

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, questions about the importance of public space have surfaced as demonstrations and occupations have visibly reentered the civic imagination. Current debates about public space in cities, or the lack thereof, focus mainly on open and accessible places of assembly—that is, parks, squares, and streets. The concept of a physical commons in short supply and highly monitored by police and cameras is undoubtedly problematic to the formation of discursive practices. However, there is another kind of space that is just as critical to democracy—one in which the nature of public participation is negotiated, coordinated, sustained, and developed into productive propositions for political action. This space is the office, workshop, or building where activist groups meet to organize and plan what often appear to be impromptu acts of political dissent and collective participation. In the many debates about the public sphere, this less visible domain of participation has not yet garnered adequate attention. *Counter-Institutions: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side*, explores the history and potential of such private-public spaces through a study of select buildings that have been appropriated and adapted by politically oriented citizens and nonprofit organizations in New York City.

COUNTER INSTITUTION

Public institutions play a critical role in the way cities are structured. In the '70s and '80s, as federal funding for public programs was systematically dismantled, New York City's civic infrastructure was seriously compromised. The closing of schools, hospitals, parks, and playgrounds; the end of the federally funded public housing programs; the deinstitutionalization of mentally ill patients; and the cutbacks in funding for the arts adversely affected life in the city. To compensate for the retreating welfare state, many New Yorkers organized to pursue alternative types of collective action. This activity took many forms. Artist collectives, guerrilla gardeners, social activists, and various advocacy groups converted city-owned and semi-abandoned properties into places that fostered civic participation and encouraged self-organization. The term *counter institution* refers to these insurgent,

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grassroots efforts that provided direct deliverables and generated alternative forums of empowerment to communities under pressure from an unfortunate set of circumstances. The concept of an “institution” encompasses an organization with a set of covenants and the building that houses such an entity. This book examines the dual identification of institutions as both administrative and physical structures by underscoring the history of actions and activity within the buildings. In doing so, *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* aims to highlight the importance of such physical space not simply as a backdrop but as a crucial aspect of social movements within the city.

ACTIVIST ESTATES

Within the Lower East Side, network of counter-institutions, although not precisely linked, form an association through activism. An examination of political activism around war, housing, and social justice that have informed social reform efforts in New York City provides the context for analyzing three activist-run buildings selected for this study. These three structures are—an office building used by anti-war and social justice advocates, a large abandoned schoolhouse run as a Puerto Rican community center, and a tenement building that was converted to a collectively run art center. These three case studies represent three different but overlapping political constituencies that emerged in New York City in the '70s. Fiscal crisis and the temporary devaluation of real estate during this period allowed ad hoc citizen undertakings and social advocacy groups to establish control over semi-abandoned buildings and properties.

This book argues that the use of these buildings by activists over the past five decades is tied to the flux of political and economic events affecting the city and the nation. The provocation of the philosopher Henri Lefebvre that the city is an oeuvre, a work, a collective creation, is extended here to apply to buildings that act as repositories of the collaborative actions of its inhabitants. By examining how properties and buildings have been used as a base by social movements to launch a critique of the city and the nation, this book explores the important and often unrecognized ways in which “activist estates” have contributed to the civic realm. While the buildings are not in themselves agentic, there is, within social movements, a practice to co-opt space and ascribe it a symbolic charge by naming a building or a place. The three buildings discussed in this book were each named accordingly: the Peace Pentagon was the headquarters of the anti-war movement; El Bohio was a metaphoric “hut” that envisioned the Puerto Rican



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Activist Estates: Three Buildings in the Lower East Side.
Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

community as a steward of the environment; and ABC No Rio, with its name appropriated from a storefront sign with missing letters, was a playful punk move that appealed to the anarchistic sensibility of the artists that ran a storefront gallery in a run-down tenement. These names activated the spaces and ascribed them an aspirational charge and thereby created an agency that is discussed and envisioned here in this book as *Activist Estates*.

LOWER EAST SIDE

In discussing the past, present, and future of these three institutions, it is important to define the geographical area in which they emerged. The Lower East Side traditionally refers to an area east of the Bowery, extending from Fourteenth Street in the north to the Brooklyn Bridge in the south. This area is designated as Community Board 3 by the city, and the neighborhoods within this jurisdiction have historically been defined by the different migrant groups that have brought varying cultural and economic perspectives to the area. There is a wealth of multidisciplinary urban histories and social studies of the Lower East Side going back to the legendary photo-essay by Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, a book published in 1890 that described the living conditions of the immigrant poor (Jewish, Italian, and Chinese) in the lower wards of nineteenth-century Manhattan. Since then, this neighborhood, with its mix of ethnicities, cultures, and countercultures, has been examined by various urban practitioners and scholars as a microcosm of a city with all its dialectical potentials and pitfalls.

The first of a series of more critical studies, *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (1994), edited by Janet L. Abu-Lughod, brought together the research and insights of sociologists, geographers, planners, and historians to examine the contestation of space in this multivalent neighborhood. This narrative of competing interests in a socially diverse neighborhood, which dates to 1994, has since been expanded by other scholars, and recorded in films, oral histories, novels, poems, and essays written by residents of the neighborhood. Of these, Christopher Mele's *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York City* (2000); Malve von Hassell's *Homesteading in New York City, 1978–1993: The Divided Heart of Loissaida* (1996); and *Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side* (2007), edited by Clayton Patterson, have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of a contentious history of development in the Lower East Side.

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While drawing on these multidisciplinary perspectives, the point of departure for this book is to examine how *buildings* structure the social lives of people and generate an alternative forum for civic participation. *Counter Institution: Activist Estates of the Lower East Side* examines the tension between the impermanence of the insurgent activist practices and the permanent but maintenance-heavy aspects of architecture. The three buildings considered here are part of a larger network of properties that have historically been used to house, aid, and abet social movements in the city. While acknowledging the parallels between many other spaces with similar intentional communities and spaces for activism, this book remains closely focused on the case-study approach. Theoretically, this method of looking at geopolitically specific social movements builds upon the framework set up by Manuel Castells in his seminal 1983 work *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. Using the case-study method, as opposed to a comparative analysis, this book looks at the transformation each “counter institution” over an extended period of time.

By remaining within a limited urban context—the Lower East Side—the narrative emphasizes the trajectories of people in between buildings and adjacent sites to construct ideological networks that run as a historic thread through the neighborhood over time. The first chapter pulls together the larger history of social organization in lower Manhattan and, in doing so, moves beyond the Lower East Side to examine actions around City Hall, Washington Square, Union Square, and the former manufacturing districts north and south of Houston Street. The map of the Lower East Side is sometimes stretched, such as in second chapter, to include a triangular area extending west of the Bowery to Lafayette Street now designated as the NoHo (North of Houston) Historic district. In the third chapter, the actions of the Puerto Rican “Loisaida” movement concentrates on the neighborhood east of Avenue A, between Fourteenth Street in the north and Houston Street in the south. The fourth chapter locates the praxis within the terrain south of Houston Street, within what was once the Jewish immigrant enclave of the Lower East Side. The actions and activities of the three constituencies discussed in the book create a patchwork of links and affinities that present the neighborhood as not merely bound by streets and districts but rather as an interconnected network of actions and possibilities.

While grounding the narrative firmly in a few selected blocks of New York City, the book contextualizes the micronarratives of activism in larger, more geographically dispersed collective undercurrents. The buildings in question are anchors, but the sociopolitical aspirations of

grassroots organizing take the project outside these physical spaces as individuals connect to events that intersect with the larger jurisdictions of municipal and federal policy. While exploring the global identities of some of the actors involved in this telling, the book remains confined to the spatial practices and political activism of the Lower East Side. A comparison of anti-war/anti-corporate movements in Latin America, related self-determination movements in Puerto Rico, and a broader understanding of global anarchic spaces is hinted at but beyond the scope of this book. By remaining “location based,” this book is an invitation to other scholars and practitioners to study the overlapping constituencies of urban social movements and to expand the research further by examining the global aspects of local movements.

METHOD

The history of organizing and the activities of groups and individuals within the different buildings are culled from various primary sources including newspapers, reports, meeting notes, photographs, and documents from private and public archives. This broad research was enriched by interviews with people involved with the buildings, many of whom are still dedicated to these movements. The history of these spaces as presented here is therefore by no means comprehensive but rather selective and informed by the observations of those interviewed by the author. The placement of the Activist Estates, that is, the buildings, at the center of larger questions of social equity, war, and cultural production, yields a different perspective of the instrumentality of space. The book consciously aims to highlight this point of view. To parse out the reciprocity between urban space and global events, between people and buildings, this work uses a hybrid method of combining words with images. The project of mapping and drawing is integral to the writing of this book. Drawings, photographs, time lines, and collages do not merely complement the text. Rather, they serve to explore the relationships between geography, politics, architecture, and history. The efficacy of envisioning spatial and political practices in relation to time is central to this investigation. As part of this approach, archival photographs of past events are presented along with current documentation and questions about the future of such buildings. This method of analysis is seldom applied to a historic reading of buildings and the way memory and action become a component of a functional space.

Although there is considerable research and writing on alternative spaces formed by artists in New York City from the '70s to the present,

there are few attempts to see these spaces as part of a larger network of collective undertakings. By comparing how various social groups use space to establish themselves through the occupation of buildings, this book seeks to provide a more inclusive concept of citizenship and, by extension, readership. Exposition through the mapping of information has long been a part of the lexicon of protest tactics. By borrowing from this tradition, this work hopes to generate new ways to imagine buildings as vital resources for the future and a critical part of the civic infrastructure. This book charts out territorial occupations at different scales and simultaneously builds upon the use and symbolic value of these buildings. This method of research and representation will be of interest to academics and students working at the intersection of art and design with history, the social sciences, preservation, and community organization.

As self-organized spaces disappear from the city center but continue to mushroom in more economically conducive environments, this book can provide a critical perspective on the possibilities of structuring collective resistance. This social and visual history book is addressed to practitioners, activists, artists, architects, policy makers, and others who are interested in how the city can inspire and encourage political engagement. With the continuing thrust of speculative development in cities such as New York, it is essential to ask what alternate forms of participation exist for the many groups who depend on the availability of space to organize movements. This book is about the appropriation of built spaces and the short- and long-term experiments in collectivity forged through the actions of these counter-institutions. In taking over a few dilapidated buildings and breathing social purpose into them, people deliberately countered the rapidly growing commodification of real estate. The fact that many of these ventures began as ad hoc experiments in a grassroots democracy, persisted over the years, and spawned other initiatives attests to the power and promise of this mode of space-based organizing. In trying to memorialize, interpret, and politicize the buildings in question, this book hopes to empower a new generation of activists, architects, artists, and urbanists to engage in the built environment.

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