffiti bleeding through freshly painted walls.

TOTAL WAR FOR LIVING SPACE

What's changed is the notion that this was OUR space to be defended. The squatting and political movement that rose up in and around Tompkins Square from roughly 1985 to 1995 was in many ways the last generation of activists to conceive of the Lower East Side as oppositional space.

The battle over Tompkins Square grew out of a much larger and decades-old struggle to preserve the multiethnic, working-class nature of the neighborhood against the forces of "urban renewal" and gentrification. For the squatters, homeless activists, artists, and social renegades who agitated there, defending the park was part of a much more ambitious gambit to liberate space, to wrest control of the city's abandoned buildings and rubble-strewn lots and create a new kind of community operating outside the realm of property law.

The act of squatting city-owned buildings, of exempting them from the cycle of speculation, was not a symbolic protest but an eminently hands-on assault on the bedrock of New York capitalism— real estate— which offered tangible results: You got a cheap place to live and consort with fellow radicals making art and ragging on the system.

In this context, Tompkins Square served as both a living symbol of the neighborhood's dissent and a physical locus for organizing and agitating against the homogenizing tide of wealth and redevelopment.

"The idea of space — of organizing around space — came from the negative, from the idea that the government was actively moving to spatially *deconcentrate* inner city areas," says former squatter and activist Frank Morales. "It became an operative understanding, part of the analysis of areas like the South Bronx and Lower East Side."

A radical Episcopal priest who had helped a group successfully homestead a couple of buildings in the South Bronx, Morales arrived on the Lower East Side in 1985 with a stack of federal housing documents relating to the Kerner Commission Report on the riots that ripped through America's inner cities during the late 1960s. While generally thought of as a rather benevolent attempt to remedy the country's deepening racial divide (the report famously warned the U.S. was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal"), the Kerner Report's authors also made some controversial recommendations for restoring order in urban areas. In order to alleviate poverty and the growing hostility toward mainstream society by minorities living in these overcrowded "slums," the

report recommended policies to encourage "substantial Negro movement out of the ghettos," and into the white-dominated suburbs.[2]

Subsequent documents from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Kerner Commission consultant Anthony Downs referred to a policy of "spatial deconcentration" — essentially deconcentrating the poor from the inner cities by withholding funds and services to these areas in order to make way for more middle-class development. Whether or not "Spatial D" itself was ever instituted as public policy remains unclear; the documentation seemed vague at best. But when Yolanda Ward, the activist who'd sought to expose this conspiracy, was shot to death on a Washington, DC street in 1985, it reconfirmed the sense among urban radicals that the government was actively engaged in a war on the poor. [3]

Published in the radical graphic zine *World War 3 Illustrated* in 1986[4], this theory of spatial deconcentration was central to the perspective of the more militant squatter activists. Coming out of the fiscal crisis, when the Beame and Koch administrations cut services to poor neighborhoods like the Lower East Side and the South Bronx and whole blocks of tenements were burned to the ground in arson fires, it was easy to see why. Less conspiratorial minds might be tempted to cast the city's actions during that period as more indicative of depraved neglect by an institutionally racist bureaucracy with no money and nothing to be gained from helping the poor. (Daniel Patrick Moynihan had famously advocated a policy of "benign neglect"; Abe Beame's housing czar Roger Starr came up with the term "planned shrinkage.") But for community agitators like Morales, this was a concerted plot to clear the poor and neutralize urban dissent involving the police, the military, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)[5] acting in concert with city planners and real estate developers. And the subsequent, obscene speculation on the abandoned and dilapidated housing stock of the East Village in the 1980s and early '90s, followed by the city's paramilitary evictions of squatters and homeless, would serve as proof of the conspiracy:

"We saw the taking of buildings as part of a counterattack in this spatial war, so to speak," Morales explains. "From then on, the notion of space — seizing territory as a defensive strategy against this onslaught to remove and push [poor people] out of the area — became the center of what we were talking about. The idea of building communities of resistance was precisely that. It was hands-on ideology, not abstract but ultimately practical. We were resisting this effort to remove us from these areas."

The strategy, Morales explains, "was both affirmative — taking buildings or making gardens to create free space, to extend the space where there was no speculation; and defensive — defending the squats that had already been taken, and thereby slowing the real estate pressures around you, which in turn helped preserve the low rent housing in the area."
The notion of free space also harkened back to the Diggers of the 1960s (themselves a throwback to the 17th century squatter movement in England) and Proudhon's old anarchist adage, "property is theft." It was also a reaction to the stultification of the traditional left and the evisceration of the workplace as a field for social struggle. In contrast to marching in the streets, squatting was direct action that could boast of more than symbolic gains: To take a building and make a home in one of the richest cities in the world. To make that

building a stage for political dissent and an anti-consumption lifestyle, thumbing your nose at the system and the market theocrats who served Mammon.

Flyers circulating in the neighborhood spoke of "Total War for Living Space." And indeed, the battle over the squats and Tompkins Square took on mythic overtones, with activists casting the fight to "free the land" as a guerrilla struggle against the rightwing ideological assault of the Reagan administration, or in solidarity with the uprisings of landless peasants in Latin America. That stance gave this otherwise local struggle its radical cachet, attracting punks and activists from across the U.S. and Europe, along with the usual parasitic elements of the sectarian left seeking to capitalize off the latest social unrest.

Of course, many minorities and long-term Lower East Siders saw the squatters and Tompkins Square agitators less as defenders of the neighborhood and more as interlopers on their turf. (The LES has never been kind to newcomers, and it had seen all manner of idealism before.)

THE MYTHOS OF TOMPKINS SQUARE

This conception of the Lower East Side as a kind of final frontier for urban struggle drew from the area's radical history—a culture of dissent that dates back to the neighborhood's formation as an immigrant entry point and working class slum, home to socialists, anarchists, feminists and numerous competing ethnic groups vying for space. Tompkins Square played a key role in the creation of that ethos. When it was constructed in 1834, city officials expected the park to attract wealthy families to the area, like those already occupying elegant townhouses to the west of Second Avenue. But the expansion of the wealthy district was halted by the economic depression of 1837. Instead, the neighborhood surrounding the park was soon filled with German and Irish immigrants drawn to work in the local shipyards, known as the Dry Dock, along the East River.[6]

Living conditions in the overcrowded tenements were abysmal and grew worse during the economic crunch of 1857, when many were thrown out of work. For the first of many times, Tompkins Square was transformed into a field of protest, as unemployed Dry Dock workers demonstrated to demand that the city provide jobs in public projects such as the construction of Central Park, then underway. Park benches were torn apart for bonfires. A *New York Times* headline read: "THE UNEMPLOYED: Great Gatherings in Tompkins Square and the Park. U.S. Troops Guard the Custom House."

City Hall responded to these disturbances by having the park completely renovated in 1859. But this effort to impose a new standard of decorum was short-lived. Large-scale rioting erupted in Tompkins Square and across the city in 1863 to protest the Civil War draft (beyond not wanting to fight for "negroes," many poor whites were pissed that the rich could get out of the draft by paying $300).[7] Three years later, the State legislature had the whole park razed and transformed into a drill ground for the New York State militia. The heavy military presence in the area did little to cool neighborhood agitators — from feminists advocating women's suffrage to anarchists and socialists urging working class revolution, or organizing rent strikes and boycotts for cheaper food.

Tensions exploded in January 1874, in the wake of the financial "panic" of 1873, when police brutally shut down a 10,000-strong rally of workers and unemployed in Tompkins Square, clubbing both demonstrators and bystanders in a melee that labor leader Samuel Gompers described as "an orgy of brutality."[8] Accounts of the event eerily presage the Tompkins Square riot of 1988. Without warning, police on horseback surrounded the square and suddenly charged into the crowd from all sides with their nightsticks swinging. "Women and children went screaming in all directions. Many of them were trampled underfoot in the stampede for the gates. In the streets, bystanders were ridden down and mercilessly clubbed by mounted officers."[9] Newspaper reports demonized the demonstrators as "riotous communists" raising the specter of the "red flag" over Manhattan. But this brutal attack on the working class also served to radicalize and alienate the local populace from the city at large, setting off a dynamic of militant Lower East Siders resisting City Hall that would repeat for generations to come.

Six months after the 1874 riot, some 3,000 people gathered in Tompkins Square and resolved that the park should always remain "open to the people for their free assembly." Local residents campaigned for the removal of the military, and in 1878, the whole park was finally reinstated for public use.[10]

It's worth reviewing this early history because it helps account for the degree of political and economic exceptionalism that evolved on the Lower East Side — the way the neighborhood seemed to function for so many decades as an island unto itself. Despite the area's relatively easy proximity to the downtown financial district, efforts by New York's ruling class to transform the neighborhood into a Wall Street bedroom were repeatedly confounded by a combination of community resistance and economic downturns. In 1929, the Rockefeller-sponsored Regional Plan Association came up with an ambitious scheme to raze large blocks of tenements to erect a Second Avenue speedway, "high-class" high-rises, modern shops, even a yacht basin on the East River. The plan met heavy neighborhood opposition from tenant and labor groups, but was largely sunk by the arrival of the Great Depression. Similarly, a 1956 urban renewal plan by Robert Moses that would have mowed down whole blocks of tenements between East Ninth Street and Delancey Street was defeated by a decade of intense political organizing by the Cooper Square Committee, combined with the ongoing exodus of the middle classes to the suburbs, which drew government and investment capital out of the inner cities.[11]

Instead, other waves of immigrants — Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, and African Americans fleeing poverty in the South — flooded the Lower East Side, retrenching the perception of the area as an "ethnic slum." As social geographer Neil Smith writes, "In the postwar period, disinvestment and abandonment, demolition and public warehousing, were the major tactics of a virulent antiurbanism that converted the Lower East Side into something of a free-fire zone."[12]

Cheap rents drew beatniks and artists from the Greenwich Village in the '50s, then the hippies of the '60s, along with all manner of radical factions from the Diggers to the Young Lords, Black Panthers, free-loving communalists, Kerista sex cultists, dervishing Hare Krishnas, and Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers. The radicalized, offbeat tenor of the neigh-

borhood, combined with the deepening squalor and crime wrought by the influx of heroin, speed and crack cocaine in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, gave the Lower East Side its reputation as an "outlaw" zone.

With the arrival of artists in the early '80s sprouting renegade galleries and performance spaces in the area's bottomed-out storefronts, that outlaw flavor became chic. Many of these new artists were white and middle class, staking out a new frontier against the soulless consumerism of the suburbs and frightening Cold War posturing of the Reagan administration. They reveled in the clash of their freewheeling, downscale bohemia thriving in the shadow of the corporate titans that ruled midtown and Wall Street. But their mediagenic spectacle made them pilot fish for gentrification, as both speculators and City Hall rushed to capitalize on the notion of the "East Village" as the new hipster SoHo.[13]

In 1981, for example, Mayor Ed Koch proposed auctioning off vacant buildings to developers to create artist co-ops. But the plan was fiercely opposed by local housing groups and many artists themselves when it was learned that the co-ops, publicly financed as low and moderate-income housing, would sell for $50,000 and could be flipped at market rates after only three years. Members of the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council (JPC) —a coalition of more than 30 housing and community groups, many of them closely aligned with the Cooper Square Committee —tacked up signs on the abandoned tenements proclaiming: "This Land Is Ours. Property of the People of the Lower East Side: Speculators Keep Out!" (One of these signs still proudly adorns "C Squat" at 155 Avenue C), and the plan was voted down by the Board of Estimate in 1983.[14]

HOMESTEADERS TAKE OVER

Many of the members of the JPC were themselves pioneers in the first wave of homesteading on the Lower East Side that began in the mid 1970s. While there had been sporadic efforts at squatting in previous decades (books like Ed Sanders' *Tales of Beatnik Glory* and William Kotzwinkle's *The Fan Man* are rife with scenes of hippie crash pads), the notion of people using "sweat equity" to fully renovate buildings for low-income housing took root in the '70s, led by neighborhood residents and tenants of in-rem buildings who refused to leave during the onslaught of fires and abandonment that swept the area during the fiscal crisis, along with some inspired social activists drawn to the urban battle zone. At the time their efforts were quite celebrated. In 1976, *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite* featured a report on the 11th Street Movement, a group of homesteaders who took over several abandoned buildings on East 11th Street, presenting the group as pioneers in the fight against urban despair.

The group was founded by local residents and activists such as Michael Friedberg, a maverick from South Africa, who teamed up with Interfaith Adopt-a-Building, a newly formed, citywide sweat equity group. By today's standards, their project to create a kind of self-sufficient commune in the East Village seems wildly idealistic. At 519 East 11th, the homesteaders installed an African fish farm in the basement, along with solar panels and a windmill on the roof, and at one point even succeeded in forcing Con Edison to buy the excess

electricity it generated. (The scheme admittedly didn't last long; the windmill is still there but never functioned all that well and has been dormant for years.) They also transformed a series of drug-infested lots on East 12th Street into a community garden called El Sol Brillante—one of the few such green spaces in New York City that is cooperatively owned by local residents.[15]

Impressed by the success of the 11th Street Movement and similar projects in the South Bronx and East Harlem, President Jimmy Carter authorized a National Urban Homesteading Demonstration Program in 1977, which funneled federal monies into homesteading projects, generally through established community organizations such as Adopt-A-Building and UHAB (the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board). Others eschewed the red tape and bureaucracy of these schemes in favor of a more "self-help"-minded approach, such as A Better Way, a group of local activists and tenants who took over four tenements on East Sixth Street. In fact, it was in part to quell a rash of unauthorized building occupations across the city by both tenants and activist groups like ACORN and Banana Kelly (in the Bronx) that the city launched its own homesteading program in 1980. The program, which was fairly informal in its early years, granted groups title and financial assistance to renovate buildings that the city otherwise might have torn down.

In the early days, one homesteader remembers, a group could form a tenant association to rehab a building and actually get the city to deliver materials. "We would just go into these buildings and start gutting them out to kind of stake our claim, then back that up by putting in an application for the city [homesteading] program or to get funding from the federal government or state," says Howard Brandstein, executive director of the Sixth Street Community Center, who helped homestead numerous buildings on the Lower East Side through Adopt-a-Building and RAIN (Rehabilitation in Action for Improvement of Neighborhoods), a local sweat-equity group funded by the Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference (LESCAC). "We'd tell the city we were applying for funding, and the city would give us provisional site control. The city just didn't care. The neighborhood wasn't worth anything back then," Brandstein says.

At one point, homesteaders could qualify for $45,000 per unit or more in city and state and federal funding to renovate buildings.[16] Brandstein estimates more than 30 buildings were homesteaded on the Lower East Side by various groups. Many of those homesteaders went on to become members of the local community board, such as Margarita Lopez, who was subsequently elected to represent the neighborhood on the City Council; others became successful artists such as composers Butch Morris and Jemeel Moondoc, and actor Luis Guzman.

But many others were left out in the cold. Reagan dumped the federal homesteading program along with all of Carter's "green renewal" efforts as soon as he took office, and the city's housing department became increasingly restrictive about approving buildings, eventually canceling its program in 1986 as real estate values across the city surged.
City officials now insist that homesteading was never "practical" enough to be considered a viable means of creating low-income housing. For all those buildings that succeeded, many others dissolved in internal disputes or as people drifted off. In fact, many of the truly

needy homesteaders became fed up with the refusal of the city and its sanctioned housing groups to allow people to live in the buildings until they were fully renovated.

Local housing advocates also became disillusioned with homesteading as a means to create low-income housing—especially as market pressures in the neighborhood intensified. Brandstein reflects: "Homesteading was inherently more of an anarchist structure of self-government in each building. It was a very elaborate model, but it didn't hold together in terms of the forces that were tearing people apart on the Lower East Side. There was no longer a political conception in the neighborhood to keep building this cooperative structure . . . People would start exploiting the situation—behaving like owners and trying to get out of the resale restrictions. A lot of buildings were ending up in conflict. Also, there weren't enough people with skills; we weren't drawing a critical mass of people. And the buildings themselves needed support structures so they didn't fall into this kind of capitalist thinking. So we came up with a scheme for a land trust," whereby the tenements would be owned as low-income co-ops, but the land would be held by a community land trust.

The problem, in the eyes of Brandstein and other JPCites, was that homesteading alone could not check the wave of gentrification that by the mid-80s was threatening to subsume the remaining undeveloped properties on the Lower East Side. Neighborhood housing advocates turned their attentions to fighting off Koch's plans to auction off large numbers of empty buildings to private developers. That fight led to the infamous 50-50 cross subsidy plan, whereby the city agreed to allow the remaining in-rem buildings to be renovated for low and moderate-income housing in exchange for the ability to sell off vacant lots for market-rate development.[17]

Negotiated by members of the JPC and Community Board 3 and finally approved in 1987, the cross-subsidy plan was considered a triumph of localism over the city's real-estate-friendly housing bureaucracy. (Housing cross-subsidies were a relatively novel concept at the time). The problem, of course, was where to get the money to renovate the buildings for low-income people? The feds weren't giving much of anything, and following the stock market crash of 1987, the city wasn't either.

SQUATTERS MOVE IN

In the meantime, a new generation of activists was already taking over buildings on the Lower East Side, and pushing a more radical notion of homesteading than the community groups that came before them. There have been so many misconceptions of who the squatters were, and in fact their collective identity has always been hard to define. Some were locals who sought official sanction and title to buildings, but found that the city had cancelled its homesteading program—or were refused entry, such as the residents occupying three tenements on East Seventh Street between Avenues C and D, which were taken over by a mixture of original tenants and squatters in the early 1970s. Others were radicals who wanted no part of "the system." Many squatted from necessity, or to sustain their downwardly mobile art careers. Others because they wanted the freedom to create their own homes and live outside the "rent slave" housing market. Or to demonstrate with their own

hands the criminality of a housing bureaucracy that could leave so many without homes. There was never any single reason if you pressed.

Their outsider status was reinforced by the state's refusal to recognize sweat equity as a means of creating housing any longer. That refusal helped define a more radical and desperate population. Anyone willing to live with perpetual threat of eviction had to be something of a rebel—whether you called yourself a homesteader or a squatter.

Still, within the squatting scene there were two somewhat overlapping philosophies: those who considered themselves homesteaders using self-help to create homes, with the ultimate aim of forcing the city to give them title to the property; and those who squatted in defiance of property laws, believing housing should be "free" (or at least free to those who worked to reclaim it.)

David Boyle epitomized the former philosophy. A former Police Academy recruit and New School university student, Boyle helped found the 13th Street Homesteading Coalition, which took over six buildings on 13th between Avenues A and B in the mid-1980s. Boyle says he got the idea to squat the buildings from Sarah Farley, a former civil rights organizer from the South who had squatted a building on East Sixth Street in the '70s (it later burned down) and ran a group called LAND (Local Action for Neighborhood Development) out of the thrift shop on the ground floor.

"Sarah told me to work on building gardens in the [empty] lots, which I did at Sixth Street," notes Boyle, who helped found the Sixth Street and Avenue B Community Garden. "And then she said to start taking over buildings." Boyle says he and Rolando Politti, an Italian artist who immigrated to the Lower East Side in 1980, initially tried to join the fractious mix of homesteaders on East Seventh Street between C and D but were put off by the infighting.[18] They then opened a building on East Third Street, which got taken over by Mickey Cesar, the infamous "Pope of Dope" pot dealer. They also made a stab at clearing out a nascent squat on East Fifth Street, which Boyle says was already occupied by several homeless drunks and a couple of street peddlers who objected to their efforts to remove their junk.[19]

Then Farley directed Boyle, Politti, and a young activist named Marissa DeDominici to the swath of unoccupied tenements on East 13th Street.

"We were like gung-ho Sandinista Marxists at that point," says Boyle. "We were interested in doing something new. Our inspiration was the Mondragon cooperatives led by the Basque separatists in Spain [during the 1950s]. Rather than pursuing some kind of military program, the Mondragons believe the best way to obtain independence was to control the land and industry. So we thought we were going to be setting up some sort of cooperative economy on the Lower East Side. And the first step was giving value to people's labor, so the sweat equity thing really dovetailed into that. We actually printed up our own money with some labor guy's face on it that we used as receipts. If you couldn't pay your rent money to the building, which was then like $75 or $100 a month, you could pay it with labor notes." According to Boyle, this system functioned fairly efficiently for about a year, with roughly 60 members. "With everyone paying $75 to $100, we had a couple thousand a month to spend

on the buildings, which meant we were able to pay outside contractors to do some big $8,000-job, like run an electrical line from the street. We had a real commonweal going. We were moving toward being a part of RAIN, toward becoming legal homesteaders. But we had a more adventurous model than RAIN because we were living in the buildings while we renovated them."

Living in the buildings while you renovated was a major sticking point in negotiations with the city. While many early homesteaders got away with inhabiting the spaces they worked on, by the early '80s, that wasn't an option in the eyes of city bureaucrats and the housing groups that funneled people into its legal homesteading program.

"The city really went nuclear against you when you moved people into a building, because that meant you were taking it over," says Boyle. "The city didn't want people to live there. That meant you were squatting, and the city wouldn't deal with squatters. When homesteading groups like RAIN and Adopt-a-Building went in and started working on a building, they did it without city permission. But they didn't go so far as to say, we have this building. It was more like, we've invested energy in it. Whereas our position was, we have it."

Nevertheless, Boyle says initially there was some crossover between the two camps. "Groups like RAIN and Adopt-a-Building were really building a constituency more than they were taking over buildings," Boyle maintains. "The people in their groups who came to work days at a particular building weren't necessarily the people who moved into it. We showed up and worked on some of RAIN's buildings, and they helped us a bit, too." (In fact, Boyle says he helped initiate the JPC scheme to put up signs on abandoned tenements declaring them "Property of the People of the Lower East Side" in direct response to all the "For Sale" signs that the city was tacking up. They fashioned the signs from the tin the city had used to board up the vacant buildings, and spray painted them at one of the 13th Street squats.)

In order to get around the fact that the city would not negotiate with squatters, Boyle and some of the other 13th Street homesteaders formed their own not-for-profit group, Outstanding Renewal Enterprises (ORE). "The idea was to have an entity that the city could deal with, because they wouldn't deal with us," Boyle explains. As a legal not-for-profit, ORE was allowed to join the Joint Planning Council. The group got grants to start the Lower East Side's first recycling program and was instrumental with other members of the JPC in helping found the Lower East Side People's Credit Union. Although ORE and the 13th Street homesteaders initially won approval from the local community board for a couple of their buildings, Boyle says the group's drive to become a legal homestead unraveled because of internal disputes.

"We got a couple of bad apples in there who took apart the program by going for rent strikes against us," Boyle says. "We were moving toward becoming a part of RAIN, and some people didn't want to go that way. I think they figured that once we were part of RAIN, they couldn't get away with not paying rent, so it was easier to take us out. So they initiated this campaign of rumor-mongering and scandal, and then RAIN wouldn't take us in."

By that time, the 13th Street buildings had attracted other squatters who felt housing should be free. They clashed with Boyle and the other ORE members' efforts to impose rules and structure. "I was pretty Stalinist at the time," Boyle concedes. "I felt that if we were trying to produce some kind of small utopian thing, you had to work, produce some kind of money, and contribute to the collective. But these other people didn't want any part of `the system,' and at that point, we were a system [in the buildings]. So they spent all their energy resisting us," he says.

Others involved at the time would no doubt object vociferously to Boyle's version of events. [20] What's always been fascinating about the squats is the intensity of competing personalities, ideals and objectives within them. For all its conflicts, the 13th Street scene became a seedpod for other squatting efforts and art projects, such as the Shuttle Theatre in the ground floor of 537 East 13th Street, which became a venue for Living Theatre plays, jazz improvs and performances by local and traveling artists like Baba Olatunji.

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Another corridor of squats evolved on East Eighth Street between Avenues B and C when Michael Shenker, a musician and self-taught electrician (who had also been inspired by Sarah Farley), opened up an empty tenement at 319 East Eighth Street in the spring of 1984 with his girlfriend Natasha and some other people from the neighborhood who were seeking cheap housing. One of them, a Jamaican-American woman named Tya Scott, split from 319 and opened up her own building across the street at 316 East Eighth Street with her sons and their extended families. (Tya kept her distance from the rest of the squatting scene and conceived of herself more as a property owner.)

Later that fall, some activists traveling with the Rock Against Reagan tour returned from the Republican Convention in Dallas and broke into the back of 327-29 East Eighth Street. According to Yippie Jerry "the Peddler" Wade, the building was more of a crash pad until "English" Steve Harrington and Cathy Thompson arrived, fresh from the squatting scene in Europe and looking to put in practice the revolutionary ideals and squatting skills they'd learned there. Wade says he helped sledgehammer open the front door with Harrington and Cathy Thompson in December 1984. They were soon joined by Frank Morales, who had returned to the Lower East Side in 1985 seeking to apply the model of homesteading he'd learned in the Bronx.

The intersection of radical idealism at 327-29 proved to be a fertile mix. "We didn't really become organized as `squatters' until we opened up 327-29," says Wade, who had earlier taken over another abandoned building at 643 East 11th Street. "We were still arguing about the use of the word squatting, and whether we should be squatters or homesteaders. Most people wanted to call it homesteading. They kept saying 'squatting is something you do when you take a shit.' But we weren't homesteaders. We didn't qualify for any of the [homesteading] programs, and most of those programs wouldn't want us anyway, even if we did [*laughs*]. Then English Steve and Cathy came and started using the term squatting left and right, and we kind of went with it from there."

Recalls Harrington:

> We were the anarchist squatters, so we had no intention of going legal. Becoming legal would have been too much dealing with the system. We'd been squatting in Europe, where you just didn't consider that, where becoming legal was up there with informing on your neighbor. It was too much. That's how we thought of it back then.

According to Morales, 327 became a pit stop for activists and folks traveling the underground circuit — including folksinger Michelle Shocked, who squatted there for a summer and held hootenannies in the ground-floor community room. "327 was a mothership on the block," he recalls. "People from all over the world were coming there — from Brixton, Latin America, different parts of the US, Italy, lots of film crews. Wherever people were squatting, they would hear about squatting in New York and they just showed up there. Between 1985 and '87, we had all kinds of things going on there. It was really great . . . Soon after that, two or three other buildings were opened up on the block. So Eighth Street became the initial jumping-off point, and little by little, we moved out to [other squats] in the neighborhood."

Admittedly, the other squats that opened on Eighth Street remained rather marginal. Across the street at 336-38 East Eighth Street, Momma Lee, a spirited middle-aged woman, presided over a kind of collective crash pad for punk rockers, transients, druggies and numerous dogs inside a cavernous double-barreled tenement that never seemed to get worked on much. Dwight, a former shelter resident, led the squat next door and ran all-night punk fests in an abandoned garage down the block dubbed the People's Warehouse. 318 was occupied by several former street dwellers along with Ralphie and his hardcore punk crew, Squatter Rot.

But the Eighth Street scene was significant because it marked the emergence of a more militant, youthful and openly contentious squatting movement. Not only did they openly defy the city by taking over the buildings, they went against the older housing advocates in the neighborhood, who already had their dibs on some of those tenements.

"Eighth Street violated the peace treaty we had with LESCAC and the JPC," says Josh Whalen, a writer and defacto squatter (he lived in a rent strike building for 20 years). "We had divided the territory among us like rival gangs, and everyone knew it was hands off Eighth Street."

Other squats cropped up on East Ninth Street, Avenue C, Third Street, Tenth Street, Fourth Street, Sixth Street, Fifth Street — fueled by the arrival of young punks and activists funneling though the old Yippie headquarters at Number 9 Bleecker Street, the Anarchist Switchboard on East Ninth Street, or the Rock Against Racism concert network (which was founded in England by squatter-friendly punk bands like The Clash), as well as young artists looking to make their mark in New York. Not all were newcomers of course. Bullet Space squat on East Third Street was founded in 1986 by Andrew and Paul Castrucci, twin brothers who had been priced out of their art gallery on Avenue B, and some members of the

Rivington School art gang, who operated a rather anarchic metal-sculpture "garden" on an abandoned lot on the corner of Rivington and Forsyth streets. The new arrivals dovetailed with the older activists, street dwellers, and local residents pushed out of their rental apartments to create an eclectic, dissentious mix.

More than just building housing, squatting was seen as an extension for other arenas of social activism. There was an early crossover between homesteading and the Central America solidarity movement. Activists who had been traveling to war-torn Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1980s to build housing and schools decided to turn their attention to fixing some of the bombed-out buildings in places like the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. Some of the early members of 209 East Seventh Street "homestead," for instance, were members of the Nicaragua Construction Brigade.

The growth of squatting also coincided with the surge in activism around homelessness, which, as the crisis mushroomed in 1980s, became something of an "in" cause. Indeed, the more activist-oriented squatters such as Morales, English Steve, Thompson, and Alfredo Gonzalez actively sought to recruit homeless people into the squatting movement by giving workshops in city shelters through groups such as the Valentines Day Committee.

"We were organizing against the forced relocation of poor people into the shelters," explains Morales, "and we saw squatting as an antidote to that." In the process, they also sought to convert housing advocates who remained skeptical of squatting as a means to create viable homes for low-income people. At the time, Morales says, 'Most of the housing people on the left didn't want to touch squatting."

The squatters even advertised for new recruits on the back pages of the *Village Voice* ("Need a Home? Squat . . .") and on the WBAI radio show *Listeners' Action*, which was then functioning as a kind of citizen-led homeless relief project in conjunction with the food pantry at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

Recalls Morales:

> We got on the radio and said 'show up at Seventh and B on Saturday morning if you want to work,' and like 50 people from the tri-state area would show up, mostly because they wanted to volunteer to help out. People would come, old and young, experienced and not, and actually volunteer to shovel rubble or scrape paint. This one guy came in and organized a crew of welders and construction workers to replace the entire stairs in one squat on East Eighth Street. They just showed up one day, and after a month of weekends working on it, it was done.

A key factor in the expansion of the squatting scene was the creation of Eviction Watch, an activist phone tree used to fend off eviction efforts by local police, as well as attacks by competing housing groups and drug dealers. In a movement without any centralized structure, Eviction Watch became an important tool for networking within the squats and with supporters in the community. They also set up a communal kitchen in the ground floor of

537 East 13th Street to feed people using food culled from dumpsters or donated from local restaurants, which meant that squatters who didn't have kitchens could go cadge a meal when they needed to.

"There was a level of self-organization in the beginning, and for a while, a kind of organic connection," says Morales. "We weren't just inhabiting space, we were actually changing the environment, working it, in a `freedom in action' kind of way."

YOUR HOUSE IS MINE

At the height of the movement in 1988-1989, there were about two-dozen squatted buildings on the Lower East Side, and probably two dozen more in East Harlem, Washington Heights, and the South Bronx. While the squats uptown were more cohesively working class and rooted in their communities of color, the scene on the Lower East Side was more countercultural and provocative, as rendered in the iconic flyers that plastered the nabe, from John the Communist's predictions of imminent martial law to Missing Foundation screeds like "The Party's Over," "Your House Is Mine," and "1988 = 1933."

However hyperbolic, such rhetoric reflected how severe gentrification had become on the Lower East Side. By the winter of 1984, small cockroach-infested apartments that rented for $400 a month were suddenly, with minor renovations, going for $1200 and up—thanks in large part to the NYPD's "Operation Pressure Point," when scores of officers rounded up an astounding 14,000 drug suspects over 18 months. Stripped of its most violent and brazen drug trade, Alphabet City went from being one of the poorest areas in the city to one of the most "up and coming." Increasing numbers of elderly and Latinos were driven from their rent-controlled units through a combination of illegal buyouts, harassment, and denial of services as landlords emptied buildings in order to drive up their resale value. Whole buildings were warehoused vacant while the streets became flooded with homeless people—refugees of the crack epidemic, the closing of state mental hospitals, Reagan-era crackdowns on welfare and social services, and an insane rental market that meant one slip and you were out the door.[21]

The more militant squatters saw themselves as establishing a kind of beachhead against gentrification—their presence brought neighboring property values down—and agitated inside the park with rallies and smoke-ins and punk concerts, along with frequent marches to the local offices of the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Influenced by the theory of Spatial D and the transfer of authority over homeless shelters to FEMA, John "the Communist" Potak and several others formed the Emergency Coalition Against Martial Law and began protesting everything from police brutality and AIDS to the shelter system while calling for mass rent strikes. Indeed, Jerry Wade says he and Potak fantasized about building an American version of the Christiania Free State, the countercultural mecca built by Danish squatters who took over an area of deserted army barracks in Copenhagen.[22]

"John and I had always wanted to attract radical hippies," says Wade of his throwback idealism. "There was a real conscious effort to bring in hippies, but by that time, there just

wasn't enough hippies around anymore in the neighborhood, so we settled for punks. We used to recruit people off Avenue A."

But aside from a few tussles with local precinct cops, the anti-police-state rhetoric remained more of a paranoid gloss on the scene than any real guiding ethos. Beyond the diehard radicals, most folks were more DIY (do it yourself) than ardently anarchist, too busy scrapping to make a living, make art and build their homes than to seek out confrontations with police.

"A RIOT IS NOW IN PROGRESS IN TOMPKINS SQUARE"[23]

That changed with the police riot of August 6, 1988. On that night, John the Communist's and Missing Foundation's predictions of imminent martial law appeared to come true as more than 400 cops stormed through Tompkins Square and its surrounding streets, brutally clubbing protesters and bystanders indiscriminately. It was almost as if the neighborhood's history was caught on repeat, things accelerated out of control so quickly, subsuming the immediate triggers — gentrification, displacement, the effort to clamp down on the area's anything-goes counterculture — into this volatile, epochal event that would resonate for years to come.

The ostensible cause of the riot was the imposition of a 1 a.m. curfew in Tompkins Square in response to neighboring residents' complaints about rowdy revelers spilling out of the bars along Avenue A and holding late-night "concerts" inside the park. But underlying that were growing tensions over the way gentrification was undermining the multicultural base of the neighborhood. The previous summer, a plan by the Parks department to close Tompkins Square temporarily to make repairs and discourage revelers was rejected by the local community board after some complained it was a city plot to promote real estate speculation. So when the curfew cropped up unexpectedly in the midst of a powerful heat wave in 1988, it put even local dog-walkers on edge.

Activists, squatters among them, saw the curfew as another effort to tame the Lower East Side for a wealthier class of people. The militants were apoplectic. This was an invasion of their turf, an effort by the police and real estate developers to assert control over the "people's" park, to remake its rough, unsocialized edges into something more akin to Union Square.

Some of these squatters and activists had fought to save Adam Purple's renowned Garden of Eden from the city's bulldozers and were involved in a campaign to preserve La Plaza Cultural, a community-tilled park on East Ninth Street, which was then slated to become a senior citizen home.

They put out leaflets calling on the community to resist. But the reaction of both the cops and the community went beyond even the most paranoid militants' wet dreams, as the battle raged in the streets till dawn with a fury not seen in decades. No doubt most of the thuggery came from the police, who were clearly spoiling for a fight after being forced to retreat from the park the previous weekend. On July 30, when a small contingent of 9th Precinct

police arrived to break up a midnight rally called to oppose the curfew, they were beaten back by a hail of bottles. Five police were injured in scuffles, including one who suffered a broken wrist, and four people were charged with felonies, among them Jerry Wade, who had helped spark the melee by spraying a line of police with a can of shaken beer.[24]

In the following days, Wade and other local agitators recall that cops driving on patrol would slow down to threaten, "We're gonna get you guys on Saturday night."

"It was almost like a gang fight," says Morales. "Everyone knew there was gonna be a showdown on Saturday night."

Still, no one expected that police would arrive with their badges covered, fully prepared to bust heads, or that they would be called out in such provocative numbers — including about 30 mounted police on horseback, sharpshooters on neighboring rooftops, a mobile command post, and a helicopter that swooped menacingly over the crowds. (Fifty-three people were injured over the course of the night, including 14 cops, 31 were arrested, and 121 complaints of police brutality and excessive force were lodged.)

Although Mayor Koch and Police Commissioner Ben Ward initially sought to blame the riot on "skinheads and degenerates from Scarsdale," most in the crowd that night were simply locals who liked to hang out in the park or folks spilling out of nearby bars and restaurants on a hot Saturday night. By staging such a massive display of force and brutally charging the crowd, the police managed to galvanize large numbers of local residents and bystanders who joined the militants blocking traffic along Avenue A chanting "Pigs Go Home!"

But if the riot had not been planned, there's no question that some in the crowd helped escalate the confrontation by setting off M-80 firecrackers and chucking bottles at police. There had already been an informal campaign of "property devaluation" by some on the scene. Random acts, like leaving a quarter stick of dynamite under a parked cop car to blow out the windows, were not unheard of back then. The week before the riot, cops and local landlords were set on edge by leaflets plastered on doorways the night before the riot, vowing to "burn down" the houses of all those who supported the curfew. An absurd threat, no doubt, but provocative nonetheless.

Although the riot was not led by squatters and anarchists, it helped propel their cause into the limelight. Media crews swarmed into the neighborhood seeking to uncover the "shadowy" world east of Avenue A, and many returned with sympathetic if sensationalized portraits of the scrappy folks who'd turned rubble-filled tenements into homes. And, as in the 1874 park riot, the 1988 riot also helped radicalize the surrounding community, which now felt itself under assault from City Hall. Suddenly residents of the Christodora House — the luxury condominium building on Avenue B and Ninth Street that had become a hated symbol of gentrification — were visiting the park with care packages for the homeless. Rudolf Piper, the owner of the Tunnel nightclub in Chelsea who'd gotten battered by the cops during the riot, appeared on news broadcasts denouncing "yuppie" invaders.
Boosted by swelling numbers of supporters, the more militant squatters and agitators stepped up their resistance in the park. "We decided to squat the park," says Morales of the

campaign they led to encourage and defend the growing homeless encampment in Tompkins Square. "It was a conscious effort to reconfigure the nature of the park, and also make this more than symbolic protest against the lack of housing and horrible conditions in the shelters," Morales says.

John the Communist and Jerry the Peddler erected a teepee on one of the central greens emblazoned with the slogan, "Free the Land!" They and others promoted the park encampment as both a refuge for the homeless and a kind of firewall against further gentrification east of Avenue A. Protesting in the park, they believed, would draw heat away from their buildings.

In retrospect, Morales concedes this notion of staging a long-term encampment in the park was not sustainable — especially as the city began referring more and more homeless people, evicted from other parks and public spaces, to Tompkins Square. "It created an untenable situation for us. It was a contradiction," Morales says of the tent city that would swell to nearly 400 people. And many squatters steered away from the park battle, seeing it as a distraction from the hard work they needed to accomplish in their buildings. But initially there was a lot of support on the Lower East Side for the "hands off the homeless" stance. For a brief window of time (1988-1991), Tompkins Square was redefined, locally and even nationally, as a "symbol of resistance to gentrification."

WAR IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

But while the park riot helped win support for the squatters' cause, it also amped the level of confrontation with police, setting off a cycle of increasingly militarized battles as the city moved in to divest this population of "thieves and troublemakers" from its buildings.

The first casualty was Tya Scott's squat on East Eighth Street, which the city condemned after a bulldozer "accidentally" nicked the front façade while clearing the remains of an abandoned tenement next door. What began as a rush-job demolition turned into a six-hour standoff as supporters, mobilized by Eviction Watch, rushed to Tya's building in the early hours of April 1, 1989. I can recall a mob of about 20 squatters and incensed locals rushing at the plywood construction fence wielding a police barricade as a battering ram, storming past the astonished beat cops posted to defend the demolition crew like a horde of crazed Vikings.

The fight over 319 East Eighth Street — when the city used a fire in the building as a pretext for eviction — was even more *Escape From New York*. In my notes of the period, I find this effort to account for the police presence assembled on May 9, 1989:

95 cops on Avenue B
30 cops at 8th and C
33 cops at 9th and C
33 cops at 7th and B
13 mounted police at 9th and C
5 police with dogs at 9th and B

3? sharpshooters on rooftops, guarding lot on 7th
1 busload of cops at 8th (about 30 inside), 2 empty police busses on C
3 police media vans

In fact, more than 400 police were dispatched to maintain a complete cordon around two city blocks for five days as the demolition crew worked round the clock, using high-powered klieg lights that lit up the block like a movie set, as a giant wrecking ball slammed into the building, sending up giant plumes of dust. The massive police overkill and expense (the demolition costs alone were estimated at $600,000) prompted cries of outrage from no less than Catholic Archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor, Episcopal Archbishop Michael Kendall, and Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins. The scene was easily cast as a David and Goliath narrative of squatters struggling to create homes versus the city bureaucrats intent on crushing them.

Just two weeks earlier, the squatters at 319 had managed to subvert the city's demolition plans. There was the grand heroism of Willie, a gay man who moved to 319 after being made homeless by AIDS. He sauntered past the police lines and scaled the fire escape to reclaim the building, dumping bottles of fermented piss from the roof that sent the cops and demolition workers running for cover. Then a ragtag crew led by Morales lassoed the construction scaffolding and yanked it down, as city officials looked on in disbelief.

Despite the unorthodox tactics, this mediagenic victory earned the squatters some popular support, as well as the help of some architects from the Pratt Institute, who argued the building could be saved. So when the city imposed a state of virtual martial law on the neighborhood, with police occupying neighboring rooftops for days and forcing residents to show ID to enter their own buildings, it had even co-op owners voicing conspiracy theories.

Looking at my notes of the street protests, what's striking is how radical the sentiments expressed by local residents were. Standing on the police barricades, with bottles flying and M-80s exploding in the distance, I interviewed a man who lived at a recently co-oped building at 323 East Eighth Street who said his bedroom had been damaged by the demolition at 319. A nurse at Beth Israel hospital, he was trying to reason with the cops. "I'm sick of private capital getting everything it wants, and what makes America great getting screwed," he responded when asked why he was out there demonstrating. "The thing that makes New York such a great place is the variety of lifestyles. It's a beautiful garden, and they want to tear it down and make it into a homogenous, climate-controlled, plastic-turfed lawn."

Famed attorney William Kunstler, who was then defending the squatters, declared: "There are seeds of rebellion here, people pushed to their outer limits. What could be more compelling than homeless people taking over an abandoned building?"

Kunstler's law partner, Ron Kuby, was even more emphatic: "A thousand years of property law says the buildings are for the owners. There's no common law for squatters in the U.S. But if you get a mass movement, the laws will follow. We saw that in the Civil Rights movement."

Ron Kuby's prediction did not come true. But back then the riots and street protests really felt like mini epics. The activists were emboldened by the neighborhood's history — even if within the Lower East Side there were often profound disputes between squatters and community housing groups that tended to split along generational lines. The folks who had helped squat the Christodora House in the late '60s with the Black Panthers and Young Lords, and who took over an abandoned school in 1979 to create the CHARAS/El Bohio community center on East Ninth Street, now saw this new generation of squatters as irresponsible, revolutionary wannabes playing a game in a place where the stakes were too high. The competition for cheap housing was fierce. What gave some twenty-something artist or college drop-out the right to cop a crash pad and rumble with the police when there were whole families doubled and tripled up in the projects with no place to go? The squatters wasted buildings, they said. They passed out with their candles lit and let their houses burn down. They were parasites dancing amid the truly urban poor.

For the squatters, the housing advocates were pimps and sell-outs who'd traded in their radical roots for careers spent grappling with a bureaucracy intent on dispensing crumbs at best. Their answer to the housing crisis was the 50/50 plan — a compromise that squatters said would only fuel gentrification and displacement by sanctioning new market rate housing next to low income rehabs.

Yet the two fronts reinforced each other, despite their differences. The housing advocates on the Lower East Side had always operated to the left of the baseline politic that governed the rest of Manhattan. That changed with the 1991 election to the City Council of Antonio Pagan, a neo-con Democrat who upset the longtime liberal incumbent Miriam Friedlander. Pagan became a darling of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, for seeking to curb the excesses of New York liberalism that the Lower East Side had come to epitomize. Backed by the police union, he rode to power on a campaign to evict the homeless from the park, roust the anarchists and squatters, and stop letting the area be a "dumping ground" for social services. His election coincided with the dramatic closing of the park for a two-year renovation that would permanently clear the homeless shanties and establish the 12 a.m. curfew that remains in place today.

This final reclamation of Tompkins Square pretty much closed the book on the park's legacy as a cauldron of unrest. It was followed by paramilitary eviction assaults on five East 13th Street squats, spearheaded by Pagan, who pitted "lazy" squatters against a scheme to use low-income tax credits to renovate the buildings for more "deserving" poor. In 1995, the city went so far as to send in sharpshooters and an armored personnel carrier to evict the squatters, who welded themselves inside the buildings. (Most were booted out then, though a lawsuit allowed residents to remain in three of the buildings until 1996, when the police again forcefully evicted everyone, and the buildings were gutted.)

The use of tax credits to produce low-income housing reflects the triumph of market-based strategies for urban renewal over the old state-sponsored model of subsidized housing — not

to mention any lingering idealism about grassroots sweat equity. While Pagan lambasted the 13th Street homesteaders as privileged troublemakers who "treat the whole neighborhood as a radical Romper Room," the not-for-profit organization he directed, Lower East Side Coalition Housing Development, made out quite nicely: LESCHD owns and manages the former 13th Street squats as low and moderate-income housing. (After leaving office, Pagan returned to LESCHD as a "staff analyst.")

Would Pagan's and City Hall's campaign to evict the squats have been so successful had the activists not spent so much time — and political capital — fighting to defend Tompkins Square and the homeless encampment there? There's no question that the increasingly squalid conditions brought by hundreds of needy people occupying the playgrounds and lawns without proper sanitation and services — combined with the park warriors' often inanely provocative efforts to recreate the 1988 police riot — undermined community support. Looking back, even hardliners like Morales and Harrington concede that the squatters involved in the park cause could have made more concrete gains by focusing on upgrading their buildings rather than scrapping with police. "We were so integrated with the issues of genocide and racism in the shelters, we couldn't separate it," says Morales of the social struggle around the park.

"If the squat scene hadn't happened, the park battle wouldn't have happened," concludes Harrington. "It was part of what we were about, bringing people in off the streets and into the squats. So the homeless situation in the park was part and parcel with the whole squatting movement."

Indeed, the 1988 riot and subsequent park battles helped inspire Tent City, a group of former park dwellers, who marched on Washington to demand housing and attempted their own building takeovers on the Lower East Side. [See Section Three, Chapter 2, "Tent City" by Ron Casanova.]

But the effort to integrate street people, many with drug and alcohol problems, into the often anarchic and contentious world of squatting proved far more difficult to achieve. "Most of the [street] people who came through and did okay would clean up their act and then move on," says Harrington. "They really didn't want to stay living in the buildings. Others we took in — quite often I think we did them a disservice. We were so radical then, we never believed in getting people services, and some of these people really did need that. They had real substance abuse or mental health problems, or I mean, some of them couldn't even really read and yet we weren't really prepared to deal with that. It was like, grab a hammer and start building a wall, and they just couldn't fucking do it. They'd hang around getting fucked up. And then they'd steal a camera or something, and we'd throw them out."

Still, the fact that people would even attempt such a social experiment is significant. The years of costly park battles and squat evictions undoubtedly helped convince the city to legalize 11 of the dozen remaining Lower East Side squats, which are now in the process of becoming low-income co-ops.[25]

These squatters are the survivors, the ones that managed through a combination of luck and hard-won experience, to hold their ground. That the Giuliani administration in its final year in office would ever agree to grant them title to their buildings is a reflection of how diligently many worked to restore the buildings and rehab their living spaces — some of which now look better than your average co-op. Bloomberg officials, who finalized the deal in September 2002, said they were motivated by the fact that the squatting scene had "matured" over the years and had come to include a more racially diverse population of families and people with stable jobs — blithely overlooking the fact that many were the same rabblerousers the city had fought with for so many years. They'd simply grown up a bit. But legal observers say the city must have also realized that if it moved to evict these squatters in court, it would have risked losing and thereby codifying the right to take adverse possession of city properties in a way that could have dramatically expanded the rights of squatters elsewhere in the city.

But while the city has ceded them the buildings for a dollar apiece, the squatters must bring them up to code without any of the government grants afforded to the homesteaders of the '80s, let alone the hefty tax breaks that for-profit developers receive for setting aside a portion of their apartments to low-income people. And the squatters are not allowed to sell or rent their spaces for profit. So in a sense, they are being charged with creating permanent low-income housing, without any of the subsidies that both developers and not-for-profit housing groups normally receive.

The 11 buildings have formed a new coalition to negotiate with UHAB, which is overseeing the financing and renovation process. But outside of that formal unity, these days the "squatters'" fights are largely internal. They are reconciling their space within the system, trading in free rent for the promise of security, while battling to keep the banks, contractors and UHAB from driving up their mortgages. While UHAB initially pledged to keep the monthly maintenance charges low— $300 to $750 depending on apartment size — many fear mounting rehab costs will become a mechanism for pushing the poor and more dysfunctional out.

Meanwhile, fights have emerged as the now legal homesteaders struggle to come to terms with what real ownership of their spaces means. If one person doesn't pay, who does?

In the same vein, many of the neighborhood's community gardens, which were started on squatted land, have won preservation. They are now working to set up bylaws and boards of governance, contending with insurance liabilities — all the formalizing elements that constitute property ownership.

Meanwhile, a new urban renewal plan is reshaping the community, this one spearheaded by the Cooper Square Committee. The same progressive housing group that defeated Robert Moses' scheme to mow down blocks of tenements for upscale housing has just leveled the old Cuando community center on the corner of Second Avenue and Houston Street, along with four historic loft buildings on the Bowery—including a former brothel and saloon occupied by feminist author Kate Millet. These properties were sacrificed to make way for 700-units of new housing, just 25 percent of which will be dedicated to low and moderate income people. The rest of the housing, which includes a 14-story housing complex on the corner of Houston and Bowery, will be luxury apartments, including 200,000 square feet set aside for commercial space, where a Whole Foods is slated to open.

There are still a few countercultural venues left in the nabe, such as ABC No Rio, Bluestockings bookstore, and the more avowedly lefty May Day Books, housed at the Theater for the New City on First Avenue. There's also an effort to resuscitate the East Village's "legacy of counterculture" via the HOWL! Festival, a week-long celebration of the arts —though one wonders whether this effort will only succeed in reinforcing the kind of hackneyed nostalgia and countercultural boutiquing that have overtaken places like Woodstock, rendering radicalism a tourist attraction, detached from its roots.

But the notion of organizing around space as a locus for political struggle no longer applies. Political organizing these days centers on the war, the media, the corporate colonization of the globe. The players and battles are far-flung and transitory by nature. There are still local struggles, such as the campaign to block a proposed 23-story luxury tower on Houston Street by local residents who fear it will inundate the area and hasten gentrification, or the ongoing effort to reclaim the old CHARAS/El Bohio community center on East Ninth Street, where the new owner has proposed building a 19-story dorm. (In an ironic twist, these days the folks petitioning in Tompkins Square are residents of the Christodora House, including penthouse owner Michael Rosen, who developed the swank Red Square apartment complex on Houston Street in the late '80s, and who now speaks earnestly about the need to preserve the "sanctity" of neighborhood against high-rise incursions.)

Still, these are defensive, rear-guard tactics. The idea of taking or reclaiming property and using that as a base for further social agitation is gone. Unlike the young idealists of the '60s, '70s, and '80s, it seems unlikely that the current crop of newcomers to the Lower East Side would align themselves with any neighborhood-wide struggle against gentrification.[26] The East Village's identity has already been subsumed into the grid of Manhattan real estate. It's no longer an island of diversity or cultural resistance but an "entertainment district" (to use City Hall's phrase)—a trendy theme park of bars, restaurants, and chic boutiques whose shifting aesthetics look more to LA, Tokyo, Paris, or Berlin rather than anything indigenously Loisaida, whatever that is. (The neighborhood was always such a concatenation of cultures and influences, it becomes harder to pin down what that essential Loisaida spirit ever was.)

The atomization of social struggle on the Lower East Side reflects the splintering of communities and workplaces brought on by globalization. For relative "old-timers" like me, there is a sense that the spirit of the Lower East Side has been hollowed out,

deconcentrated. The old romance of the East Village as a harbor for outcasts, fuck-ups, and artists was defeated by the militaristic incursions of the Giuliani administration, followed by the ethos of market efficiency embodied in the Bloomberg administration, for whom even smoking cigarettes in a bar or catching a nap on the subway is considered a ticketable offense.

Bohemias are predicated on cheap rents and free time, the time to mix it up with people from all races and classes and transgress social barriers, and so reinvent one's relationship to the world. Without cheap rents, there is no free time. Kids working four jobs to pay for a cramped bedroom in a $2400 a month, Ikea-furnished apartment don't have the luxury of such free-floating interaction. Starbucks becomes their living room, Barnes and Noble their library, the bars a field for networking and self-promotion and/or an escape from the get-ahead grind. Fighting the system is a waste of time; the struggle now is to have a stake in it.

Many of the old-guard rebels and rads are now raising families or have escaped to upstate or Vermont, places where free minutes don't only come with cell phone plans. But those of us who lived through this period of social upheaval in the neighborhood need to remember and celebrate the idealism, however flawed, that fueled the movement to "liberate" and defend the Lower East Side. The idea that people have a right to housing provides a check to the dehumanizing market fundamentalism of our times.

"It was liminal space," says David Boyle, reflecting on the bombed-out landscape that he encountered on the Lower East Side in the early '80s. "The property was neither here nor there. It wasn't quite controlled by the government or contested by the landlords who walked away from it. That's the space in which change takes place, the kind of space that's important for revolutionary ideas to come forward.

"Back then, the Lower East Side was an incubator, but it didn't last. It was already becoming a constrictive environment," Boyle continues. "If you're gonna change the world, you're not going to change it by hanging out on the Lower East Side and talking to the same people, because the Lower East Side is not the world. In fact it sort of has an entropy about it."

Author's Note: This essay began as an effort to reassess why the battles over Tompkins Square Park mattered, given that there's so little battling over it now. That inquiry led inevitably to the struggles by various groups to claim turf on the Lower East Side, from the early homesteaders who took over abandoned tenements and founded community gardens in forsaken lots, to the squatters, who did the same but were rendered outlaws when the city cancelled its homesteading program. This remains an incomplete survey of a complex social movement that evolved over time. Left out are the voices of the many quiet doers and artists, women and mothers, professionals and laborers whose hard work succeeded in preserving the buildings. I leave that exploration to another chapter.

Endnotes:

1. Quoted by Bill Weinberg in "Tompkins Square Park and the Lower East Side Legacy of Rebellion," *Downtown* February 14, 1990.

2. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), chapters 16-17.

3. Three men were in fact arrested and convicted for Ward's murder, which prosecutors deemed a street robbery gone awry. The shooter was sentenced to 15-years to life, and his two accomplices pled guilty to charges of manslaughter and robbery for their role, and for robbing someone else a block away just prior to Ward's killing. Nevertheless, Ward's friends and supporters in the housing movement, who conducted their own wide-, publicized investigation of the case, continued to insist that she had been assassinated for her work, noting that she had been harassed and received phone calls threatening her with bodily harm. [See: "3 SE Men Plead Guilty to Murder of Housing Activist," by Al Kamen, *Washington Post*, November 17, 1981; "Man Gets Jail in Activist's Death," by Al Kamen and Benjamin Weiser, Washington Post, March 10, 1982.]

4. *World War 3 Illustrated*, No. 6, 1986

5. Much was made out of the fact that in 1987, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)— which was established in 1979 to oversee domestic security and relief in the event of natural and nuclear disasters and/or wartime emergencies — was also put in charge of administering federal homeless relief efforts established by the Stewart McKinney Act of 1987, which codified the right to shelter. Former military bases and prisons were retrofitted as homeless shelters, prompting fears of new federal "Bantustans" for the poor.

6. This historical overview draws heavily from Bill Weinberg's "Tompkins Square Park and the Lower East Side Legacy of Rebellion," cited earlier, as well as Marci Reaven and Jeanne Houck, "A History of Tompkins Square Park," published in From *Urban Village to East Village*, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1994), pp. 81-98.

7. Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures on New York's Lower East Side,* (Amsterdam Monographs in American Studies, 1994), p. 33.

8. Christopher Mele, *The Selling of the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 58.

9. Philip Foner, *The Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1978), p. 448. Quoted by Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 11. See also Raven and Houck.

10. Reaven and Houck, pp. 87-88.

11. See Mele, chapter 3 and Smith, chapter 1.

12. Smith, p. 21.

13. The name "East Village" was first promoted by real estate interests during the 1960s in an effort to reinvent the area north of Houston Street as a fashionable destination, and disassociate it from the image of the Lower East Side as a working class slum.

14. Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification," in *The Portable Lower East Side*. Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 1987; online at http: www.abcnorio.org/about/history/fine_art.html

15. Ronald Lawson, "Tenant Responses to the Urban Housing Crisis, 1970-1984," *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (Rutgers University Press, 1986); online at http://www.tenant.net/Community/history/hist05b.html. John Kalish, "Urban Agriculture is Working in the Middle of Manhattan," *The Aquarian*, June 25, 1980.

16. Interviews with Carol Abrams, spokesperson for the Department of Housing, Preservation and Development August 22, 2002; and Howard Brandstein, who besides being a homesteader was the former director of the Home Ownership Project for Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of New York.

17. According to Val Orselli, executive director of the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association and a former member of the JPC, the JPC and CB3 forced the city to provide funds upfront to do the low-income rehabs first. The 1000 new units of market-rate units were never built. "We purposely selected the sites for that market-rate housing that were next to low income housing. So they never happened. We did not know at the time that that would make them that unattractive, but that's what happened." (Interview with Orselli, May 2004)

18. According to East 7th Street residents, those buildings were then being run by a "Ma Barker-type" woman and her drug-dealing sons.

19. This is Boyle's version of the story. According to Jimmy Stewart, a street peddler and electrician who first moved into the Fifth Street squat in 1982, what he and his partner "Web" objected to was Boyle's effort to "take over" the building. (Interview with Stewart, June 14, 2004.)

20. Brandstein recalls that RAIN rejected the 13th Street squatters because they were for the most part white — a common if somewhat exaggerated allegation made by housing advocates, who tended to overlook minority participation. Other 13th Street squatters say they rejected ORE and Boyle's leadership because they viewed him as a "takeover artist" out to establish ownership of the buildings for himself, or because they did not believe going with RAIN would give them control of their buildings.

21. According to Census figures, 14.5 percent of the Latino population on the Lower East Side left between 1980 and 1990.

22. It would be wrong to overplay ECAMA's following; for the most part the group was a front for John the Communist's one-man propaganda machine and offered a caricature of resistance to oppression. But JTC was expert at showing up at all the demonstrations with big, brightly painted banners and stacks of flyers bearing a mix of angry denunciations of the police collaged with clippings of the latest government atrocity against the poor.

23. This was the headline used in the 1874 edition of the *New York Graphic*, cited in Andrew Castrucci's *Your House Is Mine*, Bullet Space Collective, 1993.

24. That same night, Wade and several other activists had been invited to appear with rabid talk show host Morton Downey at Downey's nightclub act in midtown. They arrived at the park around midnight, drunk, pumped and bearing several cases of beer.

25. One other longstanding homestead on East 7th Street refused to enter into the deal and hence remains in legal limbo.

26. This chapter was written before the current movement to rezone the Lower East Side to limit high-rise incursions. It remains to be seen how well residents will unite around that.