

Squatter Stronghold Faces Eviction

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Five squatted buildings on Manhattan's Lower East Side are being targeted by New York City as the site of a supposedly low-income housing project. The city council voted on June 29 to approve a plan, submitted by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), for Lower East Side Coalition Housing Development (LESCHD, a corrupt non-profit housing organization) to develop the site. The five squats, numbers 535, 537, 539, 541, and 545 East 13th Street, are occupied by a diverse group of over 100 people, some of whom have resided in their squats for over 10 years. (A sixth squatted building across the street is not included in the development plan.) The squatter community on 13th Street was founded over 10 years ago by people who had originally sought to be accepted into the city's now-defunct homesteader program, but took a do-it-yourself approach and became squatters from the onset. They were soon joined by many more people, and expanded to include more buildings.

The city's plan was uncovered by a squatter from another block who heard rumors of the development project. Freedom of Information requests were filed, but no responses were received. After many more rumors and some anonymous tips, a New York Times reporter confirmed that there was in fact a plan for the 13th Street squats. Subsequent requests for information turned up the plan sent to the city council. It was a reincarnation of a plan defeated by squatters four years ago, but this time around was submitted as an Urban Development Action Project (UDAP) to bypass the usual review procedures and deny squatters any opportunities to oppose it at public hearings. The so-called low-income housing proposed for 13th St. has a minimum income requirement for a studio apartment of \$13,800, well above what most squatters and other neighborhood residents take home.

Organize!

Due to factional disputes within Eviction Watch, a network of 21 Lower East Side Squats, much of the defense tactics were conceived and implemented by the Legal/Research and Outreach subcommittees, along with many squatters from the targeted buildings and former members of Squatter Activist Council. Attempts to hold Eviction Watch meetings were disrupted by residents of 535 and self-proclaimed communists from a group called the Class War Organizer (CWO). Squatters and supporters arriving at one meeting were driven off by residents from 535.

Formulating Strategies

The first defense tactic used by squatters was what worked four years ago—going after the funders of the project. This included unannounced visits to the offices of Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC, corporate scum who finance poverty pimps by selling tax exemptions), and Enterprise Foundation (a group that collects grants from corporate scum). Actions were also carried out in Philadelphia and other cities against funders. In Baltimore, parodies of eviction notices were pasted to the residences of Enterprise board members and employees. Mass mailings were sent out to funders, politicians, and housing groups of all types, to publicize the fact that this project would displace over 100 people. Letters of support were solicited and included in mass mailings.

The second tactic was to raise awareness in the community and build up local support. A plan to march to the Community Board was approved at one of the early Eviction Watch meetings,

before the complete breakdown between rival factions. The Community Board tactic had been used by squatters in previous struggles. Most recently in June of 1993, when over 100 squatters shut down a meeting to delay a vote on the development of Glass House. (The development plan passed at a later meeting, but was never implemented; Glass House fell to an opportunistic police force, compounded by internal disarray, in Feb. 1994.) The Community Board (#3) was only voting as a formality on this issue. The streamlined UDAP process didn't require its participation. However, it was an opportunity for squatters to voice their outrage. The first action was against a sub-committee. Fifty squatters packed the room and prevented the board from convening a meeting.

An important part of the overall strategy to defend the buildings is on the legal front. Recent court rulings over the evictions of squats in the Bronx set favorable precedent for due process to be recognized for squatters. 535 E. 13th decided, undemocratically, in the opinion of many squatters, to drop out of the legal action. Two residents of 535, including a member of the CWO, showed up in court and asked that their building be removed from the case. They also discussed a deal offered by the city to accept relocation to city-owned apartments in exchange for their dropping any and all claims to their building. Many squatters active in this struggle consider any negotiations to vacate a building to be a "sell out," and feel the divisiveness weakens the squatters movement. CWO distributed hundreds of leaflets filled with lies and misleading information, which created much confusion for people trying to keep up with the complexities of the situation.

Knowing that legal tactics alone cannot bring victory, squatters continue to put up posters and do outreach in the Lower East Side. Squatters also developed good contacts in the mainstream media. Two major daily newspapers have run sympathetic articles covering the dispute between squatters and the city.

This plan to evict five buildings is the most serious threat the squatters of the Lower East Side have faced. Squatters realize that if these buildings go the remainder will be weakened and picked off over the next couple of years. Since the mid-'80s there have been 15–20 buildings occupied by organized squatters in this neighborhood, existing in a gray area of semi-autonomy as government administrations have come and gone. The survival of squatting as a continuing movement rests heavily on whether this fight is won or lost. If the squats lose in court, squatters may have already won a political victory in the eyes of the public. If the squats were to win title to the buildings, they would no longer be squats, but could inspire others to carry on the struggle. A favorable court ruling on due process alone could put squatting right back where it was—in legal limbo.

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