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THE COMMUNITARIAN ESTATES OF LOISAIDA (1967–2001)

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CHAPTER 3: THE COMMUNITARIAN ESTATES OF LOISAIDA (1967–2001)

In 1978, after helping residents of the Lower East Side establish control over poorly managed and abandoned apartment buildings, the housing advocacy group Interfaith Adopt-a-Building (AAB) was looking to adopt a building of its own. They looked for a space large enough to accommodate its hundred-plus staff members and organizers. They set their sights on an abandoned schoolhouse, the former PS 64, on a block adjoining Tompkins Square Park. They leveraged their connections with the city to gain access to the property and invited CHARAS, a Puerto Rican collective dedicated to community organizing, to join them in occupying and running the large facility.¹ Working together, they formed a community center to pursue a three-part agenda to build “Housing, Community, and the Environment.”² The center was named El Bohio—“the hut”—to signify the ideals of a movement that had emerged from the community activism of the Puerto Rican population of the Lower East Side. Through their combined efforts, a building designed to educate and nurture successive generations of low-income Lower East Side residents was thus restored to its intended function.

This large schoolhouse, built at the beginning of the twentieth century to serve the historically working-class immigrant neighborhood, represented an important connection to the Progressive Era history of the Lower East Side (Figure 3.1).³ The school’s closing in the ’70s indicated a broader strategy of consolidation and shrinkage of public services adopted by the city in the wake of a fiscal crisis. There was a meteoric drop in the overall population in New York City that was particularly drastic in lower income neighborhoods, such as the Lower East Side. PS 64, which once served 2,500 children, was reduced to a population of 884 at the time of its closing in 1977.⁴ The building, left unattended by the board of education, was vandalized and reduced to a state of shambles in a short period of time. Its large windows were broken, lighting and plumbing fixtures were stolen, and sections of copper from the roof had been ripped off to be sold in the black market. This pillaging by vandals and lack of management left the interior exposed to both natural and human elements. The large classrooms and wide hallways became a haven for all manner of people seeking shelter. Drug dealers purportedly conducted a brisk trade within the building, and the stately schoolhouse, once an asset to the

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neighborhood, quickly became a menace to residents of the surrounding blocks.⁵

Establishing a community center on city-owned property was not an impromptu act of occupation but rather the embodiment of an ongoing struggle for political and social autonomy by the neighborhood's marginalized Puerto Rican community. Since the late '60s, AAB, CHARAS, and their many collaborators had fought on multiple fronts to halt the physical and social destruction of a broad swath of the Lower East Side. This self-proclaimed jurisdiction, indicated on

3.1
Public School 64, view from East
Ninth Street, 1908.

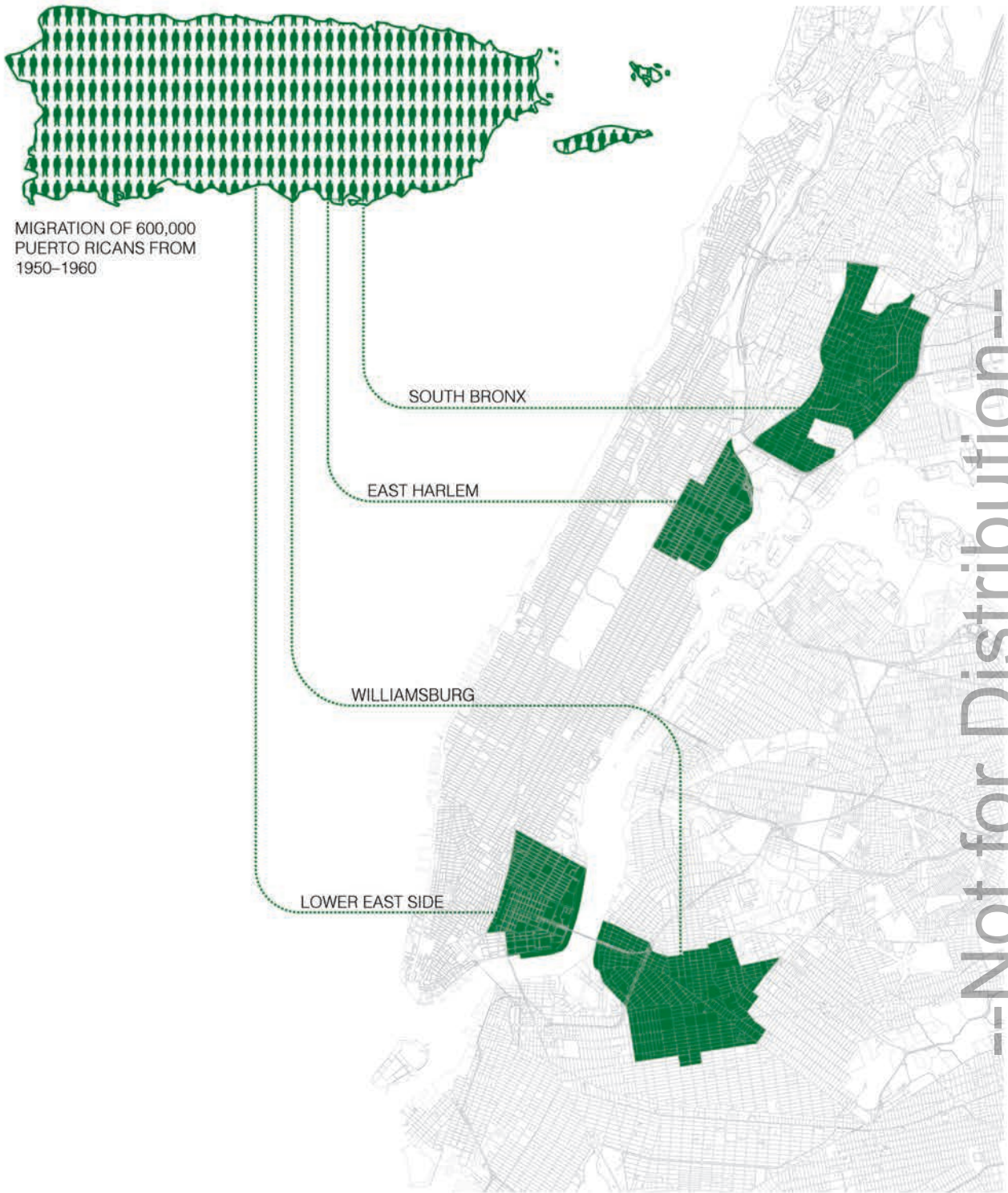
Photograph courtesy of New York City
Municipal Archives.

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the many maps prepared by AAB, extended from Fourteenth Street in the north to Houston Street in the south and from Avenue A in the west to the blocks of public housing lining the East River.⁶ This area, with its commercial spine along Avenue C, had been home to a large community of Puerto Ricans since the '50s.⁷ They followed in the footsteps of immigrant groups—the Germans, the Irish, the Jews, and the Ukrainians—for whom this neighborhood had served as a stepping-stone toward a more prosperous future in America. The Puerto Ricans, however, came at a time when the post industrializing city offered fewer opportunities to a blue-collar workforce. The gradual disappearance of manufacturing jobs from the city left the new arrivals with few employment options to face the grim reality of the post-war economy.

They settled in neighborhoods such as the South Bronx, East Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Williamsburg and Bushwick (Figure 3.2), following the trail of available tenement and public housing in New York City. It was in these neighborhoods, or “barrios,” as they came to be called, that they saw their living conditions worsen in the '70s as federal subsidies for housing and social services dwindled, schools and hospitals closed, and a city on the brink of bankruptcy began cutting back on police protection, garbage collection, street cleaning, and municipal services. Diminishing support from the public sector was followed by a depreciation of the value of private real estate. Absentee landlords stopped maintaining their properties, squeezed out poorer tenants, evaded taxes, and sometimes even burned down buildings to collect the insurance on structures whose value had precipitously declined. Charred buildings, boarded-up windows, and garbage-strewn lots characterized the urban landscape. And the lack of heat, electricity, and hot water was a domestic constant that plagued the many families trying to survive in the barrios within New York City.

The multiple crises of employment, housing, and education unfolding in these neighborhoods transformed many residents into activists and generated new forms of political agency among the city's Puerto Ricans. On the Lower East Side, deteriorating buildings and public spaces became the staging ground for experiments in alternative community organization. Residents converted rubble-strewn vacant lots into gardens, rundown tenements into cooperative housing, and storefronts into community centers. These actions created new uses and meanings for neglected urban spaces and generated a network of support through community-organized resistance to urban disintegration.



3.2

Map of Puerto Rico and New York City showing enclaves of Puerto Rican settlement. By 1960, over 600,000 people of Puerto Rican birth or parentage lived in New York City.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

Map based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau.



3.3
Loisaida: View from above. Looking north from East Fourth Street are the tenement at 309 East Fourth Street and the bare-bones playground, El Jardín del Paraíso, in the foreground, 1979. Photograph by Marlis Momber.

In 1974, when the Puerto Rican poet-playwright-plumber Bimbo Rivas memorialized this blighted territory in his poem “Loisaida,” he took a significant step in claiming the neighborhood as a spiritual as well as a physical home for the struggling Puerto Rican community (Figure 3.3).⁸ Once the neighborhood was claimed as “Loisaida,” it generated a new narrative of hope for the community of Puerto Ricans in the postindustrial city.⁹ The name “Loisaida,” derived from a Spanish-inflected pronunciation of “Lower East Side,” helped galvanize support for a series of actions involving the idea of a place that was variously reimagined as a “movement, an ideology, and a state of mind” and, later, as a “fight-back mentality” and a “philosophy of responsibility, cooperation, and determination by the people.”¹⁰ These sentiments were transmitted by word of mouth, poetry, and performances, and they were reinforced by the work of activists and ordinary citizens who transformed the neighborhood through work and play.

Temporary occupation of streets and parks through performance, combined with the reclamation of buildings and green spaces through reconstruction and ecological stewardship, constituted the ethos of this grassroots Puerto Rican movement (Figure 3.4). Harnessing the skills and energy of many engaged participants, the Loisaida movement was rooted in claiming a variety of urban sites through embodied actions. These sites, acquired through negotiation with multiple constituencies—citizens, police, negligent landlords, and the city—were

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brought to life by ephemeral acts of performance and more permanent acts of construction and occupation. The reclamation and transformation of urban spaces was indicative of a broader neighborhood movement to piece together a fragmented cityscape by multiple big and small acts of public participation.

3.4

Loisaida: View at street level. Fourth Street block party, with Baile Boricua performing, 1979. Tenement at 309 East Fourth Street is in the background.

Photograph by Marlis Momber.

EDUCATION IN THE STREET (1967)

There is nothing more exciting to me now than the fact that within the community on these streets I find leaders emerging who don't just want to take the law into their own hands, who don't want to protest, but who, with a deep and intuitive earnestness and dawning awareness, want to make things work.

—Buckminster Fuller, CHARAS *The Improbable Domebuilders*

Man, these streets are a whole life experience. I'm now using techniques I learned when I was a gang leader. You know, it's a simple decision to make. You destroy things or you make them.

—Chino Garcia, CHARAS *The Improbable Domebuilders*

In 1968 the renegade architect/environmental provocateur Buckminster Fuller stopped briefly on his travels around Spaceship Earth to lecture a youthful audience in a small building on the corner of

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Tompkins Square Park in the heart of the Lower East Side. In his talk, Fuller encouraged his audience to join a global grassroots movement to eliminate poverty and design a sustainable future. His call to join in a new world order—one that existed outside the official political system—fired the imagination of a group of young men whose own experiences of poverty and the criminal justice system made them mistrustful of the government. These young men were members of the Real Great Society (RGS), a newly formed Puerto Rican youth collective based in the barrios of the Lower East Side and East Harlem.

The Real Great Society, named audaciously in response to President Johnson's Great Society, sought to achieve bottom-up self-sufficiency within the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of New York City.¹¹ Introduced to community organization through their involvement in street gangs, the leaders of this new constellation were eager to use their leadership skills more productively to help create a robust future for their community. The news media celebrated the mythical aspect of this transformation of gang members into agents of positive neighborhood change.¹² The charismatic young leaders of the Real Great Society were invited to talk to young people in poor urban neighborhoods around the country and to educate their more well-to-do counterparts on college campuses about their initiatives in the inner-city neighborhoods of New York. With a growing concern about urban crime, there was a pressing interest by both private foundations and government agencies to fund programs targeting juvenile delinquency in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The Real Great Society, while fundamentally opposed to the paternalism embedded in such charity, leveraged their visibility to apply for grants, and organize for self-sufficiency in New York City.

In 1967 a seed grant from the Astor Foundation allowed the Real Great Society to set up small, locally controlled businesses: a leather goods store, a day care center, and a nightclub.¹³ A second grant of twenty-five thousand dollars from the same foundation allowed the group to begin one of its most enduring projects, the University of the Street, the place where Buckminster Fuller delivered his lecture. Begun in a rented storefront at the southwest corner of Tompkins Square Park, this University sought to remedy the shortcomings of the official education system by providing a free supplemental education with the help of a volunteer teaching staff.

Because of the positive press coverage and its location in the Lower East Side, the University of the Street attracted not only local low-income residents from the neighborhood but also a number of curious middle-class white students from the outside.¹⁴ The student body, at any given time, generated the course list, which ranged from the

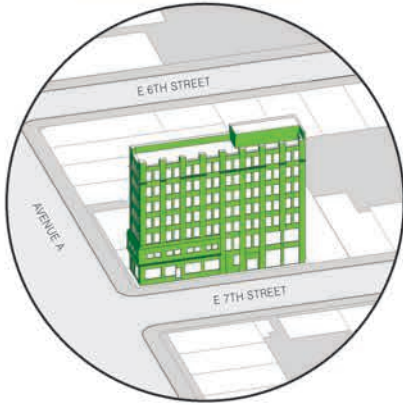
remedial to the intellectual. The curriculum included classes in English, Spanish, math, karate, music, dance, and philosophy. It also included job training courses in areas such as television and radio repair. This curriculum, which combined the liberal arts with much needed job training courses, was partly driven by its two primary sources of funding: private foundations and the federal government. The federal government was more interested in the job training, whereas the private institutions were more interested in the arts and cultural programming.

In 1968, after four years of building networks both inside and outside the neighborhood, the Real Great Society got its first substantial federal grant of \$258,447.¹⁵ The money enabled the university to expand its operations and lease five floors within the same building on East Seventh Street with the intention of establishing a similar program in East Harlem. The grant brought with it both possibilities and new responsibilities that ultimately strained the Real Great Society's informal working structure. The original group spilt up, but the members continued to expand their community-focused work along different fronts.¹⁶ The East Harlem branch of the Real Great Society went on to create an Urban Planning Studio that began as a collaboration with Columbia University but went on to become a one-of-a-kind community-controlled planning organization.¹⁷ The University of the Street continued to operate independently, eventually buying the building and becoming a privately funded nonprofit institute.

DOMES IN VACANT LOTS (1968–1972)

Lower East Side-based Real Great Society members Chino Garcia and Angelo Gonzalez enlarged their community agendas, forming a new collective in 1968 with four other people whom they had met and connected with while on an Outward Bound trip to Mexico. Upon their return to the city, they named the new collective CHARAS, an acronym based on the first names of the founding members—Chino, Humberto, Angelo, Roy, Anthony, and Sal (Figure 3.5). Over the next decade, this six-person group quickly expanded into a fluctuating collective of more than two hundred participants that included Puerto Ricans from the island and locals who wanted to implement change and rebuild an inclusive city through self-organization. Some of the group's founders used the philosophy of self-reliance under extreme conditions, cultivated in Outward Bound's outdoor leadership training program, to understand and address urban abandonment on the Lower East Side.¹⁸

UNIVERSITY OF THE STREET



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CHINO GARCIA
HUMBERTO CRESPO
ANGELO GONZALEZ, JR.
ROY BATTISTE
ANTHONY FIGUEROA
SAL BECKER
CHARAS



CHINO GARCIA



ANGELO GONZALEZ, JR.



ARMANDO PEREZ



FRED GOOD



ROBERTO NAZARIO



PAPO GIORDANI

3.5

Real Great Society (RGS) members (lower row), as featured in *Life Magazine* article, 1967 and later, CHARAS founding members (upper row), as featured in *CHARAS: The Improbable Dome Builders*, 1973. Above, the University of the Street, an alternative educational institution founded by the Real Great Society on Avenue A in Loisaída.

Illustration of Nandini Bagchee.

In its early period, CHARAS focused on educating the community while addressing the lack of quality housing, health care, and employment opportunities in the neighborhood. In 1970 they reestablished contact with Buckminster Fuller in an effort to tackle the prescient question of housing in their neighborhood. Fuller, age 75, and always on the lookout for fresh collaborations, responded with enthusiasm to this request. Together, they decided to build a prototype geodesic shelter as a first step toward addressing the affordable housing crisis in New York City.

The modular geodesic-dome house, originally designed by Fuller to address a postwar housing need in the United States, was adopted in the '60s by an unexpected constituency—a mainly white, middle-class, countercultural youth movement in rural settings.¹⁹ However, these build-it-yourself domes also appealed to a young welfare-weary Lower East Side audience that saw in its unique design a novel appeal—a low-cost, collectively built alternative to government-subsidized housing. In a landscape full of vacant lots and ill-functioning residential buildings, Fuller's dome residence seemed like a hopeful step forward. Providing an alternative to the prevailing rhetoric and financial support of the existing anti-poverty programs in the neighborhood, they desired to follow a different course of action. The domes required a certain level of involvement in direct problem-solving that appealed to the DIY sensibility of the CHARAS collective. For CHARAS and their growing youth corps, the urban dome project symbolized a way out of the deadlock between poverty and a dependence on welfare. Syeus Mottel's book, aptly titled, *CHARAS: The Improbable Dome Builders*, provides a vivid first-person account of the project. His interviews with the main participants, photographs, and observations provide a start-to-finish account this project.

Roy Battiste, the "R" in CHARAS, the most mathematically inclined of the founding members, took a leading role in the project. In 1970, he leased the third floor of a condemned, city-owned warehouse at 303 Cherry Street in the southern end of the Lower East Side and skillfully converted it into a workshop and living quarters for the working collective. The first of the geodesic structures was built to fit inside this open loft space with a triangulated wood frame skinned with canvas panels. This intervention in the loft demarcated space for different activities and provided privacy for the residents. The expansive live-work quarters were gradually filled with tools, models, drawings, and mock-ups. This active design-build studio generated interest among the children living nearby, and the teenagers recruited by CHARAS for this project became a part of the growing collective (Figure 3.6). Volunteers from neighborhood art programs, along with what Mottel



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3.6
Kids with wireframe dome model in
Cherry Street loft, 1972.
Photograph by Syeus Mottel. Courtesy of
Matthew Mottel.

described as “uptown people and dome freaks,” were drawn to this makeshift dome laboratory.²⁰ Within this soon-to-be-demolished warehouse, serious learning formed the basis for a “continuous low-ebb party.”²¹

Fuller’s assistant, the architectural student Michael Ben-Eli, intermittently visited New York from London and provided instruction on geodesic science to the collective. In consultation with Ben-Eli, CHARAS members planned a version of the dome constructed with bent cardboard triangles, reinforced with metal mesh, and plastered with ferro-cement. This structure was a prototype designed to provide temporary housing for a family of four. With Fuller’s support and growing interest around the work, CHARAS secured a New York Foundation for the Arts grant to help fund the actual installation.²² By late fall of 1972, the collective installed two dome structures in a vacant lot at Jefferson and South Street, with the permission of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Assembly took much longer than anticipated, as heavy rains, blackouts, and flailing morale took its toll on the volunteers that had rallied behind the project. The first of the domes met a tragic end at the hands of the fire department when, ironically, a homeless man seeking shelter lit a fire inside the structure. The second one, completed in January of 1973, enjoyed some publicity and prompted a visit by Fuller on his way to a lecture at Carnegie Hall.²³ This test dome enjoyed a brief sojourn in the shadow of the LaGuardia and Rutgers public housing



developments, close to the piers of the Manhattan Bridge, before being dismantled by the city to make way for a housing development (Figure 3.7).²⁴

Although the prefab dome urban housing proved untenable in New York City, CHARAS's dome-building activities and the group's outreach to neighborhood youth continued to expand over the next two decades. The Cherry Street loft, a transitional communal space, provided a blueprint for the live-work, collectively run spaces that became central to CHARAS's organizational structure. They branched out from the Lower East Side to the other barrios of New York, forming networks and creating participatory projects focused on youth education.²⁵ The domes, manufactured on rooftops, in lofts, and in storefronts, appeared regularly in New York's public spaces. These skeletal triangulated structures, clad with different materials, were deployed in street festivals as band shelters, in community gardens as greenhouses, and on rooftops as temporary shelters.

A tubular frame structure assembled inside a communal loft space on Avenue B appears in German photographer and CHARAS

3.7
CHARAS dome cardboard substructure in vacant lot on South and Jefferson Streets, with Manhattan Bridge in the background, 1972.
Photograph by Syeus Mottel. Courtesy of Matthew Mottel.

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collaborator Marlis Momber's 1978 German documentary "Viva Loisaida."²⁶ This loft, rented from a private owner, was one of many communal quarters and could sleep and support up to twenty-five people.²⁷ The beds were arranged dormitory style with drop-down curtains for privacy. At one end of the loft, along the street-facing side, was the CHARAS meeting and work area, demarcated with the tubular dome frame. In the '70s CHARAS began producing these domes through their port-a-dome initiative. For the next twenty years, these prefab domes cropped up in nuclear and housing protests within the city and were also adapted as more permanent enclosures further afield. The dome symbolized both the self-sufficiency of CHARAS and the group's autonomous participation in a larger global-environmental movement. This outward projection and promotion of a grassroots movement were important steps in educating and getting the support from a wider external audience while maintaining a strong foothold within the geographically inscribed territory of Loisaida.

YOUNG LORDS AND THE LOISAIDA MOVEMENT

In their quest for autonomy, RGS and CHARAS were part of a larger civil rights movement unfolding within a politicized Puerto Rican community in the United States. In Chicago the Young Lords, a radical Puerto Rican activist party, emerged in response to the race-based displacement and discrimination faced by their community. Their efforts and narratives galvanized other Latinos and Puerto Ricans in cities across the United States. In the summer of 1969 the New York City chapter of the Young Lords announced its formation in a ceremonious gathering in Tompkins Square Park. The group set up an office in the Christodora House, a vacant, city-owned building originally built as a settlement house on the eastern edge of the park. Although a larger proportion of the Puerto Rican youth population was located in East Harlem, the decision to stage the formation of the New York City chapter of the Young Lords on the Lower East Side was geopolitical. Tompkins Square Park was the historic locus of many radical political movements. The Young Lords' symbolic claiming of this park, with its long history as a locus of radical dissent, was strategic. It was a public expression of their interest in leading a citywide movement toward progressive reform.²⁸ The day after the chapter's formation, the members of this group mounted the "garbage offensive," demanding better sanitation services from the city by piling mounds of uncollected garbage in the middle of Third Avenue in East Harlem and setting fire to it.²⁹ This act of civil disobedience in the streets was followed by a well-publicized occupation of a church, where the Young Lords created a breakfast program, a clothing drive, a day care center,

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and cultural programs to demonstrate the potential of a marginalized community in action. Their performative acts of claiming space, backed up by providing social services, challenged the establishment and fueled the imagination of a younger generation of Puerto Ricans.³⁰ The control and repurposing of urban space fueled the resistance. In their demand for space and their right to self-determination, the Young Lords frequently evoked a longer history of spatial struggle against Spanish colonialism and American corporate interests in Puerto Rico.³¹ The fifth point of a thirteen-point program publicized by the Young Lords through *Palante*, their bilingual newspaper called for taking “Community Control Over Our Institutions and Land.”³² By occupying and repurposing institutionalized spaces, such as churches, streets, and hospitals, the Young Lords brought attention to issues involving housing, sanitation, health care, and education.

These visible public actions were a call to arms to the traditionally marginalized Puerto Ricans across the city. Within the Lower East Side Puerto Rican community, which was closely linked to the East Harlem organizers, these takeovers of space resonated positively. Their own practices of spatial appropriation were less militant and more pacifist. As RGS/CHARAS founding member Chino Garcia put it, “If the Young Lords’ symbol was the rifle, ours was the hammer.”³³ The Lower East Side’s greater racial and ethnic diversity and the long history of social reform made the contours of the Puerto Rican organizing in Loisaida different from that in East Harlem. While asserting the primacy of the Puerto Rican experience in New York, the broader Loisaida movement was closely engaged with other Latinos, as well as African Americans and white activists who lived and worked in the neighborhood. The civil rights and anti-war movements discussed previously in this book had created an enclave of radical political resistance in Greenwich Village in the ’60s. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1974, many of the activists and artists, in search of affordable living quarters and attracted to the social dynamics of the neighborhood, began migrating east to the Lower East Side. The returning Vietnam War veterans, as well as the new generation of draft resisters, found common cause with the grassroots factions organizing around “right to city” causes.

In June 1978 *WIN* magazine, which typically covered the topics of war, peace, and nonviolent action, dedicated an entire issue to Loisaida (Figure 3.8). In the editorial, the magazine noted that “the people of Loisaida have risked voicing their lives to an unknown audience, stepping beyond the boundaries of their neighborhood to speak to their sisters and brothers in the nonviolent left.”³⁴ The articles in this issue of *WIN* described the concerns and accomplishments of the people of

December 20, 1979

75¢

win

PEACE & FREEDOM THROUGH NONVIOLENT ACTION

SPECIAL ISSUE



LOISAIDA
Portrait of a Community

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Loisaida, in the areas of housing, environmental initiatives, poetry, music, and performance. The type of publicity helped connect people working on social justice in Loisaida with a larger network of politicized organizers. This, in turn, catapulted a relatively local group of organizers into a broadly recognized social movement.

3.8

Loisaida Movement featured within, and on the cover of the war resisters *WIN* magazine, December 20, 1989.

NO HEAT, NO RENT: ADOPTING BUILDINGS (1970–1975)

Community organizing in 1970s New York City often centered on the lack of jobs and the scarcity of quality affordable housing. In a vicious cycle of cause and effect, the ongoing exodus of the middle class to the suburbs and the perception of the city as a dangerous place was a major factor in the disinvestment of private real estate.³⁵ Property owners, a historically powerful constituency in the city's economic landscape, sought ways to make good on their troubled investments in a flailing economy. In low-income neighborhoods, many landlords stopped paying taxes and maintaining their properties. As the cost of fuel rose, property owners sought to recoup their losses and drive out rent-regulated tenants by cutting off heat, electricity, and water.³⁶ Forced evictions and warehousing—a strategy of keeping buildings vacant for extended periods of time, left people without homes while buildings sat abandoned and empty. Neglected properties were vandalized and sometimes deliberately set on fire by building owners in a last-ditch effort to collect insurance. Once vibrant and densely populated residential neighborhoods all over the city were abandoned and, in some instances, reduced to rubble by fires and preemptive demolitions.

In response to this escalating housing crisis, tenants across the city galvanized support from faith-based organizations, legal service agencies, and housing advocacy groups. “No Heat, No Rent” banners appeared on buildings as renters fed up with substandard living conditions took matters into their own hands and declared rent strikes.³⁷ Some advocates and tenants went beyond the traditional rent strike, taking collective control over the management of their buildings. In 1970 a radical Catholic clergyman, Monsignor Robert Fox, organized a group of residents in East Harlem and rehabilitated two fire-damaged buildings on East 102nd Street, facilitating their conversion into cooperatively owned apartments.³⁸ This process, dubbed sweat equity, allowed future residents of the co-ops to contribute construction labor as a form of down payment toward a future apartment.

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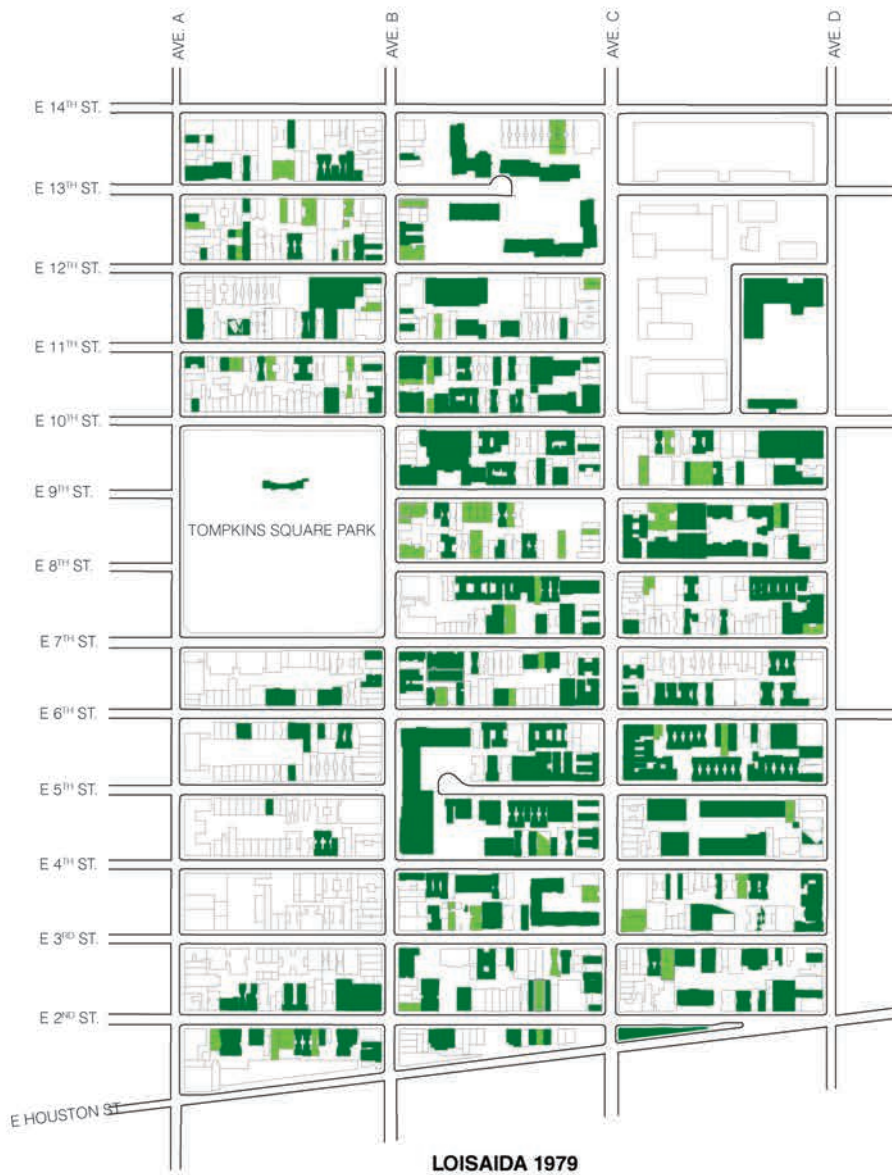
As tenants organized rent strikes and took over the management of their buildings in many low-income neighborhoods, the city was on the brink of bankruptcy. To press delinquent property owners into paying their back taxes, the city took possession of many of these “in rem” properties through tax foreclosure with the intention of selling them at public auctions. Paradoxically, this pressure hastened the process of abandonment as owners simply walked away from their properties, leaving tens and thousands of run-down buildings filled with unhappy tenants in the hands of the city. The Housing and Development Administration (HDA),³⁹ an agency tasked with property development and management, saw in the sweat equity movement a reprieve in its role of unwilling landlord and property manager. By 1974 urban homesteading, as this process came to be known, was recognized by the federal government as a legitimate way to rehabilitate housing in several cities across the country facing similar housing crises.⁴⁰ The actual implementation of this seemingly simple idea—putting apartments back into the hands of the users—was a long and complex process. It began with assembling construction crews, negotiating construction loans, fixing the buildings using the labor of people that were potentially unskilled, and then ensuring that buildings were up to code and habitable. The agencies’ goal went further to make sure that these buildings were financially and organizationally secure long-term and able to pay back their loans. The city and federal agencies looked to local housing advocacy groups to provide the infrastructure and community outreach to make these projects viable, and to provide the tenants with the technical assistance necessary to self-manage a building long-term. Once the homestead proved to be under a stable internal management structure, the apartments were transferred from the agency to the resident homesteaders as limited equity cooperatives.⁴¹

The housing advocacy group Interfaith Adopt-a-Building (AAB) introduced at the start of this chapter, was one of the many tenants’ rights and housing advocacy groups operating in New York City in the early ’70s.⁴² They began by organizing rent strikes in East Harlem and relocated their offices to the Lower East Side in 1974—to an area that was most drastically affected by the disinvestment. This area, bounded by Fourteenth Street in the north, Houston Street in the south, Avenue D in the east, and Avenue A in the west, lost 40 percent of its population between 1970 and 1980 (Figure 3.9). Many residents left the area voluntarily or were forced out because of the worsening conditions of the neighborhood during this time period. Of those remaining, census data shows that a majority were of “Puerto Rican birth or parentage.” The increase in the ratio of Puerto Ricans in this area was not a result of new influx but rather indicative of the overall departure

of all but the poorest residents.⁴³ One out of every three buildings in this blighted territory, renamed “Loisaida” by the Puerto Rican poets/activists, was city-owned and imperiled with demolition.

This high rate of disinvestment, vacancy, and public ownership gave AAB the opportunity to negotiate the outcome of these properties on behalf of the tenants, as well as those dislocated and homeless. The group maintained an inventory of all properties within the thirty blocks of Loisaida and used this data to plan for a more comprehensive development while providing aid to one building at a time. AAB put up signs around the neighborhood, offering help to tenants seeking to take control of buildings in various states of abandonment and decline. In the early years a mainly volunteer group of coordinators divided up the blocks among themselves and approached residents of their assigned blocks. The coordinators kept track of all the tenement buildings and helped residents become aware of their rights. They facilitated the formation of block associations, offered support to groups seeking to manage their buildings collectively, and were actively engaged in keeping up to date within this specific geography of Loisaida.⁴⁴

AAB’s work, however, did not stop at addressing housing needs. They frequently collaborated with other community organizations such as CHARAS and aspired to bring a more holistic vision of a neighborhood-wide development. In a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, AAB described its mandate as looking at all scales of life in Loisaida—beginning at the level of the city and moving down to the scale of the block and the building.⁴⁵ The work of AAB intersected with that of several other locally based arts, education, and community outreach organizations, and its success depended on keeping everyday concerns of the residents connected to broader planning and property management goals. To this end, AAB brought together concerned citizens and organizers from community-based groups at “town meetings” to exchange information and ideas about housing and plan events designed to raise the morale of an economically depressed community. These town meetings had a double purpose: first, to help unify different groups within the neighborhood who were working toward a common goal, and second, to encourage residents to express their views within an open public forum. The meetings were conducted in English and Spanish, and “emceed” by Bimbo Rivas, who punctuated serious discussions of jobs and housing with spontaneous bursts of poetry.⁴⁶ Music, performance, and celebrations were a necessary part of this forum intended to solve problems with creative ingenuity.



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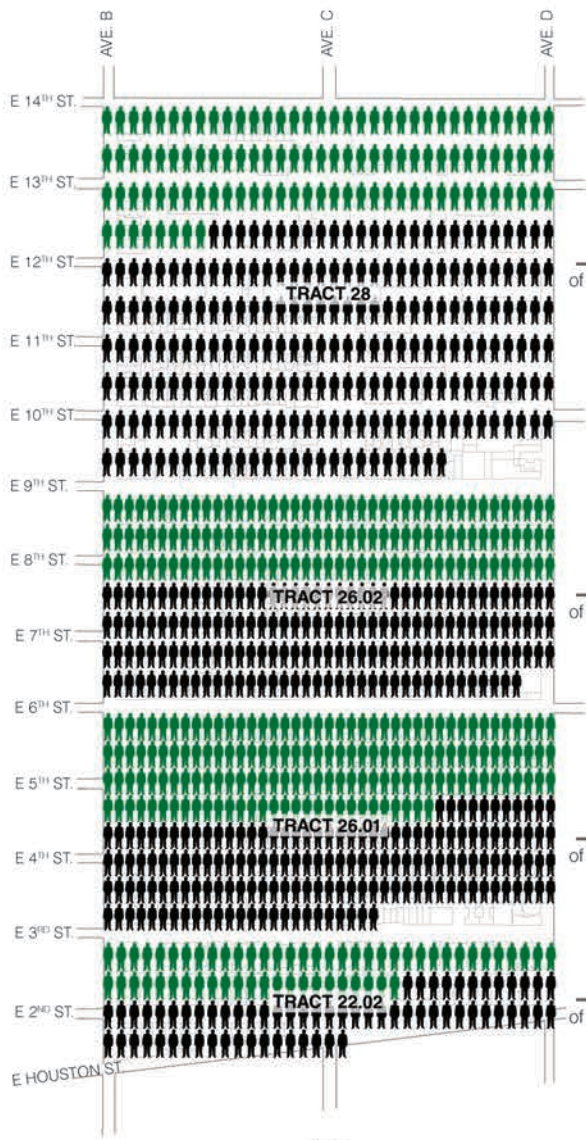


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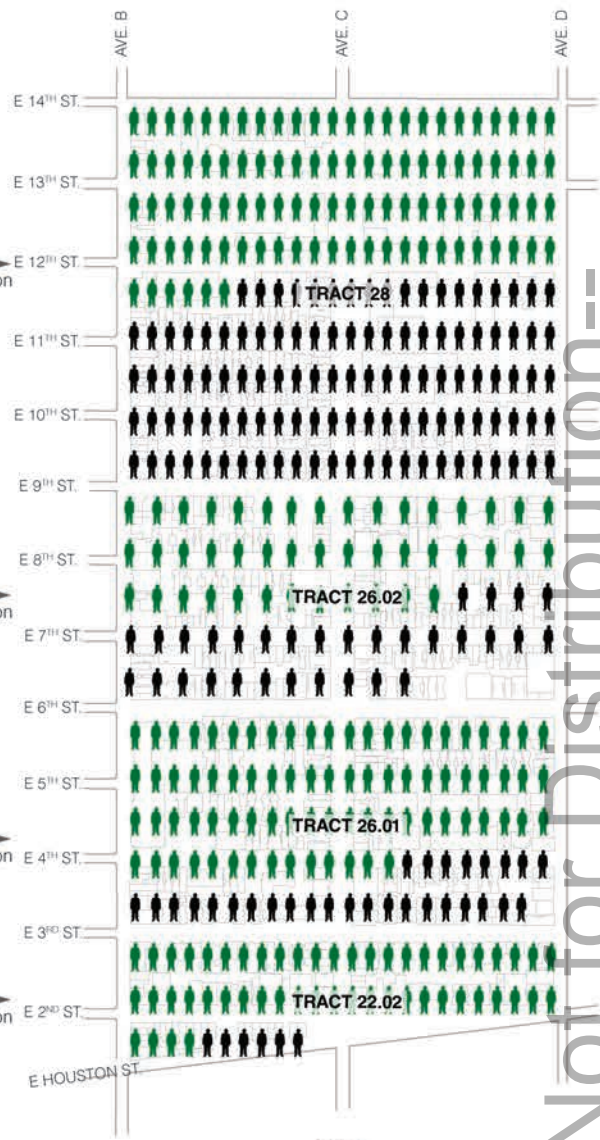
Visualization of city-owned property in 1979 with the blocks of “Loisaida” mapped against corresponding demographic data of that same area. Drawing shows the de-population of the blocks between 1970 and 1980. The green figures denote Puerto Rican residents and the black figures indicate non--Puerto Rican residents.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

Drawings based on U.S. Census Data as well as maps compiled by Interfaith Adopt-A-Building in HUD report, “Loisaida: Strategies for Neighborhood Revitalization and Self-Determination,” New York. December 18, 1979.



1970



1980

 25 People of Puerto Rican Descent
 25 People of Non-Puerto Rican Descent

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3.10
"Loisaida Townhouse" at the corner
of Avenue C and East Fourth Street,
1980.

Photograph by Marlis Momber.

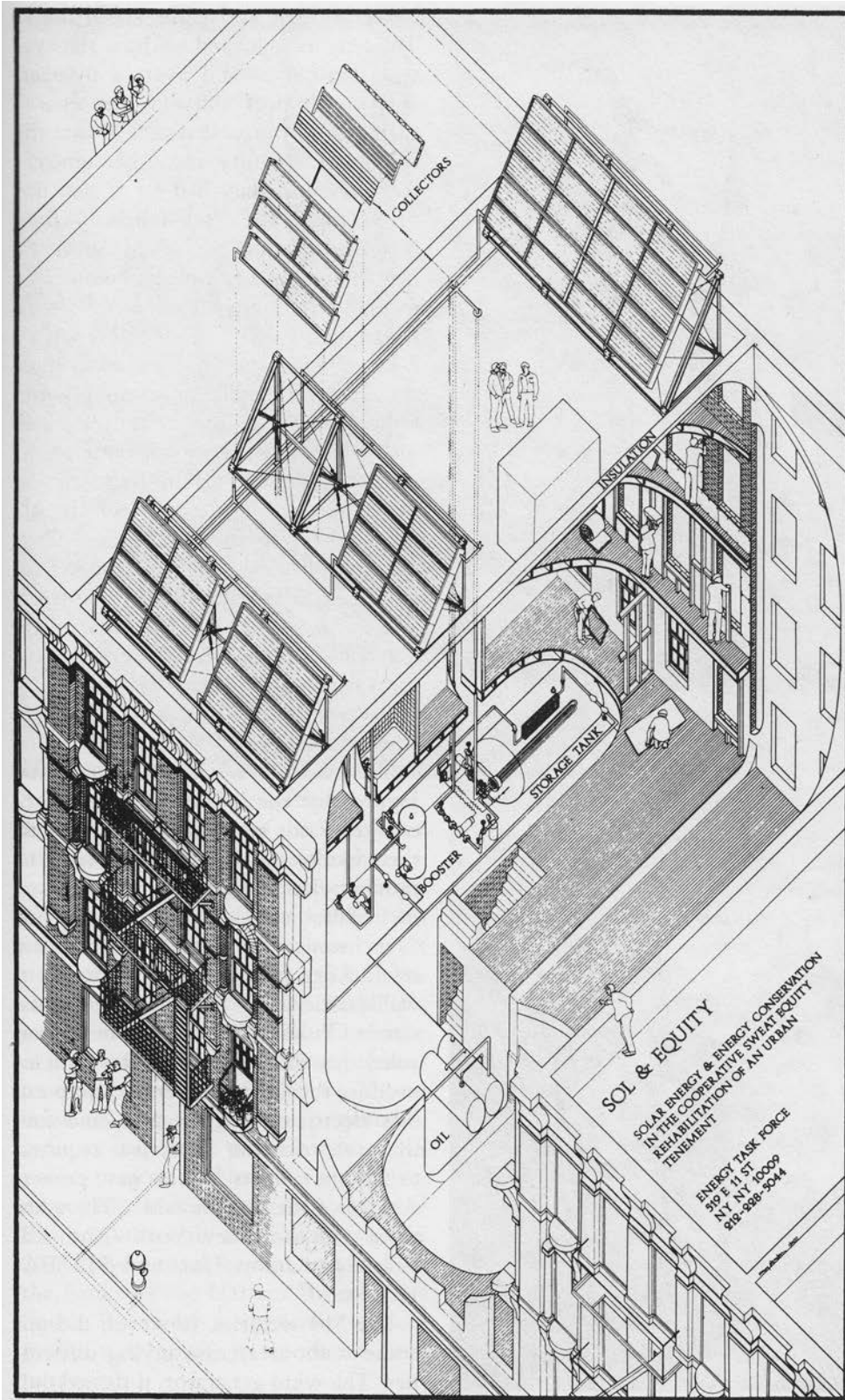
The well-attended sessions were first convened in a building on the corner of Avenue C and Fourth Street, in a building that came to be known as the "Loisaida Townhouse" (Figure 3.10). This structure, a former yeshiva dormitory,⁴⁷ offered the right mix of big and small rooms for use as an ad hoc community center. The first floor was used for meetings, gatherings, and performances. A larger vestry on the second floor was converted into an open training gym with what was described as an "Olympic size boxing ring."⁴⁸ El Teatro Ambulante, a traveling performance troupe founded by Bimbo Rivas and his mentor, the renowned poet Jorge Brandon, rehearsed in the building, preparing for public performances on the streets of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Nicknamed "El Coco que Habla" (the Talking Coconut), Brandon was a respected figure in the Loisaida community. Having recited poetry in the streets and squares of New York City since the '40s, he brought the rich oral traditions of Puerto Rican spoken word, infused with political activism, to Loisaida. Performances by El Teatro Ambulante explored the theme of territorial

conflicts in Puerto Rico as well as the more contemporary struggle for survival in Loisaida. The narrative of dispossession articulated through these ambulatory performances acquired weight through the adopting of buildings in Loisaida.

NO HEAT, NO RENT: ALTERNATIVE TECHNOLOGY (1974–1978)

In 1974, AAB sponsored its first successful urban homesteading project at 519 East Eleventh Street. This badly damaged building, slated for demolition by the city was, instead, rehabilitated through sweat equity. In order to fund the renovation, AAB obtained financing through a municipal loan program and brokered a deal with the city's Department of Real Estate.⁴⁹ They advertised the project by word of mouth and, working in collaboration with CHARAS, quickly gathered a crew interested in the work. If AAB was involved with the legal and technical aspects of homesteading, CHARAS, operating out of their communal loft quarters on Avenue B, was the force that brought social cohesion. The critical mass of people needed for the implementation of the sweat equity projects was gathered from their flexible network of associates and DIY ethic. CHARAS member Luz Rodriguez, a second-generation Puerto Rican and a native Loisaidan, joined the homesteading effort at 519 East Eleventh Street as a "sweater" at the age of seventeen.⁵⁰ A year later she had an apartment of her own in the building and was the youngest equity owner within the building. For Rodriguez and other members of her generation, projects such as these provided the physical and conceptual challenge of doing something outside the framework of normative social expectations.

Besides the CHARAS contingent, the participants of the Eleventh Street homesteading project included a heterogeneous group of locals with little or no construction experience as well as an outside group. Brent Sharman, a volunteer coordinator for AAB visiting the site in its early phase recalls a daunting, empty shell of a five-story brick tenement with a pile of rubble at the bottom.⁵¹ Despite these odds, those deployed in the physical reconstruction secured ownership of eleven apartments within the building in a short period of two years. For AAB, the realization of this project was a watershed moment. It allowed them to expand the scope of the organization's work from tenant organizing to workforce development for the repair and renovation of vacant buildings. In the aftermath of this project, AAB qualified for a substantial federal grant that allowed them to expand their operation and create an infrastructure for job training in construction and building management.⁵²



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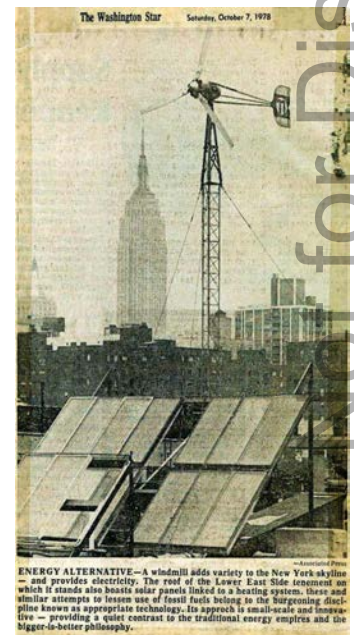
The model homesteading project at 519 East Eleventh Street inspired two other homesteads and a wave of civic improvements on the same block. Residents cleaned out vacant lots and garden enthusiasts planted a fruit and vegetable garden. El Sol Brillante, created on two adjoining city-owned lots, made use of discarded building materials from the renovation of the homesteads to create raised beds, planters, and benches. A multigenerational and multiethnic endeavor, the garden of the sun represented an early example of organic farming in the city and was among the first properties to become a part of a larger land trust in 1980.⁵³ This flurry of activity on a block best known for the sale of auto parts from stolen cars was collectively known as the “Movement on Eleventh Street.”

The publicity garnered by this effort⁵⁴ attracted the attention of a group of sympathetic young architects and planners. This contingent, seeking to implement small-scale alternative energy-generation technologies into new models of affordable housing, found its way to Loisaída. The ever ambitious Loisaída community welcomed the new “Energy Task Force” as it set about making the building on East Eleventh Street more energy efficient (Figure 3.11). They began by adding improved insulation in the exposed surfaces of the building and then went on to install solar collectors on the roof as a way to reduce future operating costs. This group published its work in a manual entitled “No Heat, No Rent,” turning a slogan for a rent strike into a do-it-yourself, long-term, energy-conservation goal.⁵⁵ A year later the same group, in collaboration with the homesteaders, upped the ante by installing a wind turbine on the building’s roof to generate electricity. The turbine’s dramatic forty-foot-high presence in the New York City skyline created a media sensation.⁵⁶ The *Washington Star* featured a photograph of the turbine with solar collectors in the foreground and the Empire State Building in the background. The write-up described the approach as “small-scale and innovative—providing a quiet contrast to the traditional energy empires and the bigger-is-better philosophy” (Figure 3.12).⁵⁷

MIRACLES IN LOISAIDA (1978–1982)

The amount of energy generated by the turbine was not significant, but the symbolic impact of this “windmill” competing in a New York City skyline with the Empire State Building spire to the west, and the Con Edison chimney stacks to the east, provided a significant boost to what sociologist Daniel Chodorkoff described as the Alternative Technology (AT) movement in Loisaída.⁵⁸ He documented and studied both the social and the environmental aspects of this movement in Loisaída

3.11
Drawing of 519 East Eleventh Street showing solar collectors on the roof and energy generation cutaway section of the tenement building. Image from Energy Task Force, *Windmill Power for City People: A Documentation of the First Urban Wind Energy System*, New York City, 1977.



3.12
Windmill write-up in the *Washington Star*, Saturday, October 7, 1978.

in his PhD thesis, *Un Milagro: Alternative Technology and Grassroots Efforts for Neighborhood Reconstruction on New York's Lower East Side*. In 1980 this movement aspired to explore the use of renewable energy as a means to achieve greater self-sufficiency. Recycling, gardening, and seeking alternatives to energy preoccupied CHARAS as well as other neighborhood youth groups such as C.U.A.N.D.O. One third of Chodorkoff's dissertation focuses on CHARAS and views their prioritization of a holistic social alternative to economy, culture, housing, and energy as the true goal of the AT movement. He describes CHARAS's use of simple technologies to apply environmentally sound practices as not an end in itself but rather a transformation of society inside out. The combination of homesteading, gardening, and forming consensus through local town hall meetings in Loisaida came close to what social theorist Murray Bookchin advocated as a way to create a "Libertarian Municipal society."⁵⁹ In this model of governance, small urban self-governed assemblies with specific social and ecological goals form the basis of a democratic confederation. The professionals and homesteaders involved with the Energy Task Force and some of the organic gardening advocates had met as students at a summer program at the Institute of Social Ecology, which was run by Bookchin and Chodorkoff in rural Vermont.⁶⁰ Bookchin was a product of an older, more radical anarchist tradition with roots in the Lower East Side. He reconnected with this geography through his young students and Chodorkoff, who found among the camaraderie of groups such as CHARAS the lived reality of Bookchin's socioecological utopia.⁶¹

In the summer of 1980, ten years into its port-a-dome enterprise, CHARAS was invited by the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont to build a year-round aquaculture dome.⁶² The communitarian vision of CHARAS, a decade after its foundation, continued to challenge the status quo on many levels and redefined the Nuyorican (New York-Puerto Rican) identity. Through their creative endeavors, they sought to dismantle not only the stereotype of the welfare-dependent Puerto Rican but also the stagnant alternative of the assimilated middle-class Puerto Rican moving out of Loisaida into what the poet Miguel Algarin refers to as the "dark void of the American dream."⁶³ In 1972 Algarin began informal poetry jams in his living room to give voice to the poets, playwrights, and musicians experimenting with language and the experience of life in New York City as Puerto Ricans. The Nuyorican Poets Café grew out of this soiree and, by 1980, established itself in a tenement building on East Third Street. This building and the many well-known poets that emerged from the institution brought visibility to the movement. In his introduction to *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*, Algarin captures the spirit embodied in the efforts of CHARAS and other community-based

initiatives during this time: “The next day the Renegades continue their work, and the Dynamites initiate their construction. The work at first is slow and there is no existing language to express the feelings and work to be done. Language and action are simultaneous realities. Actions create the need for verbal expression.”⁶⁴ The synchronicity of word and action represented by the theatrical and logistical interventions in Loisaida was about creating a culture of resistance, experiment, and change.

CHARAS, at the forefront of many of these actions, remained relatively flexible in terms of defining a specific mission. Chino Garcia described their role at the time as a catalyst in the neighborhood.⁶⁵ Within Loisaida, they organized on a project-by-project basis and partnered with a variety of people and organizations to launch urban space-based initiatives that brought visibility to their causes. A core collective of six to eight full-time members worked with many different teams of volunteers on a variety of reconstruction projects.⁶⁶ They made decisions collectively and were committed to the idea that youth empowerment and self-knowledge rooted in culture, ecology, and education were the key to breaking the cycle of poverty, violence, and demoralization. They gathered a large following of young volunteers from New York and Puerto Rico who lived communally and provided

3.13
Grupo Cemi performs in La Plaza Cultural. The audience in the background is seated in the open amphitheater, 1980.
Photograph by Marlis Momber.



the support to get projects off the ground.⁶⁷ They used this power base to consolidate public space, and they established three important alternative institutions in the blocks between Avenue C and Tompkins Square Park: La Plaza Cultural, a large open-air assembly space; CHARAS Recycling Center; and El Bohio Community Center.

The first of these, La Plaza Cultural, was an open gathering space fashioned from a ragged assortment of city-owned lots bordering the southwest corner of Avenue C and East Ninth Street. In 1978 the lots were filled with trash, construction debris, and the carcasses of old cars. CHARAS installed a chain-link fence around the perimeter of the fifty thousand-square-foot site to protect it and cleaned up the property using the energetic labor of its collective members. Liz Christy, the founder of the Green Guerillas, donated plants for the plaza. Other members of the organization set up a rain harvesting and composting facility within this park. However, La Plaza Cultural, named and planned in the grand tradition of public squares in Latin American cities, was far more than a garden. It was a space for everyday encounters and a forum for public events. To this end, volunteers piled up a large mound of dirt at its center and fashioned an amphitheater out of wooden railroad ties. The program for the space was fluid. In the summer, town meetings; informal gatherings of musicians; and celebrations with theater, poetry, and dance transformed this patchwork of vacant lots into a beloved and valued community resource. The revival of folkloric performances such as the *bomba* and *plena* from Puerto Rican sugar plantations transposed into this Loisaïdan context made relevant the radical performance-based resistance of a distant place and time (Figure 3.13).⁶⁸ With its openness to street and avenue, La Plaza Cultural provided a perfect place at which political resistance and social life converged.

Environmental stewardship of the streets around the Plaza was the natural next step for CHARAS. In 1978 a grant from the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) allowed the group to convert a vacant five thousand-square-foot former oil depot into a community-run recycling center. The vast amount of trash littering the neighborhood became the instigation for this venture. A “cash for trash” incentive publicized by posters throughout the neighborhood brought mounds of recyclable glass, paper, and aluminum into the facility (Figure 3.14).⁶⁹ This for-profit venture created employment for the youth and turned waste into an asset. The conversion of the polluted single-story garage structure (also filled with garbage) into a place of environmental stewardship was indicative of the longer-term goals of a community planning for a sustainable future.



3.14

Top: Entry detail of the recycling center from *Quality of Life in Loisaida*, (1979). The crew posing in front of the door are CHARAS members. The headline from the newspaper reads "Don't waste it."

Bottom: La Plaza Cultural in foreground with CHARAS recycling center to left in the middle ground, 1980.

Top photograph by Marlis Momber. Bottom photograph by Josie Rolon, published in the *Quality of Life in Loisaida*, (1979).

In March 1979 the *Quality of Life in Loisaida/Calidad de Vida en Loisaida*, a free bilingual quarterly, documented the successful ventures and positive changes taking place within the neighborhood and warned residents about the imminent threats to these gains. One article described the annual Three Kings Day parade in Loisaida, an event in which a costumed procession of kings, angels, and camels moved through the blocks around Avenue C, giving “Miracle Awards” to properties that had been “saved” in the previous year. These included several sweat equity buildings, a community center, a music studio, the Nuyorican Poets Café, and CHARAS’s recycling center. The writer of the article characterized this last “miracle,” the recycling center, as “a place where not only our garbage but our spirit is recycled.”⁷⁰

COMMUNITY AT EL BOHIO (1978–1998)

The rehabilitation of PS 64 and its transformation into a community center was the most ambitious undertaking, one that completed the “campus” of properties claimed, rescued, and eventually managed by CHARAS. The grand five-story brick and terracotta structure, straddling the block between East Ninth and East Tenth Streets, between Avenues B and C, was designed in 1906 by the architect C.B.J. Snyder, Superintendent of School Buildings, as a state-of-the-art public school for the then populous immigrant community of the Lower East Side.⁷¹ Snyder’s innovative H-shaped plan integrated two raised outdoor courts at the north and south ends of the building, facing East Tenth and East Ninth Streets respectively. These generous terraces served multiple functions: They allowed light into the classrooms, provided a buffer from the street, and allowed outdoor space for recreation and events. A 350-seat auditorium tucked under the Tenth Street terrace with a separate entrance was included in the original design of the school. This public hall provided a venue for evening lectures, performances, and political rallies for three generations of residents from the time of its construction to its closure in the ’70s (Figure 3.15). In this manner, the school had always been an architecturally and socially significant community asset. Despite its deteriorated physical condition, the school—with its many classrooms and large public spaces—was well suited to become El Bohio Community Center.

CHARAS’s move into the prominent schoolhouse, introduced at the start of this chapter, came at a time when the Loisaida movement was at its apogee. AAB officially leased the building from the city to manage its expansive job training program, which was funded by a federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)



3.15
Auditorium at PS 64, 1910.
Photograph courtesy of the New York City
Municipal Archive.

grant.⁷² In 1978 this bootstrap organization, run for several years by a mainly volunteer staff, was able to hire a hundred employees consisting of program coordinators, planners, and paid trainees.⁷³ AAB capitalized on this trainee task force to initiate the repair and renovation of the fifty thousand–square–foot building. However, given the enormity of the task, the grudging support from the city, and the limited resources, they quickly realized that they would need the support of the larger Loisaida community. They invited CHARAS to share the building. Within a year, raising money from private and public sources and with the volunteer labor of friends and comrades, CHARAS and AAB managed to make the first two floors of the building reasonably habitable. The renovation was provisional, but CHARAS’s motto “Doing more with less”—attributed to the group’s mentor, Buckminster Fuller—kept the operation afloat and attracted tenants and programming to the building. The gym, the theater, the printing press, and the town meetings—activities first begun and housed in the Loisaida Townhouse—were gradually absorbed and expanded within the partially renovated community center.⁷⁴

AAB set up their offices on the second floor in the southeast wing of the H-shaped schoolhouse building. They used the many classrooms on this floor to conduct workshops and run job training programs for construction and building management. The CETA grant came with tremendous responsibilities, and AAB, which had been so effective in

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their grassroots role, struggled to keep pace with their newfound affluence. So, although it was AAB that initially negotiated the occupancy in PS 64, it was CHARAS that eventually took over the role of building manager and program facilitator for El Bohio Community Center. They arranged a couple of desks, a bulletin board, and some filing cabinets on the first floor, below AAB, toward the Ninth Street side of the building. From this vantage point, they kept an eye on the main entrance and kept track of the activities within the building. Securing the schoolhouse in a neighborhood still rife with drugs, crime, and destitution was a challenge all by itself. CHARAS renovated the classrooms one room at a time and invited their colleagues and collaborators from the art, educational, and environmental organizations to join them in populating the expansive interior.

In exchange for space, various professionals and nonprofits joined the enterprise offering instruction in art, dance, photography, and martial arts. Among the early operatives within the building were Seven Loaves Inc., a nonprofit arts coalition, and the magazine *Quality of Life in Loisaida*. Seven Loaves provided administrative support to smaller arts collectives, including Children Arts Workshop, Printshop, Fourth Street I, Cityarts, Los Hispanos, and the Teatro Ambulante.⁷⁵ Some of these same arts organizations, in turn, worked out of the building, generating a synergy of exchange between housing, culture, and the environment that had emerged in the neighborhood. The *Quality of Life in Loisaida*, headquartered right next to Seven Loaves on the second floor, continued to report and inform on the economic, social, and political dimensions of life in Loisaida

During the first few years, the cultural and educational programs promoted by CHARAS became the mainstay of El Bohio. Chino Garcia, in his role as chairperson of El Bohio board, recruited several different people and organizations to take charge of various aspects of the new community center (Figure 3.16). Describing the CHARAS approach to community organizing, Garcia explained in a recent interview, “If someone came to us and said they wanted to work on the project, we said, ‘Sure, here is your desk, there is the phone, get started!’” He credits this method as having led to the launch of several successful grassroots efforts in this building—among them, Picture the Homeless, an organization that sought to put a human face on city residents who had no place to live, and Recycle-a-Bicycle, an organization that taught kids to build their own bicycles from old parts.⁷⁶ This *laissez-faire* approach allowed programs located in the community center to evolve organically out of the interests and concerns of old and new residents. This process of expanding incrementally, in step with the gradual renovation of the building, contributed to El Bohio’s

open-ended and egalitarian character. With the influence of Seven Loaves—artists of color and alternative art practices were nourished and lent weight to the creative endeavor of forming an institution based on the holistic approach championed by CHARAS.

One of the principal projects that absorbed CHARAS in El Bohio was the renovation of the 350-seat auditorium in the basement. The many successful performances produced by CHARAS in the parks and around the neighborhood found a more permanent indoor venue in the basement of El Bohio. In 1981 the New Assembly Theater reopened with *Winos*, a play written by Bimbo Rivas about the problems of alcoholism and drugs within the community. Rivas, an alumnus of PS 64 and author of the poem *Loisaida*, was one of the leading figures of the activist theater movement that was a means to disseminate the message but also a creative expression of a besieged people in the survivalist landscape of Loisaida. The importance of performance as a tool to examine social issues led to the creation of other radical theater groups such as Divaldo Theater, Big Bucket Theater Company, Ninth Street Theater, and Carnival Knowledge. All of these groups used the building to rehearse, offer workshops, and stage regular performances.

In 1981 a group of experimental film enthusiasts began screening movies in the building that highlighted politically themed films focused on housing, social movements, and community development. They invited young but relatively unknown directors such as Spike Lee to screen their films and engage in a dialogue with the audience. They built a projection booth in the old school cafeteria on the first floor at the rear of the building, and Matt Seig, along with Doris Kornish—a recent arrival from West Virginia, coordinated a regular film series in this makeshift cinema.⁷⁷ Doris had her own desk in the main office, where she spent hours poring through newspapers, film criticism, and movie catalogs to create a unique film program built around themes that were pertinent to the center (Figure 3.17).⁷⁸ Classic films were paired with the work of local and lesser-known filmmakers from Latin America, Africa, and Asia to explore common themes of struggles against capitalism, war, and poverty. This well-attended program was advertised through attractively designed posters that CHARAS pasted around the neighborhood. *Films CHARAS* became a neighborhood institution and included conversations with filmmakers to encourage audience participation.

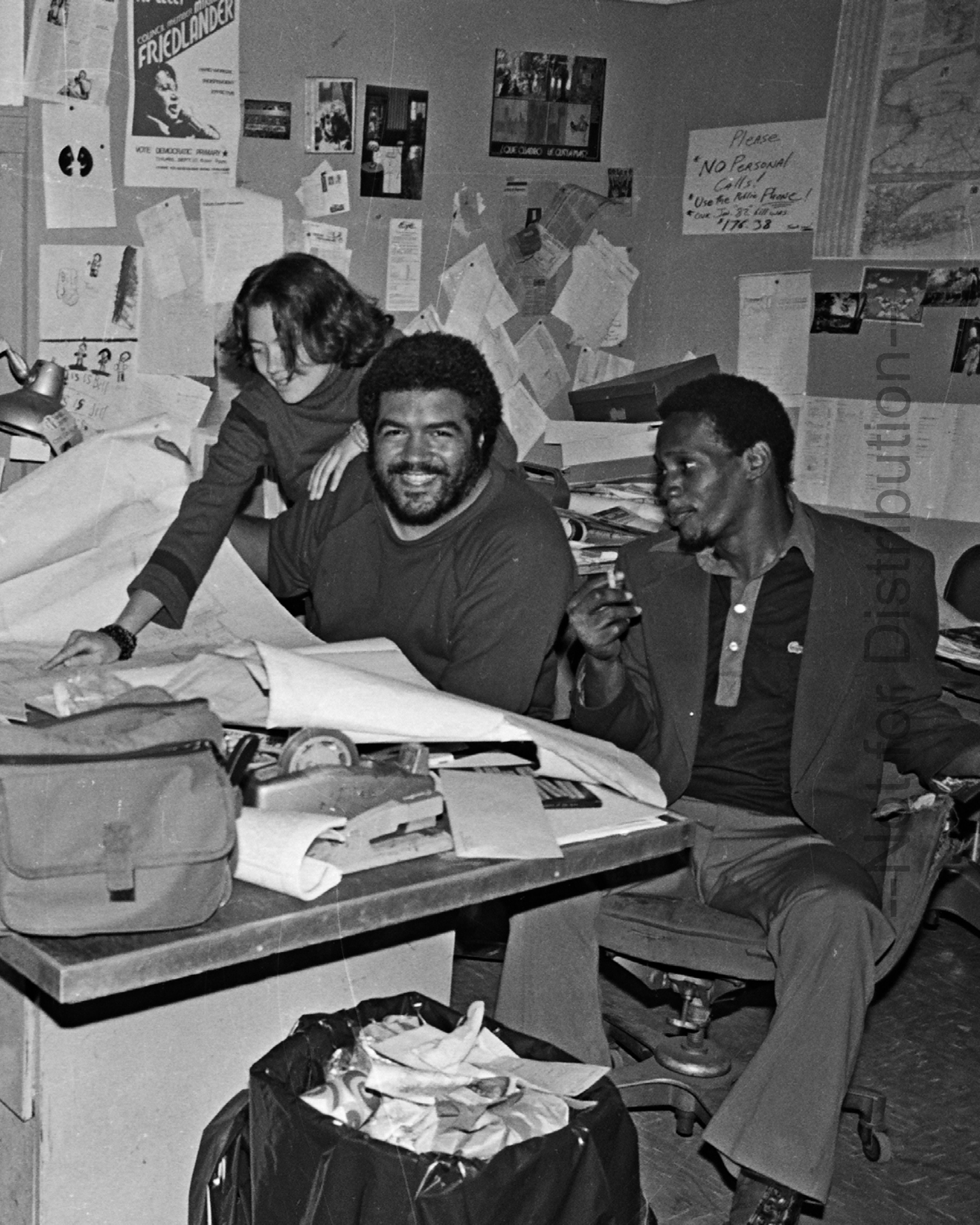
As artists moved into the neighborhood and new commercial and non-profit art spaces opened in the Lower East Side, El Bohio also became a venue for visual arts exhibitions. The walls of the building's main

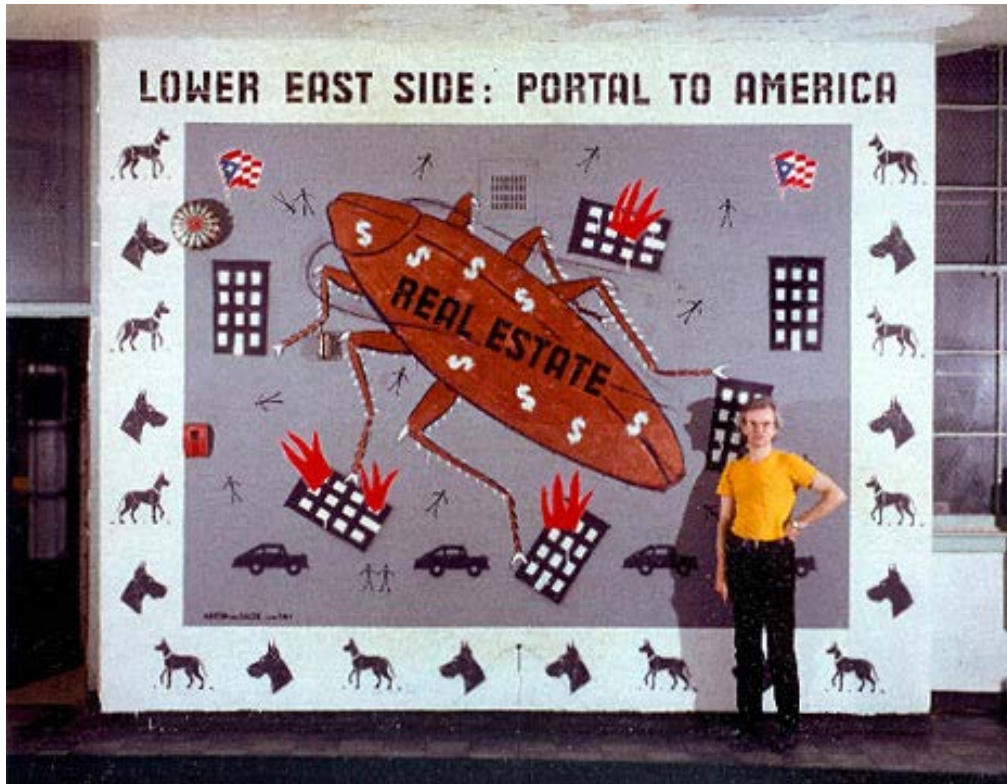
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3.16

CHARAS office within the El Bohio Community Center with Emily Rubin, Doris Kornish, Cynthia, Chino Garcia, and Slima. On the desk are a set of blueprints of the building renovation, 1981. Photograph by Marlis Momber.







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3.17
 Artist Anton van Dalen with his mural, *Lower East Side: Portal to America*, in the main lobby of El Bohio, 1981.
 Photograph by Linda Davenport, courtesy of Anton Van Dalen.

entry lobby on Ninth Street were cleaned, painted, and fitted with lighting so the space could be used as a gallery. It was here that many local artists got an opportunity to present their work and participate in group shows. Openings were enlivened by performances of jazz and Latin music, and the presence of a makeshift bar made for a festive reception of new works. In 1980 El Bohio was one of several venues on the Lower East Side that presented a large group show on nuclear disarmament sponsored by the collective Artists for Survival.⁷⁹ A floor-to-ceiling mural by the artist Anton Van Dalen, executed on the southern wall inside the gallery, focused attention on local housing problems by depicting the neighborhood with a giant “real estate cockroach” at the center (Figure 3.17). The two small Puerto Rican flags within the mural, according to the artist, were a reference to the community’s predominant ethnic makeup in the ’80s.⁸⁰ This mural, entitled *Lower East Side: Portal to America*, made clear that despite the success of El Bohio and the many community initiatives, the neighborhood was still very much at the center of a continuing housing crisis.

While forging new relationships and widening its networks in its role as the moving force behind El Bohio, CHARAS also reconnected

with its long-term associates in its continued pursuit of an ecological agenda. In June 1982 Daniel Chodorkoff organized an “Urban Alternatives” conference at El Bohio. The conference combined the center’s three-part mission: housing, social ecology, and the role of the arts in building community. Over the course of two days, twenty panels convened to discuss topics ranging from food supply and auto-free zones in New York City to energy alternatives and housing.⁸¹ The classrooms at El Bohio were used for multiple, simultaneous panels along with a range of workshops conducted by alternative technology advocates, housing activists, local politicians, anarchists, and artists. According to the *East Village Eye*, the forty-five-minute keynote address delivered by Murray Bookchin encompassed “1848 Marx to New Deal pragmatism, but settled somewhere on the steps of Loisaida.” For Bookchin, the continuing efforts of groups like CHARAS represented a heartening example of a participatory, self-organized democracy in action.⁸²

Other conference participants included a group of more established politicians who echoed this same call for self-determination. A panel on housing and gentrification focused on how small gains within Loisaida were threatened as the city, under Mayor Edward Koch, moved aggressively to create incentives for developers. Councilwoman Miriam Friedlander, a strong voice for community control and a vociferous critic of the mayor’s policies, insisted that when it came to the housing market, the city should be held accountable in its role as “regulator” rather than “speculator.”⁸³ This conference, simultaneously festive and thought-provoking, led to the possibility of exchange between those in office and their constituents, the citizens of Loisaida. It also made visible the tensions between the more utopian strands of the Loisaida movement and the shifting priorities of the city and the neighborhood as New York City slowly emerged from its fiscal crisis.

The acts of physical reclamation, accomplished through a creative process of inventing an integrated vision of self-governance, could not have been possible without often circumstantial and sometimes deliberate support from local and federal agents. In describing the work of AAB, the pragmatist-poet and founder of the Nuyorican Café, Miguel Algarin, wrote, “To stay free is not theoretical. It is to take your immediate environment. Who owns the building in which you live? Find them out, then deal directly. Who is willing to talk his way through the legalese that puts wrinkles on the tongue? Roberto Nazario is willing. He can chew a Municipal Housing Authority contract down to its bold deceptions.”⁸⁴ Algarin presents Roberto Nazario, the coordinator of AAB at the time of the move into PS 64, in a respectful fashion, as someone who is capable of dealing with the city and federal bureaucracy while remaining “free.” This balancing act of depending on

federal aid while organizing on behalf of tenants ultimately strained the organizational structure of AAB. The transition from tenant organizing to managing a federally subsidized CETA program created a rift within the tight-knit Loisaida community. Some of the tenants and block associations that had viewed AAB as an advocate and cohort began to view the organization as part of the establishment as it regulated loans and struggled to transfer homesteaded properties to building cooperatives.⁸⁵

LA LUCHA CONTINUA (1982–1999)

The hard-won gains in Loisaida were challenged throughout the '80s as the United States, under President Reagan (1981–1989), and the city, under Mayor Koch (1978–89), began to cut back on federal and municipal subsidies. Despite Loisaida's remarkable transformation, and partially because of it, the changing fiscal landscape dramatically affected the nature of organizing in this neighborhood. As capital began to flow back into the city, the once abandoned and neglected sites that had been transformed into the gardens, homesteads, and community centers in Loisaida were increasingly coveted by those with speculative interests. Whereas during the '70s community groups had focused on laying a physical claim to an unwanted neighborhood, the next decade was about preserving these gains and warding off new threats of dislocation as investors saw opportunities in a rapidly gentrifying landscape.

As federal money for energy initiatives, job training, and housing programs dried up, organizations that had come to rely on these benefits grew smaller and ultimately folded. This lack of fiscal support, combined with a change in leadership, led to the dwindling influence of AAB in the neighborhood. As the vocational training programs run by AAB drew to a close at El Bohio, CHARAS was left to run the center as a more arts-oriented community space. In 1984 El Bohio signed a fifteen-year lease with the city for the PS 64 building and hoped they would get more funding for pending renovation. After six full years of occupation, the building still lacked a functioning heating system, the roof leaked, and the top two floors of the building were mostly unusable. After repeated lobbying through supportive local politicians, El Bohio received a community development fund from the city to repair the roof and install a new heating system in 1984.⁸⁶ This money never went far enough, however, and new problems, such as a flood in the basement theater, kept management busy applying for construction grants and seeking new fiscal sponsorship.

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Urban scholars and historians view the influx of educated white artists, galleries, clubs, and new cultural institutions into formerly poor and working-class neighborhoods as a contributing factor, if not a direct cause, of gentrification.⁸⁷ In the case of El Bohio, the new influx of artists, anarchists, and radicals were seen by CHARAS as a potential ally in the struggle against the city-developer coalition. To keep the building financially viable and socially vibrant, El Bohio rented the larger rooms to theater groups for rehearsals on an hourly basis and the smaller classrooms to artists for studio space. In the mid-80s two well-organized art auctions brought some degree of fiscal solvency to the center as well as a new generation of contributors to the building.⁸⁸ The artists who donated their works for this auction helped subsidize the operations of the center, which continued to provide such basic services as computer classes, after-school programs, films, and theater spaces to local artists and residents at nominal fees (Figure 3.18).

Urayoán Noel, in his book on four decades of Nuyorican poetry, provides a nuanced perspective of the continuities and ruptures in the “counter-politics” of the Nuyorican poets movement, which is informative to the analysis of El Bohio’s transformation.⁸⁹ In 1982 the Nuyorican Poets Café closed for repairs and went into a long hiatus. During this time, Noel writes, the homegrown Nuyorican poetic tradition, which was rooted in the politics of survival in Loisaida, was “canonized” within the context of the larger Chicano diasporic experience.⁹⁰ According to Noel, when the café reopened in 1989, a younger multicultural cast of characters performed within new formats that embedded the political struggles and anxieties of the older generation to offer a “global” resistance to new threats that commodified the authenticity of the older, more localized resistance. Similarly, in the later years, the Loisaida movement and, consequently, El Bohio opened to a wider audience in order to continue to provide vital resources at the local level. This culture was formed around several new identities that included the broader multiethnic Latino constituency as well as an emergent, anarcho-squatter-collectivity with links to a European, as well as a nascent American punk, search for a new identity. Added to this wide spectrum of outsiders was the escalating presence of the disenfranchised and homeless people that found, in the vacant lots and Tompkins Square Park, an odd camaraderie and tolerance. These disparate groups adapted the spatial struggles and counter institutional stances of the previous decade of a Loisaidan struggle to the new modalities of police violence and the battle for urban space unfolding in the Lower East Side.⁹¹

THIRD FLOOR

City Arts (Briefly)
Carnival Knowledge
Vocational Training
Recycle a Bike
Tylis Photography
Rehearsal Room
Martial Arts Room

SECOND FLOOR

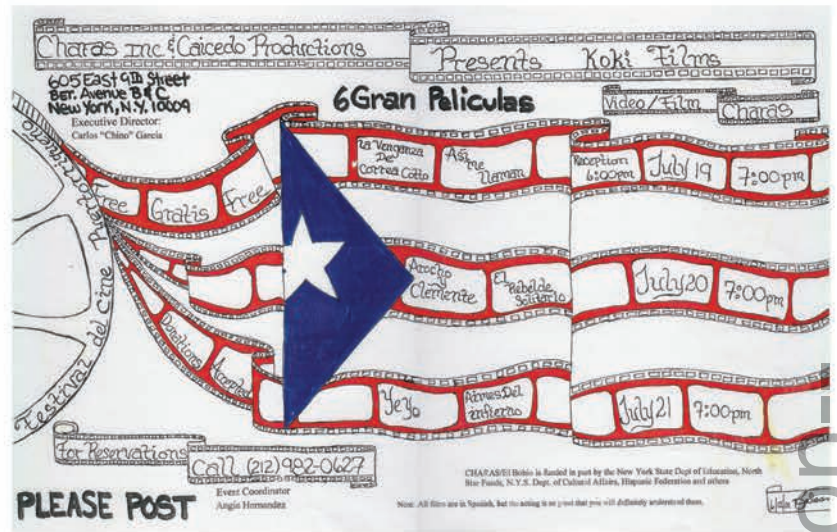
United Musicians Ltd.
Scavenger Theater
CHARAS Office
Education & Computer Center
Quality of Life
Darkroom
Community Room
Tompkins Square Artists

FIRST FLOOR

Art Gallery
Theatro La Terrassa
CHARAS
Adopt-a-Building
Summer Performance
Terrace

BASEMENT

Auditorium-El Teatro
Ambulante (Bimbo Rivas)
Dressing Rooms
Film CHARAS
Shop Building



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In 1985 a large-scale mural project sponsored by CHARAS, in collaboration with the arts collective Artmakers, celebrated this finding of common cause in La Plaza Cultural. This park, a decade after its creation, had once again deteriorated; parts of the chain-link fence were gone, and drug users encroached on the site, discouraging other residents from using La Plaza. In response to a call to paint the walls of buildings bordering La Plaza, trained artists worked with local collaborators to develop and execute a variety of murals along several linear feet of adjacent building party-walls that bordered the site's southern and western edges. Both local and global political perspectives determined the content of the new murals. Paintings of police brutality and the destruction of buildings in New York City were presented alongside images of popular uprisings in Latin America and anti-apartheid actions in South Africa. These works, designed and executed by different artists, varied stylistically but were linked in terms of thematic content. Dispossession, revolution, and community united an array of these global-political envisionings. Black-edged bands with white letters reading "La Lucha Continua" ("The Struggle Continues") visually tied these separate images executed by many artists into a fluid continuum.⁹²

On a prominent exposed wall of the six-story tenement at Avenue C, Eva Cockcroft, founder of Artmakers, led a team of twelve artists in painting a crumbling tenement cityscape showing people struggling to fight demolitions and evictions with reconstructions, celebrations, and a dignified daily existence (Figure 3.19). Embedded in this image was a fragment of the mural depicting the Chinese contributions to the neighborhood, as first executed on this same wall by Freddie Hernandez in 1977. Also represented in this mural are the "Miracles of Loisaida"—a geodesic dome, a windmill, a solar roof array, and a street stand selling fresh produce. In the center is a crystal ball that evokes a bucolic landscape, or perhaps an urban garden, in which a circle of women are celebrating. Images of working women float on the surface of the glass globe, bringing into focus the contribution of women and an ecofeminist perspective of the struggle for self-sufficiency. These murals, with their many layers of references, brought together the experiences of people in Puerto Rico, New York, the Americas, and Africa, and displayed them on the disjointed walls of La Plaza Cultural. The flexibility of the syncretic aspects of the Puerto Rican culture, their complex identity, and the spatial politics of Loisaida were laced together and adapted in this instance to address a more global concern for social justice. This same mix of international artists, musicians, and environmentalists from all different backgrounds was also reflected in the tenants at El Bohio.



Urban development on the Lower East Side, beginning in the late '80s and continuing into the next decade, was driven in large part by the vast amount of real estate held by the city government. Many gardens and community facilities with no leases were jeopardized as the city sought to relinquish its role as the administrator of troublesome properties and preferred to hand them off to private developers. In the vacuum left by AAB, other homesteading programs continued in the area and were spearheaded by organizations such as the Lower East Side Catholic Area Conference, United Homesteading Assistance Board, and Rehabilitation in Action to Preserve Neighborhoods.⁹³ It was through the concerted effort of these groups and the strong tenant organizations that a lot of the remaining tenements were brought into cooperative ownership (Figure 3.20). In 1986 the city officially ended its homesteading program⁹⁴ and began a process of consolidating smaller lots into bigger parcels and auctioning some of these larger, more attractive properties to private developers. To contest these sales, many housing advocates and politicized citizens' organizations in the neighborhood gelled into a formidable opposition.⁹⁵ Signs of "Lower East Side Not for Sale," "This Land is Ours," and "Speculators Keep Away" appeared on buildings, in gardens, and in street demonstrations (Figure 3.21).

3.19
La Lucha Continua –murals on the northern wall of La Plaza Cultural, 1985.
Photograph courtesy of the Artmakers Inc.

HOMESTEADS

537 E 11TH STREET

B374 / L65
1976- City-Owned
2012- Transfers deed to HDFC



635 E 11TH STREET

B394 / L48
1981- City Owned
1992- Transfers deed to HDFC

304 E & 306 E 8TH STREET

B390 / L9
1978- City Owned
1992- HDFC



517 E & 519 E 11TH STREET

B405 / L7510 & L51
1974- City Owned
1990- 519 E Heartsone HDFC
Next to Windmill project where cars were stripped for parts.



641 E 11TH STREET

B394 / L48
1977- City Owned
1988- Transfers deed to Florisol HDFC

191 E 3RD STREET

B399 / L41
1970- City Owned
1988- Transferred

522 E 6TH STREET

B401 / L21
Failed Homestead
1988- 522 E assoc.

239 E 2ND STREET

B384 / L24
1978- City Owned
1988- Transfers deed to Joseph Card Memo
Currently HDFC

539 E 6TH STREET

B402 / L45

219 E 4TH STREET

B400 / L48

309 E 4TH STREET

B374 / L65
1978- City Owned
1987- Transfers deed to All Peoples Homestead 309 HDFC



742 E 6TH STREET

B375 / L30
1978- City Owned
1985- Transfers deed to Habitat



66 AVENUE C

B374 / L6
1978- City Owned
1986- Transfers deed to HDFC

702 E 5TH STREET

B374 / L8
1978- City Owned
1986- Transfers deed to HDFC

507 E & 509 E 11TH STREET

B405 / L58
1974- City Owned
1976- Transfers deed to 507/509 ETAL

310 E 4TH STREET

B373 / L8
1976- City Owned
1979- Transfers deed to HDFC

320 E 4TH STREET

B373 / L13
1977- City Owned

--Not for Distribution--



--Not for Distribution--

3.20

Key homesteaded buildings in Loisaida, 1974–1991.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

List compiled from different sources, including the research by Malve von Hassell in *Homesteading in New York City, 1978–1993: The Divided Heart of Loisaida*, (1996).

local organizer and homesteader-turned politician. The victory was bittersweet, however, as a series of smaller gardens and properties were bulldozed in exchange for La Plaza Cultural.⁹⁸

In 1998, at the end of its fifteen-year lease, despite popular support and energetic fund-raising, El Bohio Community Center was sold to a private developer for \$3.15 million (Figure 3.22). The sale of the center came as a shock to a neighborhood that saw other community groups attain ownership of their buildings. According to Armando Perez, codirector of El Bohio, this negative outcome was the result of the Giuliani administration's "vendetta" against the political rallying and specific importance of El Bohio to the Puerto Rican movement in Loisaida.⁹⁹ At the time of its sale, the building was being used by theater groups, Recycle-a-Bicycle, and several artists that rented studio space to produce and exhibit their work. Despite the continued dedication of El Bohio codirectors and CHARAS cofounders Chino Garcia and Armando Perez, there was a gradual shift in the user base as those that had initiated it as a center for Puerto Rican resistance twenty-two years ago moved away. The impending loss of the building, however, brought many of the older generation of the Puerto Ricans back to the building.¹⁰⁰ They joined arms with the white artists and their cohorts to participate in a collective campaign to maintain control of the building that many saw as a symbol of "cross-fertilization for white and Puerto Rican artists and activists."¹⁰¹ On December 27, 2001, amidst chants of "Giuliani you are no good—you are destroying our neighborhood," the police in riot gear evicted the remaining occupiers of the building.¹⁰²

ACTIVIST ESTATES—PROPERTY AS RESISTANCE IN LOISAIDA

In Loisaida, the conversion and transformation of vacant lots into gardens and of empty institutional buildings into community centers not only created public space but also produced an engaged public (Figure 3.23). Locally rooted activists did not outline a master plan in the conventional sense but generated a master narrative to create an urban ensemble that accommodated education, gardening, and cultural events and responded to the housing needs of an underserved neighborhood. The publicity skills of the organizers and the fruitful collaborations between disparate groups created a social momentum that captured the imagination of the people and generated a network of "activist estates" in Loisaida. Starting with the port-a-dome project, CHARAS broadened its knowledge to include youth engagement, environmentalism, and culture, making the troubled but increasingly



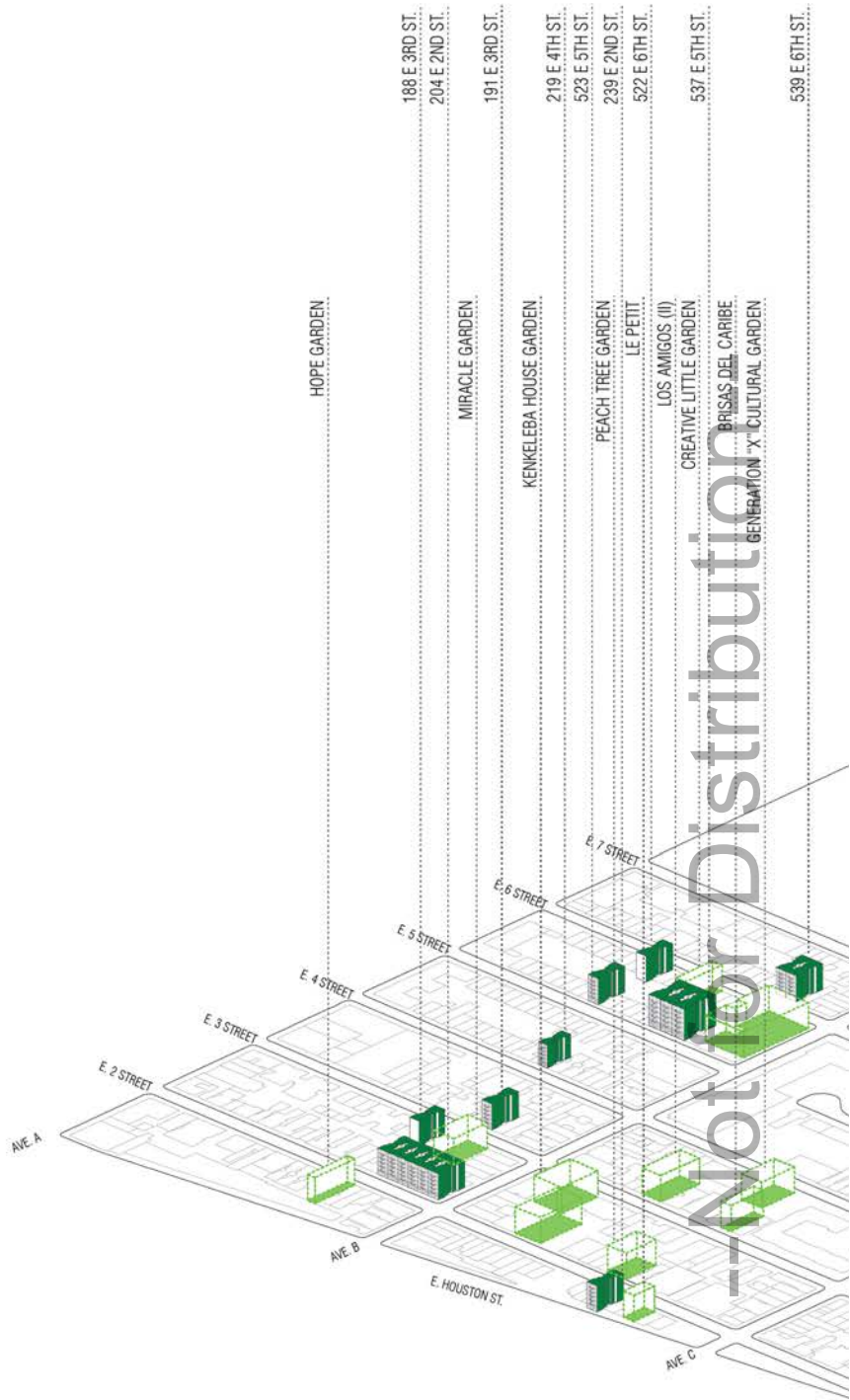
---Not for Distribution---

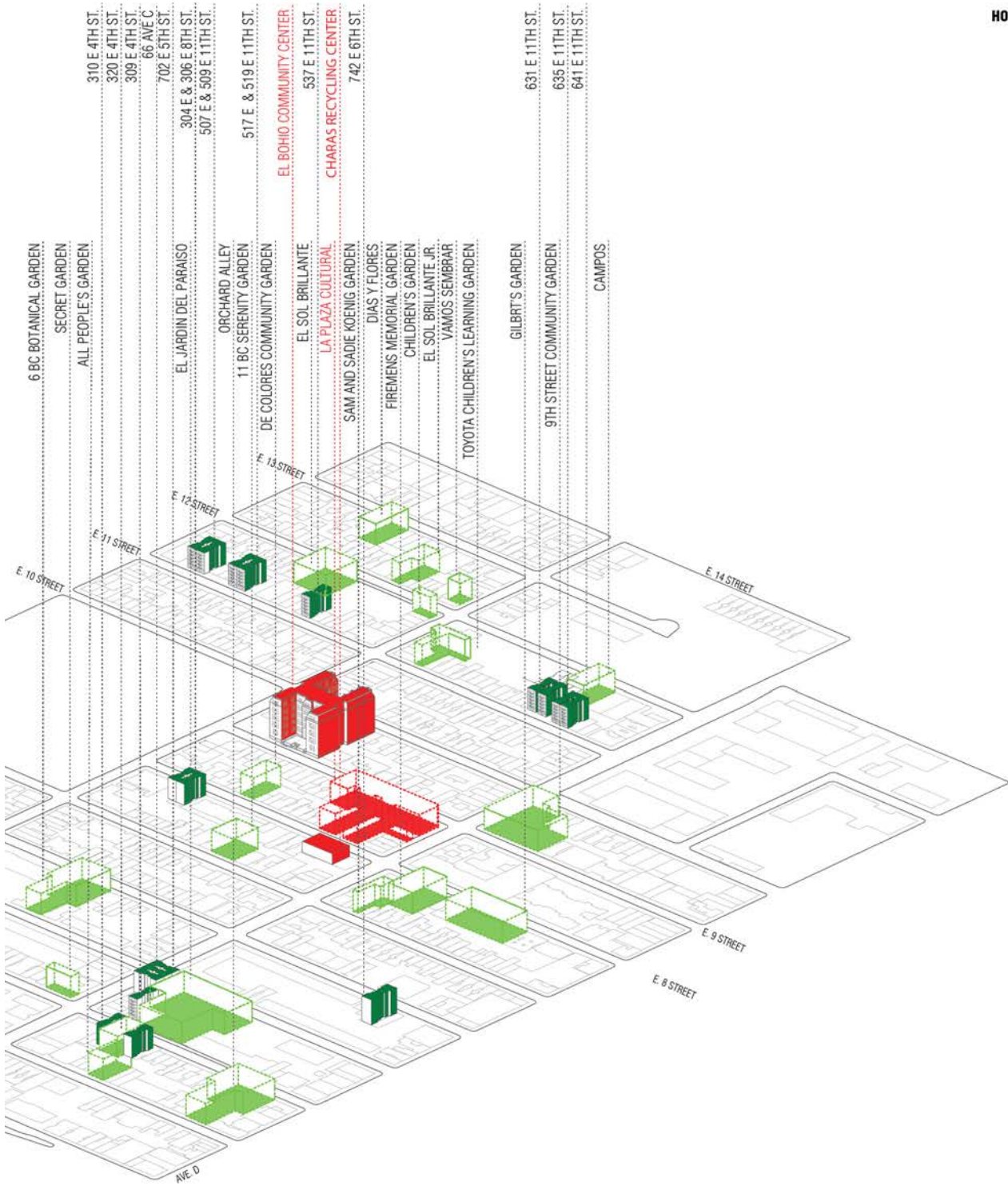
3.22
El Bohio for Sale. Save El Bohio, 1998-2001.
Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

desirable neighborhood of Loisaida a model for self-organization. The grassroots work of AAB and their dexterous juggling of available resources allowed ordinary citizens to enthusiastically embrace the concept of sweat equity and led to the creation of affordable, cooperatively owned housing. Rich in its ideological dimensions (the de-commodification of labor, the hard work involved, and the grassroots DIY ethic) and in its practical benefits (warm apartments and community facilities), this movement attracted a large cast of characters. Carpenters, auto mechanics, concerned mothers, teenagers, housing advocates, grant writers, PhD students, poets, performers, artists, and alternative energy enthusiasts all contributed to the creation of a new urban imaginary anchored in the repurposing of physical space.

Poets and builders laid claim to the Lower East Side through the Loisaida movement, identifying it as a space of Puerto Rican resistance. This construction and political assertion over a disinvested territory within New York City brought into being a new type of urbanism. Jorge Brandon, the father of the Nuyorican poetry movement, not unlike the poet laureates of a nationalist Resistance-Neruda (in Chile), or Tagore (in Bengal), gave dignity to the degraded landscape in his incantations and presence as a street troubadour speaking a double tongue. This place-based construction of a communal identity was tactical in the struggle for political recognition. The renaming and remaking of places, such as El Sol Brillante, La Plaza Cultural, and El Bohio, was driven by the need to contribute to the design and construction of a future city that was more inclusive and more radical in its use of space.

The Loisaida movement shared with other contemporary '70s grassroots urban movements unfolding in Spain, the west coast, and Latin America what sociologist Manuel Castells observed was a demand for access to the infrastructure of collective consumption—housing, education, art, and a clean environment.¹⁰³ The urban context of Loisaida, in its broken-down form, was simultaneously the facilitator and the object of collective action. By working outside the framework of electoral politics residents connected the dots, filled in the holes, and founded a networked city. The series of properties in Loisaida, the “activist estates,” functioned as a collective common held together by the thread of community action. As the city changed, so did the actions. The buildings brought under community control were not simply occupied but they were cultivated physically into places that constantly changed. The resulting change in material conditions for the participants from negative (disinvested, demolished, abandoned) to positive (cared for, rebuilt, enlivened) was the goal of their resistance.





HOMESTEADS ■

GARDENS ■

--Not for Distribution--

3.23
 Homesteads, gardens, and the legacy of CHARAS/EI Bohio Community Center.
 Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

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