Museum Chronicles Fightback & Victories Against Gentrification

Squats & Community Gardens Saved by Direct Action & Solidarity

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Above the front door to C-Squat, on Ave. C on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a weather-worn sign hangs from the fire escape reading "THIS LAND IS OURS, NOT FOR SALE," with the squatter symbol of a circle bisected by a lightning bolt. It dates back to the 1980s, when the building was taken over by anarcho-punk squatters. Below, on the window of the storefront, a much newer sign reads, Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (MoRUS).

I was among the crew that came together to launch the Museum in 2012. The core group behind the project were members of Time's Up!, a street-action oriented environmental and bicycle advocacy group. I still work with the Museum today, as an organic historian—that is, one without academic training, but rather drawing on lived experience.

The Lower East Side neighborhood has been aggressively gentrified over the past generation, but still features the highest concentration of New York City's hundreds of community gardens as well as 11 squatter buildings that have survived the wave of evictions in the 1990s by being brought into the city's Urban Homestead Program. Squatters who lived in city-owned vacant buildings were granted up to $10,000 per unit who agreed to renovate the dwellings.

As I relate on my Saturday and Sunday walking tours of the radical history of the neighborhood, these examples of reclamation-from-below emerged from New York's urban crisis of the 1970s. The capital flight and wave of landlord arson and abandonment was followed by a program of planned shrinkage imposed by the city's financial establishment, with basic services cut off to New York's "bad neighborhoods" (as they were called, with overt racism).

Left to their own devices in a neighborhood essentially written off by the city government, locals started taking matters into their own hands.

First, Puerto Rican residents began turning vacant lots into community gardens, converting rubble into soil through composting, growing fruits, vegetables and flowers, and restoring a sense of community amid the blight and abandonment.

In 1977, the Lower East Side gardeners joined with other gardeners around the city to form the Green Guerrillas who succeeded in pressuring the city to launch the Greenthumb Program, that afforded a degree of protection for the gardens from would-be developers.

Local residents also began moving into the vacant buildings, fixing them up and turning them into livable homes again. This led to the emergence of the city's homesteading program, which provided a legal framework for the reclaiming of these buildings.

The homesteaders were followed in the 1980s by the squatters—generally, younger, whiter and scruffier. They had no patience for the homesteading program—partly because they correctly perceived that it was too slow and

limited, and not enough buildings were being opened up. But also partly because of their anarchist DIY (do-it-yourself) ethic. Over the decade, some 30 buildings on the Lower East Side were opened as squats.

It was New York City's economic recovery, following a near-bankruptcy in the 1980s that ultimately threatened these experiments. The last of the factories across the East River on the Brooklyn waterfront were shut down, and the old urban working class was disenfranchised of its niche in the city's economy.

The new economy began to take over—FIRE, for finance, insurance, real estate (today updated to TAMI—technology, advertising, media, information). The children of the white flight generation, whose parents had fled to the suburbs a generation ago, started to move back to the city and recolonize the urban core, becoming the new class—the young, upwardly mobile urban professionals, or yuppies.

Suddenly, the city's so-called bad neighborhoods were reconceived as bedroom communities for yuppies. And the Lower East Side was in the vanguard, against its will—right on Manhattan island, with easy access to Midtown and Wall Street. Suddenly, abandoned properties taken over by gardeners and squatters were hot real estate.

This set off a wave of evictions—first of the squatters, many of whom were loud and visible, and angrily protesting the gentrification of the neighborhood. This anger exploded in the Tompkins Square riot of August 6, 1988, the start of what can only be called a three-year uprising on the Lower East Side.

Several riots followed until the city finally closed the park (the main gathering place for the protesters) in 1991. For two years, there was no park in the neighborhood.

This was the turning point, when the resistance was crushed and the forces of gentrification consolidated their victory. In the last big squat eviction operation, in which three buildings were raided on 13th Street in May 1995, the police brought out an armored vehicle and placed snipers with rifles on surrounding rooftops. By the end of the '90s, there were 11 squatter buildings left.

But resistance re-emerged—this time less nihilist and more ecologically minded—when the city next moved to start bulldozing those community gardens not protected by the Greenthumb Program. This also saw the first real cooperation between the older Puerto Rican gardeners and the young white anarchists in the neighborhood. Young activists borrowed tactics from the radical environmentalists out West who were working to save the old-growth forests, by locking down to the trees.

Eventually, there were negotiations over the fate of the remaining 11 squats—despite the mutual suspicions of the squatters and city authorities. In 2003, a deal was formalized whereby the designated buildings were brought into the homesteading program. One by one, the city Buildings Department signed off that they met the city housing code, and they became legal co-ops. While the residents of C-Squat still call the building a squat, the city authorities consider it a legalized homestead.

After several community gardens were destroyed to make way for increasingly upscale housing developments, there were similar negotiations to save the remaining gardens. Under two deals brokered by the New York State attorney general, many of the remaining guerrilla gardens were brought into the Greenthumb Program, and saved from the bulldozers.

All this history is documented at the MoRUS, in photographs, video displays, and archival materials. And in the walking tours we hold each weekend.

Some old rads in the neighborhood have looked askance at the project viewing it as a commodification of the district's radical history for the tourists. I acknowledge this critique, but purity is impossible under capitalism.

When I talk to young people on my tours who don't even know that the Tompkins Square Park riot even happened, I'm convinced of the importance of preserving this history.

Bill Weinberg blogs at **CounterVortex.org**.

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