Squatters In Nyc Essay, Research Paper

The Hidden Homeless

Have you ever dreamed of living in a house for free? You wouldn t have to pay the rent, and have yourself a roof over your head, and have more money to spend on things you would otherwise have to spend for a tiny piece of apartment. Think of it this way: isn t housing a right for everyone? As prices soar, the chances of finding affordable housing and low rents in NYC is nearly impossible and housing projects are rapidly getting filled up. In conditions like these, having nowhere else to go, people decide to occupy run down dilapidated houses owned by the government or long lost owners. These are our squatters, or the people that illegally reside in NYC s abandoned houses. NYC is full of empty buildings ranging from totally destroyed shells all the way to OK shape. In our city alone, there are at least forty squatted homesteads. Ten squats in the Brooklyn, 12 in the Bronx, and the remaining 18 in Manhattan.

Many squatters choose to be silent and not talk about squatting to interviewers and the news media for fear of providing over-sensationalized accounts that would get them into trouble or show them in the worst image. Also, people, especially squatters, don t like to be treated as animals in a zoo for show and tell only. Though most of them choose to maintain an existence hidden from strangers and mainstream society, squatters are becoming a large and growing class of residents settling the land without a title. Unfortunately, squatters hold very little legal recognition and the only way they can keep their houses, or squats, is by helping each other to be organized and seeking support which is essential in order to organize crucial repairs and to resist harassment and evictions from landowners and other legal occupants.

Squatting, or acquiring illegal property itself is a type of movement. People choose to become squatters for many reasons. Even though people mainly choose to be squatters because of economic hardships, some decide to be squatters due to their anger against the system of unjust laws. Other reasons include teenage rebellion, or simply activists believing that that people should have a right to land or abandoned run down houses if they live in them and maintain them properly. Squatters believe that the ownership of a building is established by use, and shouldn t only be controlled by a bunch of property and possession laws written on mere sheets of paper.

Squatter activist Seth Tobocman told me that he chose to be a squatter since it was one of the most dynamic movements to change society in the 1980 s. People who were squatting were redistributing property to the needy instead of waiting forever for the government to place them in a housing system meanwhile they went homeless.

By living in a squat with other people, he learned of the ability of power people hold within themselves when occupying a space or territory. For example, if you are shopping in a store and the store decides to close yet you don t want to leave, think of the power you hold just by occupying that amount of space with your being in the store while refusing to leave. They cannot shoot you and drag you out. They have to go through all the legal business of calling cops and attorneys and what not.

It is the same situation with squatters. If well organized and strong, squatters will choose to stay in the building when forced to evict and fight for their right to live in the squat. Unfortunately, not always do they win either when faced with a stronger body than they. A victory for squatters, for example an adverse possession law on a building is a loss of the title of squat, but rather a resident legal building. However, loss at court can also mean a political victory for squatters through the eyes of the public. A perfect example of resistance is the 13th street eviction. The tension is so thick it can be cut with a knife on East 13th street in NYC s Lower East Side Paul DeRienzo stated. On August 13, 1996, on the breaks of early dawn, squatters knew they would be facing eviction in building # 535, 537, and 537 on east 13th street even though they were given no warning. As riot cops poured onto the scene, some squatters barricaded themselves so well in their squats that the cops had to break the floor from underneath in order to get in. Others tried to fight the almighty cops, but that was to no avail. Despite the resistance by the squatters, activists, and neighborhood supporters against eviction, they lost their war and were evicted as powerful riot cops moved into the scene like beasts trying to destroy squatters belongings and demolish the buildings on which the squatters worked on and upheld for the past decade. This case was taken to court as squatters sought adverse possession (A law giving title to squatters who live in abandoned property while making significant improvements on that property for a period of 10 or more years). However, due to the lack of factual evidence of living in the building for 10 or more years, squatters lost the battle and the homes were demolished to make room for a low- income housing project.

Even today, as I am writing this report, squatters are defending their homesteads and properties. Squatters don t only protect houses. There is also a Garden Coalition which protects some of the Lower East Sides most colorful gardens that once used to be dull, useless parking lots. On 7th street, between Avenues D and B, in order to protect these gardens, there is a statue of a frog named El Coqui( a symbol of Puerto Rico) built. Each night someone is on guard sleeping in its hands to protect the garden from getting demolished by bulldozers to make way for new expensive houses.

Squatting in a house is a difficult job as well. It s not always easy to handle difficult situations that arise. Seth Tobocman found that it was difficult to consent on people living together. They had to have a set of laws, similar to our daily household chores and rules of the house. There was to be no violence, fighting, hard drugs, or stealing. If you happened to break the law you d be out. It was like living in a big family, and not always everyone got along just fine. Squatting had its downs as well, as Seth recalls while he was living in a squat. One of the hardest, most painful and difficult things to do was to kick someone out because they were violent or held a potential fire hazard to the squat. It was hard to decide whether they really had to be kicked out or not says Seth Tobocman. Some other downs of being a squatter was the constant fear of something bad happening in the buildings such as police evictions, drug dealers selling out, fires or robberies in buildings.

Some of the more meaningful events of his time as being a squatter were defending buildings and holding out against an eviction in 1989. Even today he holds meetings with people working in squatting buildings and organizes them as well as develops intense relationships with them, like a family.

Even though Seth doesn t live in a squat anymore due to some problems with his squat that put his life in danger, he still is an active member and activist of the squatter movement, as well as an illustrator and an author for the World War 3 zine

Unfortunately today, squatting a building is not what it used to be. Half of the squats that used to be open in the 1980 s are now demolished to make way for housing projects and other developments such as brownstones and other expensive houses. Today it would be impossible to squat a new building in Manhattan due to the overcrowded conditions and overpopulation our city faces. Soon, with the shortage of finding houses, people will begin to squat more outer borough houses.

328