
In the early years of the 21st century, New York City lost its soul. (Zukin 2010: 1)

In 1996 I spent some time in New York and, for a few months, I had the chance to follow the Lower East Side squatters and in particular those who lived on 13th Street. I had already visited NYC in 1984, but ten years seemed to have transformed the whole city, with some exceptions. I knew Janet Abu-Lughod’s (1994) book on the East Village and at the Blackout bookshop I found a copy of *The Shadow*, an underground newspaper published on the Lower East Side, with an article on the squatted spaces of NYC. I was very curious to see how things were going! Needless to say, squatting in New York had a very peculiar nature (see figure below).

Though, apparently, I could see familiar (from a Western European perspective) symbols in squatted spaces, such as the circle with a lightning-shaped arrow, and self-managed activities, such
as concerts and theatre performances, the whole scene was very much focused on housing, punk
concerts (compared to an Italian situation that had Social Centers and radical hip-hop at its heart),
gentrification and surviving outside the cash economy. Some people told me that they were
“homesteaders”, a concept that I had difficulty in translating to Italian, and I left with many
questions and obviously the curiosity to know in detail what had happened in the last two decades.
A few years ago, I became friends with Frank Morales, a long-term NYC squatter and advocate for
squatters, and he suggested that I read *Ours to Lose*, authored by cultural anthropologist Amy
Starecheski, currently at the Columbia Center for Oral History, who I had met while she was
working on her dissertation at CUNY Graduate Center in 2012.

The book is an interesting study not only for *Antipode* readers and radical scholars in
general, but also for people interested in understanding the policies at disposal in the capitalist
development of cities (think about “benign neglect”, “planned shrinkage” and “urban renewal”).
Composed of an introduction and five chapters plus a conclusion, it includes the oral histories that
the author carried out with the Lower East Side’s squatters between 2009 and 2015. I know what
some would say: another book on New York’s Lower East Side? Yes, it is true that throughout the
years various books have been published (among others, see Abu-Lughod 1994; Mele 2000;
Patterson 2007; Tobocman 1999), but this book is an original contribution that digs in to the details
of events and goes beyond the Lower East Side, NYC, and the USA. The book contains a
combination of voices narrating the experience of squatting in the Lower East Side. There are 36
leading actors–25 squatters in 11 buildings–and while the majority of the squatters come from the
USA, there are also people from Australia, Canada, Colombia, Italy, and Portugal. The target of
squatting in NYC has mainly been city-owned buildings and this makes a different case if compared
with similar ones in Europe (see, for example, SqEK 2013; SqEK et al. 2014). The squatters
intertwined their lives with the transformation of the squatted buildings and in doing so they have
been creating personal and political spaces, not just giving a roof to otherwise homeless people. The
space they built has taken on a highly political and geographical meaning, framing a really diverse
geography of NYC (and on this see the beautiful map of the lower East Side by Fly on p.10). In
fact, Starecheski addresses a lot of difficult questions with convincing analysis. Among others: 1)
Who is the city responsible to, and how? 2) Is it the best use of city-owned property to generate
cash for the city coffers or to house the neediest citizens? 3) Who decides who deserves housing? 4) How does capitalism produce vacant buildings? 5) Is legalizing squats a good idea? 6) Who owns the equity in legalized squats? 7) What is the temporality of homeownership? 8) What was the temporality of squatting? 9) What makes homeowners such valued citizens? 10) By taking responsibility for creating their own housing, were squatters complicit in a process through which government was outsourcing to low-income and working-class people the work of providing shelter for themselves? If this list of questions is not enough to convince you to read the book, I would offer some additional considerations.

One of the points that I found relevant is the analysis about who belongs in the city. This kind of analysis is usually dictated and applied by governments only to scrutinize in a classist, if not racist, way who deserves the right to be in a particular neighborhood or to be citizen. Although it is strange to understand who is “local” in NYC, as the original inhabitants were displaced first by Europeans and then by people from all over the world in successive waves, this is something that has oriented a lot of political actions and negotiations with authorities:

But city officials forgot about the city’s origins. “Origins” refers not to which group settled in a neighborhood earliest; that would be difficult if not ridiculous to prove, since every city is built up of layers of historical migrations. “Origins” suggests instead a moral right to the city that enables people to put down roots. This is the right to inhabit a space, not just to consume it as an experience. Authenticity…[is] a continuous process of living and working, a gradual buildup of everyday experience, the expectation that neighbors and buildings that are here today will be here tomorrow. (Zukin 2010: 5-6)

In a shockingly gentrified city, the Lower East Side, in large part because of the existence of partially decommodified housing, still has many low-income people, people of color, and longtime residents, including the remaining squatters.

For those still unconvinced to read the book because of thinking that it is related to some eccentric urban patterns, I quote the response Starecheski (p.22) gives to the question, why study squatting? Her brilliant answer is: “Studying squatting helps us understand how and (perhaps more
important) why people make claims on space. … Studying squatting and the contestation of the legitimacy of property helps us to see how culturally complex claims on the city are. Not mere zero-sum struggles over space and resources, claims on urban space extend to touch one of the foundations of culture: value.” I couldn’t agree more with such a statement, and what Starecheski unravels so well is how value in housing is produced. Squatting buildings in a particular neighborhood often leads people to address further fundamental questions of our cities, our lives, and satisfying radical needs. The book reports on the struggles of one small neighborhood in Manhattan to keep a society living in continuity with solidarity, creativity (and not in the neoliberal sense), sincerity, or, if you want to use the Zukin’s (2010) expression, soul. Even if squatting and personal trajectories are very well depicted in Starecheski’s analysis, private property and homeownership remains a central theme of this powerful book that offers readers authentic images from the depths of the soul of NYC.

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I consider the analysis of squatting and its consequences as offering a very significant perspective on the transformations that societies experience. And if sometimes these consequences can take the form of prefigurative politics, it is useful to point out those practices that care about the moral and social conditions of future generations, and this is the case of the squatters of the Lower East Side.

In Ours to Lose, the governance of urban space is described not through the actions of Mayors Koch, Dinkins, Giuliani, etc.—although they have been responsible for a lot of social disasters (see Smith 1998)—but through the intersection of spaces and individuals that generate homes for inhabitants outside the private market or social assistance. The book provides a deeper understanding of the political debates within the squatter community and between squatters and city institutions. If a couple criticisms are allowed, they would be that the book deals insufficiently with framing the peculiar experience of NYC’s squatters relative to similar groups in the rest of the US, and it would have been very interesting to open a window on the relations that were generated outside NYC. There is some repetition of the same information in parts that could have been cut,
freeing pages to maybe consider the wider web of contacts, friendships, love, activism, and culture that has been supporting squatting.

This is a book written with passion that provides a detailed narrative of the organizing and political activities of 30 years of squatters on the Lower East Side. Overall, it offers a brilliant guide for contemporary political action about what can be carried out and what cannot, and which traps and mistakes are likely to be faced. Traps and mistakes are related to many different aspects: from personal and relationship problems to the need to make decisions that affect your neighbor, and from the patterns of forced negotiations with authorities to the difficulty of framing individual and egoistic needs within larger political struggles. The author addresses the issues of group dynamics intrinsic to people that happen to be together not because of family ties or choice, but by different unexpected paths (see in particular Chapter 3), paths that have even persisted through riots (in 1988 to defend Tompkins Square Park and in 1995 against the eviction of the 541 and 545 East 13th Street squats) and evolved to the unforeseen stage of moving from squatters to co-operative homeowners through the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB). The process of becoming homeowners, started in 1999, has involved lengthy and cumbersome procedures, discussions within the squatters, and all kind of negotiations and tensions with the local authorities and tribunals. Buildings have been transformed in low-income, limited-equity cooperatives, meaning that there are restrictions on the income of future purchasers of apartments in the buildings, as well as a cap on their resale price. As of August 2015, five buildings had completed the cooperative conversion process. The squatters decided to be homeowners not only to keep a roof over their heads but also to publicly affirm the real possibility of preserving houses for low-income people against speculation, and the political gesture of running different, decommodified ways of living where collective autonomy can be pursued. By emphasizing that when the collective effort for autonomy and self-management works out it is “ours to lose”, Starecheski deliberately invites her readers to understand that we can transform our cities and that housing can be ensured for larger low-income populations than it is now. Policies can be adopted to provide not repression, jail, police violence, and the continuing criminalization of squatters, but long-term, serious social and public services (see also Boden 2015).
Returning to the many questions brought up at the beginning, it is sufficient to say that the author not only raises the most relevant and difficult queries but she also finds answers that each reader might definitely understand as reminders of the need to resist and struggle against the huge gaps in wealth and privilege that shape the space and time of our cities and of our existence. Mainstream policies, to various degrees, are oriented to attack squatters, and homeless people, stressing their unwillingness to “work hard”, accept unsustainable consumerism, and live according to society’s rules and standards. In its three decades of existence, the squatters’ movement on the Lower East Side of NYC has provided a model of collective self-management that goes far beyond the single issue of being homeless, and it has pushed the boundaries to address social justice by reducing racism, fighting evictions, facing the classist housing market, and confronting government budget cuts. This form of radical struggle is a practical direction for other people seeking to change society at the grassroots level, particularly in nations that have experienced the greatest degree of inequality of wealth and income in the last century.

References


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