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ACTIVIST ESTATES

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CHAPTER 1: ACTIVIST ESTATES

The “long nineteenth century,” a phrase used by the historian Eric Hobsbawm to describe the extended period of political and economic change in Europe between the French Revolution and World War I, was also a dramatic period of growth and revolutionary change for the industrial cities of North America. Successive waves of immigrants from Europe—Germans, Italians, Irish, and, later, Eastern European Jews—arriving in New York settled close to points of disembarkation and available work in the industrial districts of Lower Manhattan. A dense landscape of cheaply built tenement housing on the Lower East Side, situated to the east of the Bowery, and the manufacturing warehouses to the west of the Bowery, in neighborhoods today known as SoHo and NoHo, expanded to accommodate and provide work opportunities to the newcomers. Within these neighborhoods, which historians often describe as a “gateway” or “portal” to America, the newcomers shared the common fate of being dislocated from their homeland by political persecution or economic adversity.¹ After traveling across the Atlantic Ocean and disembarking in Lower Manhattan, many of the new arrivals were, at first, faced with more poverty, exploitative working conditions, and substandard living accommodations. The city government, which was dominated by Tammany Hall in the nineteenth century, did little to run the city for the good of the larger population. Instead, it controlled the electorate with bribes and favors. It was through this shared experience of having to fight for basic subsistence and communal dignity that many social and political organizations emerged in the Lower East Side. Widespread corruption within the municipal government and the actions of profiteering landlords and callous employers were gradually met by an organized resistance from unionized workers, tenant associations, and an assortment of neighborhood clubs. Local religious and ethnic societies formed with the intention of helping residents gain a social footing in the chaotic milieu of linguistic and cultural multiplicity. Within the working-class poverty of the lower wards of New York City, an ensemble of institutions—religious, secular, and anarchistic—shaped the political and spatial discourse of the Lower East Side.

This legacy of social action, designed to provide a platform for immigrants and to reform the city from the ground up, was expressed in the built environment in the form of settlement houses, clubs, libraries,

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bathhouses, playgrounds, and all manner of charitable institutions. Following the two world wars, the Lower East Side's demographics shifted as new immigrants from the Ukraine, Poland, and the Dominican Republic, along with migrants from Puerto Rico and the wave of African Americans moving north, brought different cultural perspectives into this historically immigrant enclave. By the middle of the twentieth century, with a declining economy that was based on shipping and manufacturing and a dwindling job market, it was the large stock of affordable tenement housing and the established network of social support that continued to attract newcomers. The influx of politically marginalized arrivals caught in the cycles of investment and disinvestment² in the physical fabric of this neighborhood decidedly shaped the countercultural spaces of a grassroots activism.

In the 1990s, amidst the fast-paced gentrification of the city at large, evidenced by the proliferation of luxury housing, pricey restaurants, and high-end shops, there remained the remnants of the previous era of social organization. On the Lower East Side, the soup kitchens, boys' and girls' clubs, settlement houses, radical churches, arts facilities, libraries, community centers, and gardens are a shared resource. With the engine of real estate driving the development of the neighborhood toward new levels of unaffordability, these vital public amenities hang on, precariously providing a much-needed territory for education, play, and political mobilization.

This chapter provides a selective inventory of properties claimed by sociopolitical advocates over a 150-year period of organizing in Downtown New York City. In a deliberate opposition to the concept of commodified real estate, the accounting of non-commodified property here allows for the assemblage of *activist estates*. I argue that these aggregated properties can be viewed as an outcome of the different political constituencies that have produced three different types of activist estates. The first set of properties, *Progressive Estates*, are institutions initiated by Progressive Era reformers in the late nineteenth century to engage with the social issues of employment, education, and housing in what was then a poor immigrant neighborhood. The second set of properties, *Radical Estates*, date back to the early twentieth century and combine the Marxist aspirations of labor movement organizing with the more utopian dimensions of the pacifist movement. The third set, *Artists Estates*, are about a creative approach to living and working by repurposing the underutilized infrastructure of the postindustrial city into new types of experimental cultural spaces within New York City.

The list of activist estates examined here is by no means exhaustive or inclusive, but rather lays out the themes addressed in the chapters of this book—anti-war activism, housing, and the arts. These three types of activism that informed the larger political consciousness of the nation are examined in the aftermath of the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and right to city movements. This chapter makes the point that the buildings and the institutions set up in the nineteenth century to promote social change constituted a network of physical spaces and generated a continuum of participatory democracy and advocacy in the Lower East Side. The “activist estates,” in this context, refers to the buildings and landscapes as they acquired meaning through the actions of the people involved in social organizing.

PROGRESSIVE ESTATES

SETTLEMENT HOUSES (1886–1918)

The overcrowded municipal wards³ described in vivid detail in the late nineteenth century by social reformers and journalists brought the Lower East Side and its burgeoning immigrant population to the attention of the middle-class and well-to-do New Yorkers who lived north of Fourteenth Street (Figure 1.1). Writers such as Jacob A. Riis⁴ rendered the populous living quarters of the neighborhood, with the resulting unsanitary conditions, as cause for concern for the more established inhabitants of the city. The settlement house movement was born out of the desire of the educated and well-to-do citizens to not only advocate for but also socialize the poor to a more middle-class norm.⁵ The impoverished slums of the East End of London were the original site of an experiment in social reform that espoused a form of charity whereby a more privileged class of volunteers lived within the impoverished community to better learn about and subsequently change the situation from within rather than remotely. These progressive ideas soon found their way across the Atlantic and had an impact in cities across the United States, notably in low-income immigrant neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side.⁶

The Neighborhood Guild, founded in 1886 and later renamed the University Settlement, was the first of many such organizations formed to help residents of the notorious Tenth Ward in Manhattan.⁷ Stanton Coit, a young student at Columbia University, along with other colleagues—mainly university students and young writers—moved to live in this neighborhood and thought of ways to engage with the struggling families in this part of the city. They formed clubs for the residents with the goal of providing both education and



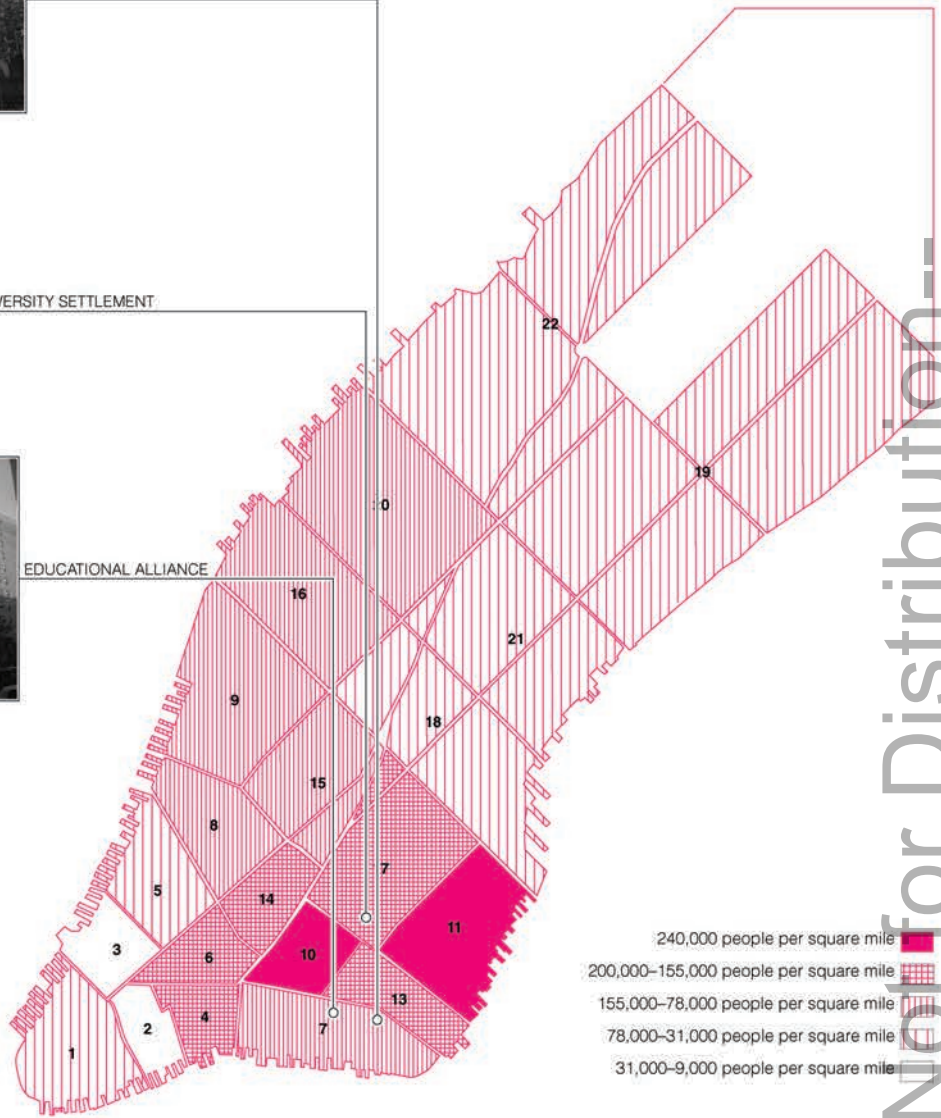
HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT



UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT



EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE



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1.1

A map of population density of New York's wards in 1900. The three prominent settlements— Educational Alliance, University Settlement, and Henry Street Settlement— retain their original buildings, and these are operational in 2017. Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

The U.S. Census Bureau calibrates the population density of the Tenth Ward in 1900 at 314,931 people per square mile. This means that three times as many people lived in this neighborhood as compared to the rest of Lower Manhattan, which at the turn of the century, held 80 percent of the city's population.



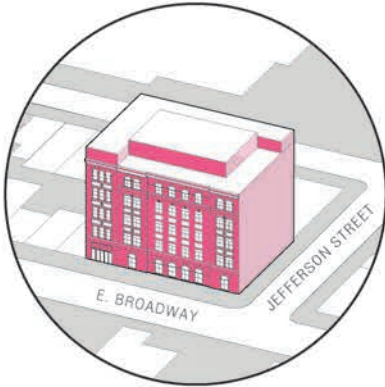
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1.2
University Settlement, 1900s.
Photograph courtesy of the New York Public
Library Archives.

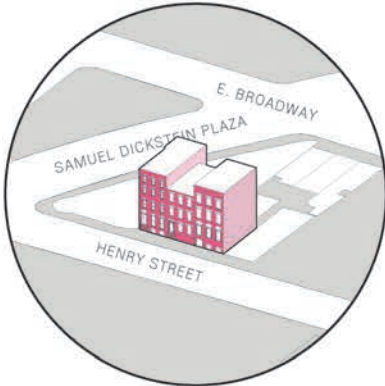
recreation.⁸ The educational role of the settlement volunteers expanded as they came to understand that the problems of work, housing, health, and environment were intertwined and endemic to the neighborhood.⁹

The settlement house became a nexus of progressive reform, a place to organize socially, politically, and economically. As the membership and support for the University Settlement grew, the volunteer staff raised money to buy property and build a five-story building at the corner of Rivington and Eldridge Streets in the heart of the neighborhood (Figure 1.2). It included large public rooms on the lower floors and smaller residential quarters for the settlement workers at the upper levels. A grand staircase, flooded with light from an interior courtyard, occupied the center of the building and connected the boarding rooms of the settlement workers above to the spaces for public gatherings below. Living rooms shared by the settlement workers, known as “settlers,” provided the communal link between private and public space. The rooftop was capped with an open steel-framed trellis and served as a gym for local youth. The building provided much needed space for a kindergarten during the day. In the early evening, after-school programs for children were conducted, and later in the day the settlement became a meeting place for social clubs and political organizations.¹⁰

The investment in a permanent base within a low-income neighborhood brought a level of outside financial and political support that stabilized the institution. This structure was inaugurated by the New York Police Commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, in 1898.¹¹ Other settlements were established along similar and complementary lines, often distinguished by a specific approach rather than the goal of simply providing a variety of services to the needy. By 1911 over twenty settlements were located on the Lower East Side (Figure 1.3).¹² Each was directed by “headworkers” and emphasized teaching and learning pedagogy. The young, educated volunteer workers hoped to learn more about the conditions and disposition of their neighbors to educate them and transform them into model citizens. Embedded in the goal of reform of the physical environment was a desire to cultivate a Victorian morality in what Jacob A. Riis memorably called the “other half” while providing the needed relief and institutional support. In looking back upon this period, historians both admire and criticize the reformist agenda of the settlement workers in their desire to superimpose their own middle- and upper-class standards of morality upon the newcomers.¹³



EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE



HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT



UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT

SETTLEMENTS FROM 1889

1911	
1910	WAGE-EARNERS' BRANCH
	HOMEMAKING SETTLEMENT
1909	
	RECREATION CENTER AND NEIGHBORHOOD ROOMS
1908	
	PEOPLE'S THREE ART SCHOOL
1907	
	THE TEACHERS' HOUSE
1906	
1905	
	MUSIC SCHOOL SETTLEMENT WELCOME HOUSE SETTLEMENT DOE YE NEXTE THYNGE SOCIETY
1904	
	EMANUEL BROTHERHOOD SOCIAL HOUSE
1903	
	GREENWICH HOUSE
1902	
	HAMILTON HOUSE
1901	
1900	
	ALFRED CORNING CLARK NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE THE COLLEGE SETTLEMENT
1899	
	DOWNTOWN ETHICAL SOCIETY
1898	
	CHRISTODORA HOUSE THE GOSPEL SETTLEMENT
1897	
	GRACE CHURCH SETTLEMENT
1896	
1895	
	HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT
1894	
	JACOB A. RIIS NEIGHBORHOOD SETTLEMENT
1893	
1892	
1891	
1890	
	HEBREW INSTITUTE/ EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE
1889	
1888	
1887	
	UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT
1886	
1885	
1884	
1883	
1882	
1881	
1880	
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1878	
1877	
1876	

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1.3

Reconstituted 1910 map of the Lower East Side with the location and time line of settlements. The three prominent settlements—Educational Alliance, University Settlement, and Henry Street Settlement—retain their original buildings, and these are operational in 2017.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

Settlement Data Source: Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, eds., Handbook of Settlements, 1911.

Map collaged from the G. W. Bromley Map (1911), New York Public Library Digital Archives.

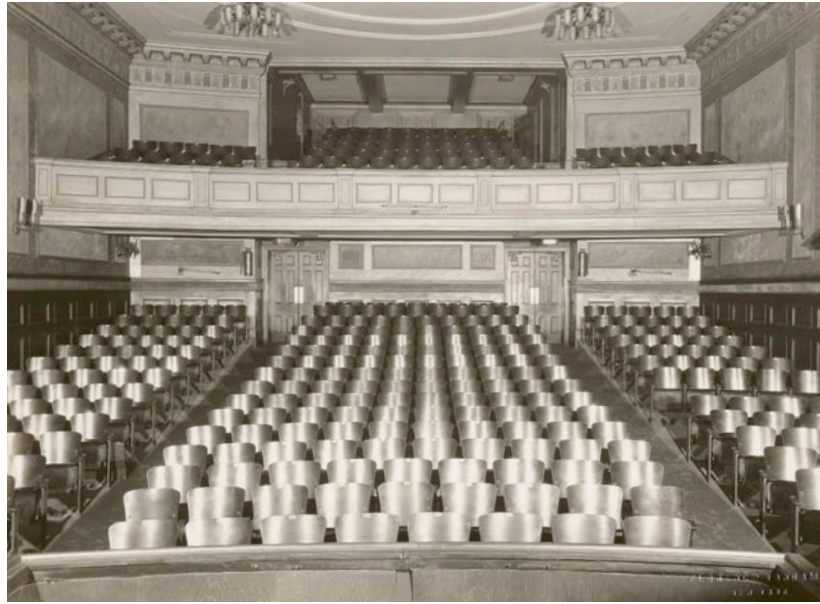


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1.4

The interior of the Henry Street Settlement Neighborhood Playhouse, 1915.

Photograph courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Archives.



The Henry Street Settlement opened in 1893 as a volunteer nursing service that provided home care to a community that had little access to health care. Trained nurses, organized as the Visiting Nurse Service, visited the homes of ailing residents and, through this intimate contact with them, built trust and acquired knowledge of the living conditions of the women, the children, and the elderly. The trajectory of this settlement expanded to provide day care, play centers, and art instruction for children. Later as the reputation of the settlement grew, they helped establish women's clubs that fought for legislation to ensure equity within the workplace and to institute laws prohibiting the use of child labor. The initial success of this settlement was in no small part due to the philanthropic interest of Jacob Schiff, a banker who bought two existing townhouses for the nurses at 265 and 267 Henry Street. Lillian Wald, the founder and headworker of the Henry Street Settlement, lived here for forty years, along with a group of settler nurses and volunteers. These houses, the first in a series of real estate holdings of the Henry Street Settlement, became the bedrock of an established community facility on the Lower East Side's Seventh Ward. In 1915 Alice and Irene Lewisohn, two sisters from a wealthy German-Jewish family, founded the Neighborhood Playhouse on the corner of Grand and Pitt Streets as part of the Henry Street Settlement. This three-story playhouse, with a 350-seat theater capacity, became a nucleus of another type of arts-oriented programming associated with the Henry Street Settlement (Figure 1.4).

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The early settlement houses, thus financed through private philanthropy, enjoyed a level of autonomy and knowledge of the inner city that they leveraged to critique the corruption within the municipal government. The dining table of the Henry Street Settlement became a launching pad for labor organizing, developing legislation on sanitary reform, implementing safety codes in tenement buildings, and regulating labor practices in sweatshops.¹⁴ The ambitions of the settlers were not simply to provide services to the neighborhood but to influence policy and to build civic institutions that would ultimately be integrated into the municipal and national bureaucracy. The goal of settlers was not to challenge and disrupt existing governmental institutions but to improve them. They saw the settlement house research work and community outreach as a first step in providing a Progressive Era model for political reform.¹⁵

The outbreak of the First World War in Europe revealed a point of disagreement within the progressive ranks. In opposition to national policy, many leaders within the settlement movement across the country were very vocal about their anti-war position. Henry Street Settlement became a gathering place for people opposed to the war, and it was here that Lillian Wald and Jane Addams, founder of the renowned Hull House of Chicago, organized a conference to discuss the adverse effects that United States involvement in the war would have on the communities they served.¹⁶ Politicized by their involvement in the settlement work, the organizing of workers' unions, and their role as suffragists, women were at the forefront of this anti-war movement. On September 28, 1914, a solemn group of fifteen hundred women marched down Fifth Avenue wearing mourning attire and carrying



1.5
The all-women anti-war demonstration parade down Fifth Avenue, 1914.
Photograph courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Archives.

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peace banners (Figure 1.5).¹⁷ Lillian Wald and a delegation of nurses from Henry Street Settlement were among the marchers. Along with labor unionists, socialists, religious and secular pacifists, Wald founded the popular but short-lived American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) in 1916.¹⁸

The United States entered the conflict in 1917 and subsequently retaliated against the anti-war activists. The settlement community whose members had actively condemned the war were labeled radicals and put on a national blacklist.¹⁹ The war, followed by an economic depression and changes in national immigration policy,²⁰ resulted in a dramatic decline in the population of the Lower East Side in the mid-'20s. As the country faced growing unemployment and food shortages, the burgeoning culture of unions and self-organized neighborhood clubs were strained. The social institutions that weathered this crisis had to rethink their organizational strategy as the political climate changed. Private benefactors that had supported the settlements grew more fiscally and politically conservative. Henry Street Settlement continued its work but refocused its attention on nonpoliticized issues, such as adding programs in music and art for the neighborhood children to its list of offerings. The Neighborhood Playhouse became a nucleus for this activity, along with a music school in a second building on Grand Street. Connecting back to the concerns of community health, Lillian Wald began summer camps for the children outside the city and built a playground within the block. This recreation and child-focused programming formed the basis of the new fund-raising initiatives at Henry Street Settlement.

HOUSING ESTATES (1930–1950)

In part due to the collective efforts of the settlements working in tandem across the country, the field of social work became increasingly specialized and professional. The National Federation of Settlements,²¹ a coalition of settlements nationwide, organized conferences and sponsored studies that created a body of research that was used to prove and leverage government policy. During the Great Depression this more professionalized approach to social reform shifted the role of the settlement volunteers and, by extension, the use of the settlement houses as a place to administrate programs rather than live amongst the poor. While the main building on Henry Street continued to house the organization's main administrators well into the '60s, the rest of the settlement houses, including University Settlement, converted their live-in facilities for the settlers into more extensive program space for the community.

By the 1930s the Henry Street Settlement was run by a mixture of paid and volunteer staff, and although it was still funded by private donations, it increasingly depended on public money as well. Helen Hall, the headworker who took over for Lillian Wald in 1933, represented the second generation of this more professionalized attitude toward social work. Hall worked in a Philadelphia settlement house before coming to the Lower East Side and helped conduct a study on chronic unemployment. Her reports and testimony were a part of Senate hearings in 1934, in support of an unemployment insurance bill put forth by Senator Robert Wagner.²² Her pragmatic thrust in creating a more responsive government made her well suited for the job at Henry Street Settlement during the Great Depression, when the settlements, along with the city, turned increasingly to the federal government to fund rising unemployment. In the winter of 1933–1934 Henry Street Settlement opened its doors to the Civil Works Administration (CWA) program as men and women from the neighborhood registered to apply for federally sanctioned work relief. Henry Street Settlement made the playhouse available for over four hundred applicants as they waited to register for jobs.²³

In the '30s, the settlement houses of the Lower East Side became active participants in New Deal Works Progress Administration programs. Workers hired through these programs provided the next generation of social workers, developed new criteria for social service programs, and helped the government connect to grassroots citizens' initiatives.²⁴ The federal and municipal bureaucracies benefited from the assistance of the entrenched progressives in localities such as the Lower East Side to help negotiate and interface with the local neighborhood unions, clubs, tenants, and block associations. The settlements raised awareness of local campaigns for equity and helped consolidate them into larger national processes.

During this time, no single issue galvanized the various groups working toward a radically transformed Lower East Side landscape more than the question of housing. In 1933, the year that Helen Hall took over the leadership at Henry Street Settlement, Fiorello La Guardia was elected mayor of New York City on a strong housing platform. A year later he directed the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to begin working on proposals to build new low-income housing for various sites in New York City. A majority of these projects executed in the neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, East Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn between 1935 and 1965 were financed by leveraging grants through federal programs created during the New Deal. The proposals for slum clearance and urban renewal in New York, initially recommended by the Regional Planning

1.6

A photograph from Helen Hall's book, *Unfinished Business* (1971), shows neighborhood housing advocates with Henry Street Settlement director Helen Hall waiting to board a bus from the Henry Street Settlement Neighborhood Playhouse to Washington, D.C., to canvas for low-income housing on the Lower East Side.

Photograph courtesy of the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.



Association in 1929 to make room for roadways, bridges, and higher-end housing, were adapted a decade later and led to the low-income housing built along the East River waterfront.²⁵

This shift in perspective from for-profit to low-income was viewed positively by the leaders of the settlement movement, who for years had protested the poor light, air, and sanitation in the Old Law tenements and were eager to see these buildings replaced by newer, more up-to-date housing. The Henry Street Settlement provided a staging ground for coalition building that brought the other settlements—the Educational Alliance and the Union Settlement House—into agreement with the local tenant organizations, such as the League of Mothers Club and the United Neighborhood Houses. These local groups boarded buses to Washington, D.C., and canvassed for new low-income housing in the neighborhood (Figure 1.6). Within the neighborhood, teams of volunteers led by the settlement houses surveyed local opinion and prepared reports arguing on behalf of demolishing the tenements and building new high-rise, low-income housing along the East River from the Brooklyn Bridge on the south to Fourteenth Street on the north.²⁶ The interest, expertise, first-hand observation, and familiarity of the on-ground social reformers were harnessed by Mayor La Guardia in the formation of the first NYCHA board.²⁷

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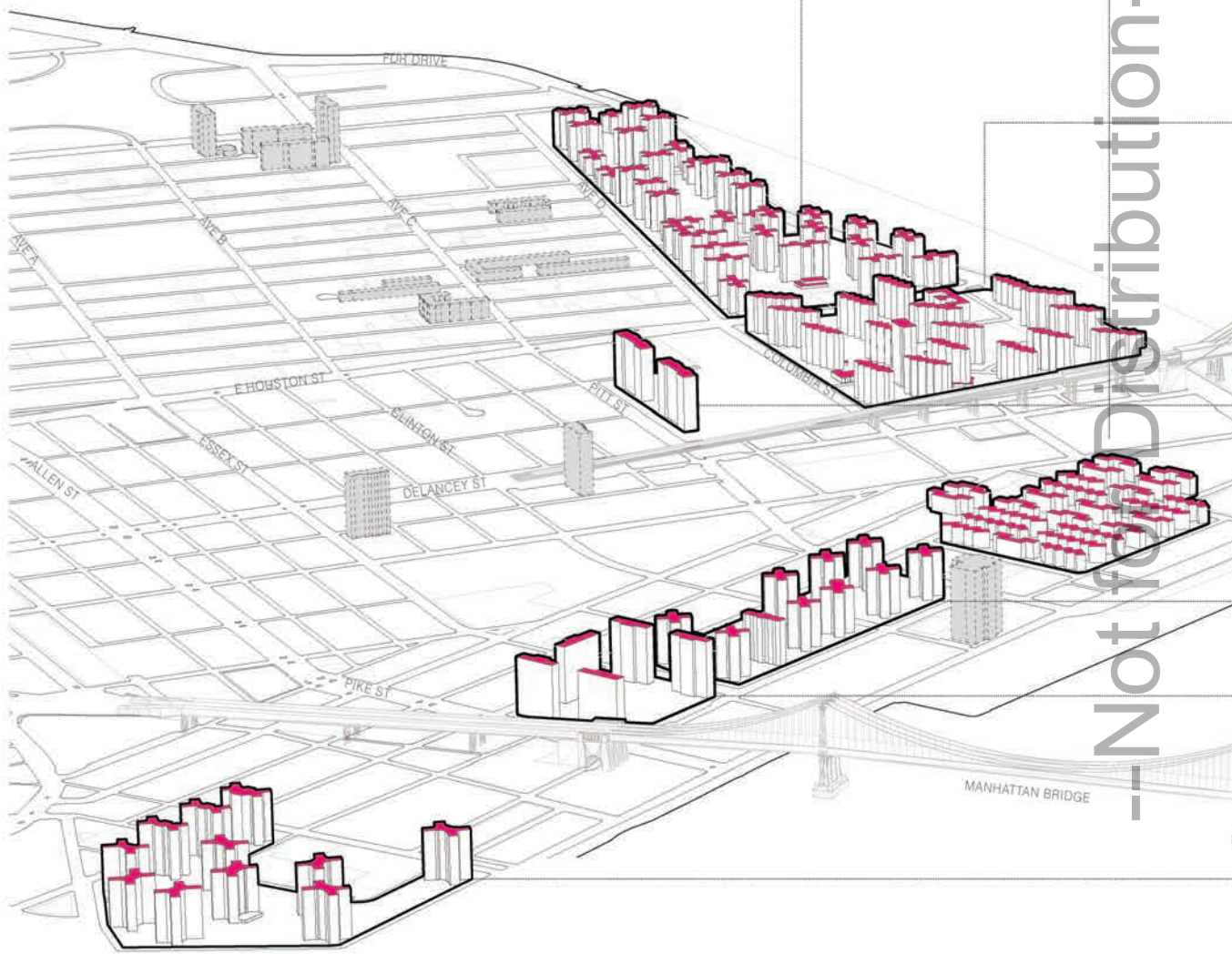
The modernist tower in the park housing typology, with the playgrounds in between, was implemented as the perfect antidote to the lack of light and air in the tenement housing. One of the earliest blocks of federally funded NYCHA houses, Vladeck I and II, was built in the '40s, directly across the street from the Henry Street Settlement. The demolition of more than 170 buildings, mainly Old Law tenements, allowed for the construction of the 24 six-story Vladeck buildings as well as the construction of a section of the East River Drive along the river. The work was efficiently completed within a year, and many of the residents from the old tenements were resettled into the more spacious housing (Figure 1.7).²⁸ As the new residents moved into the Vladeck Houses, workers from the Henry Street Settlement imagined that they would have a similar role to the one they had played in the tenements—taking care of the residents' social needs and being a part of the social life of the community. The Henry Street Settlement had been integral in the resettlement and planning of this specific project, and as a result, the spaces allocated for community rooms, the “home planning workshop and craft room” at street level, were to be managed by the Henry Street Settlement. This old-school patriarchal approach to tenant organizing, it seemed, was out of touch with the aspirations of the new NYCHA tenants. To the surprise of Helen Hall, the tenants, with the support of a citywide tenants' council, had self-organized into various committees and subcommittees.²⁹ NYCHA, in its anxiety to quash the independent tenant organizing, saw the settlements, in this case, as a potential ally and preferred to hand over the administration of the lower-level common areas to the progressive settlement workers rather than the self-organized tenants.

Major shifts in the social landscape of the Lower East Side occurred over the next thirty years as swathes of tenements and defunct

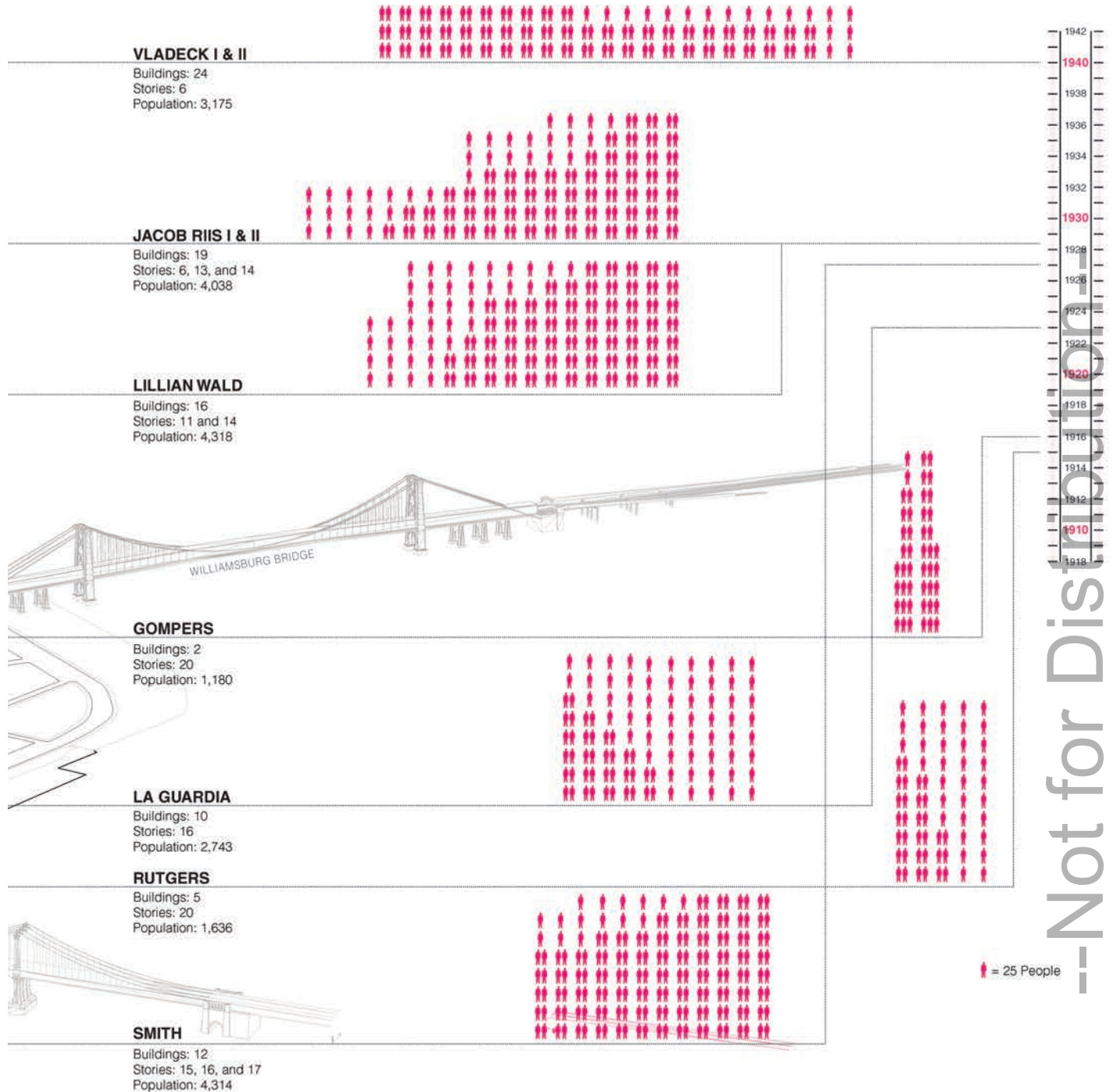
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Relocation of families within the neighborhood and citywide was well documented by NYCHA. Interviews with dislocated residents and the applicants for the new housing were often conducted with help from the settlement houses. Photo sequence shows the Bariera family in the tenement quarters on First Street, and then settled into the new Vladeck II Houses, 1940. Photographs courtesy of NYCHA and the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, CUNY.

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1.8

New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) blocks of housing along the East River, built between 1940 and 1965; showing occupancy in 2016.

Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

Data collected from the web based NYCHA interactive Map. Accessed February 2016.



1.9
Photo sequence shows the Catheras family moving from a temporary veteran's shelter in Jamaica, Queens, to the new Jacob Riis Houses, 1947.
Photographs courtesy of NYCHA and the La Guardia and Wagner Archives, La Guardia Community College, CUNY.

industrial waterfront infrastructures made way for an extension of the East River Drive and additional towers of public housing along the river. These towers, named after settlement reformers, mayors, and other public figures, brought over twenty-five thousand low-income residents to the neighborhood. The waiting lists for the apartments were long, and the process of tenant relocation from slum clearance in other neighborhoods and the eligibility criteria proved immensely complicated for public housing residents. The isolated towers, most twelve to seventeen stories high, stood in sharp contrast to the older tenements of four to six stories, and inscribed a long-term physical and social divide into the neighborhood.³⁰ (Figure 1.8).³¹ The recipients of this subsidized housing were mainly World War II veterans, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans who began moving to New York City in the '50s (Figure 1.9).³² With this new demographic, race in addition to ethnicity became a defining aspect of discrimination in the postwar Lower East Side. The deindustrializing East River waterfront provided affordable housing but few jobs to the droves of people migrating into the city. With slim prospects of employment, welfare-dependent households became a norm in inner-city neighborhoods across the country. The Lower East Side was no exception, and the settlements once intimately involved in the daily lives of immigrants in a manufacturing district repositioned themselves to deal with the emergent landscape of welfare alienation.³³

SETTLEMENT AS ESTABLISHMENT AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION (1948–1965)

In 1948, through the generous endowment of Edith and Peter Lehman, the governor of New York, Henry Street Settlement was able

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to build a new facility—a youth center at 301 Henry Street, a few doors down from the first settlement townhouses. Pete’s house, named in memory of the Lehmans’ son, who was killed in World War II, catered to boys and young men in the neighborhood. Through this institution, the settlement became engaged in what was seen, by the ’50s, as a crisis of juvenile delinquency among the neighborhood youth.³⁴ The racial tensions among the community, the increased police violence, and the gradual incursion of drugs into the neighborhood impacted the youth. The matter was discussed at a board meeting at Henry Street Settlement in June 1957, and a federally funded program, Mobilization for Youth (MFY), was conceived in response to this situation.³⁵ The goal of the settlement workers was to create a series of neighborhood-wide programs to keep teenagers off the streets and engage them in productive workshops that would potentially lead to employment opportunities (Figure 1.10). A coalition of



1.10
Photograph from Helen Hall’s book, *Unfinished Business*, 1971, shows the group of boys in front of a Mobilization for Youth project and organizers. Winslow Carlton (bottom right) was on the board of Henry Street Settlement and the founder and chairman of Mobilization for Youth in New York. Photograph courtesy of the Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

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the settlements and neighborhood-based societies jointly participated in this program. However, it was the direct involvement of faculty from the sociology department at Columbia University that brought a different, more nuanced political dimension to the project. Trained in new research methods, this group of MFY administrators insisted on direct democracy that challenged the traditional organizational approaches deployed by the previous generation of settlement social workers. The “we know what’s best” approach of the old-school settlement house liberals was seen by the academic sociologists of the MFY as patriarchal and obsolete. The MFY approach encouraged citizen empowerment through grassroots action and self-organization.³⁶ In dealing with the youth, they provided opportunities for counseling and discussion as opposed to instruction, and they believed in creating an environment that would lead to youth empowerment. Between 1963 and 1965, MFY opened a storefront on East Fourth Street, between Avenues B and C. Additionally, it initiated two coffee shops—Club 169 and The Hideout—designed to create a more informal venue, mainly for young men between fourteen and twenty-two to meet with counselors as well as to socialize. The coffee shops were “inspired by a social-cultural movement developed in the 1950s among college students, artists and intellectuals, who tried to recreate in New York, San Francisco, and other large cities of the United States, the European café as a center of intellectual, social and cultural activities.”³⁷ MFY invited gang members to form peer groups. This well-intended desire to create a democratic forum for the youth was short-lived, as the experimental methods of creating much needed common space met with targeted opposition. The difficulty of dealing with the volume of the youth that needed direction on all fronts with a small staff of mainly settlement workers created an imbalance. The coffee shops failed as safe spaces when drugs, alcohol, and violence permeated the good intentions of the over-extended organizers. Added to this was the criticism by the more mainstream bureaucrats of what was perceived as a “communist” agenda in an era of McCarthyism.³⁸ Despite its institutional failure, MFY’s efforts to achieve greater youth participation and its challenge to the conventional methods of social welfare in low-income neighborhoods were a precedent to the War on Poverty and Good Society Programs adopted countrywide in the ’60s.

These later programs had a direct impact on some of the young men that were actively sought out by the program administrators from within the leadership of the youth gangs in cities across the country. The work of transformed gang youth collectives such as the Real Great Society and CHARAS in New York City to consequently shape their own environment through bottom-up initiatives, a decade later, was impacted by the early MFY programs in the Lower East Side. The

focus on youth education and spaces of cultural exploration such as the storefronts, theaters, and community centers, discussed in chapter three, were indebted to the storefront/café-concept initiated by the MFY. The emphasis on the creation of an alternative, self-organized space resonated positively with the youth within a neighborhood that was increasingly disinvested by the municipal authorities.

RADICAL ESTATES

GERMAN HALLS AND LABOR UNIONS (1840S–1920S)

Long before the establishment of the settlement houses and coexistence within the charitable landscape of the neighborhood, religious institutions, clubs, and mutual aid societies were set up by the immigrant communities to take care of their own. These self-organized entities were often affiliated with specific places of origin in the homeland of the neighborhood's residents and offered a source of community cohesion in the immigrant enclaves of the Lower East Side.³⁹

In the 1840s Germans fleeing the recriminations resulting from political revolutions in Europe settled in pockets of New York City. Within the Lower East Side, in an area that came to be known as *Kleindeutschland*—the socially motivated Germans brought a working-class solidarity.⁴⁰ They organized a network of voluntary societies that provided charitable support and an avenue of social engagement to compatriots. This culture of participation was expressed in the organization of temporal events—parades, funerals, festivals, and sporting events, but also registered more permanently in the architecture of the neighborhood. The skilled German masons and carpenters were responsible for the construction of the many multistory tenements and working lofts in the Seventeenth Ward of Manhattan. The beer halls, corner saloons, gymnasiums, and theaters along the Bowery and the main avenues of *Kleindeutschland* provided entertainment to the working-class residents. As the immigrant German community grew more affluent, they added purpose-built halls and clubs to house the many collective undertakings of the community.⁴¹ Larger halls available for rent provided a place to host weddings, large social events, and political rallies. It was in such places of public gathering, in 1850s New York, that the German-American unions of carpenters, cabinet-makers, weavers, the labor party socialists, and the more anti-institutional anarchists organized what are seen to be the beginnings of the American radical left.⁴²

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, as the well-to-do German community moved away from this neighborhood, a different contingent of immigrants—Eastern European Jews escaping persecution in pogroms and labor camps—brought with them a different revolutionary perspective. They organized via mutual aid societies and gradually joined the organized labor unions to demand better wage and working conditions. A series of successful strikes from 1908 to 1914 were a collaborative undertaking of the socialist intelligentsia with a more heterogeneous blue-collar Jewish immigrant workforce.⁴³ The involvement in local organizing gave the marginalized labor class a means to enter the political arena and advance within the city’s social hierarchy. Membership within the unions created ties to emergent political parties such as the Jewish Labor Party, the Socialist Party, and the American Labor Party, each of which made some headway within mainstream electoral politics in 1920s New York.⁴⁴

This type of ground-up organizing adopted a more oppositional approach toward the establishment that was different from the steady lobbying and institutional change being proposed by the settlement progressives in early-twentieth-century New York. The beer gardens, meeting halls, and theaters on the Lower East Side—the scourge of the settlement workers—provided places for people to meet, participate in mass culture, and create a space for autonomous political expression. In a report produced by the University Settlement in 1899, different authors criticized the existing “saloons” and “public halls” of the Lower East Side as disreputable places.⁴⁵ While recognizing the need for public halls, particularly in the winter months, settlement house workers regarded the culture of drinking within them with disapproval. They advocated, instead, for a large gathering space within the settlement, sans alcohol, to alleviate the problem.

The political potency of the saloons and beer halls, as Tom Goyens explains in *Beer and Revolution*, was not to be underestimated. Commerce and public political life freely associated in these venues that were decorated with photographs of respected speakers and advertisements of events. Anarchists, socialists, and unionists favored their preferred establishments, each setting up an insider understanding of these places that gained a reputation over time.⁴⁶ Enterprising proprietors built purpose built street level halls with residential quarters all along major commercial thoroughfares. On East Eleventh Street between Third and Fourth Avenues, Charles Goldstein, a Polish-born German émigré, built one such establishment, Webster Hall in 1886. The grand rental hall included the owner’s living quarters in an annex and became a center for the public gatherings of a working-class population, providing a space for dances, receptions, lectures, meetings,

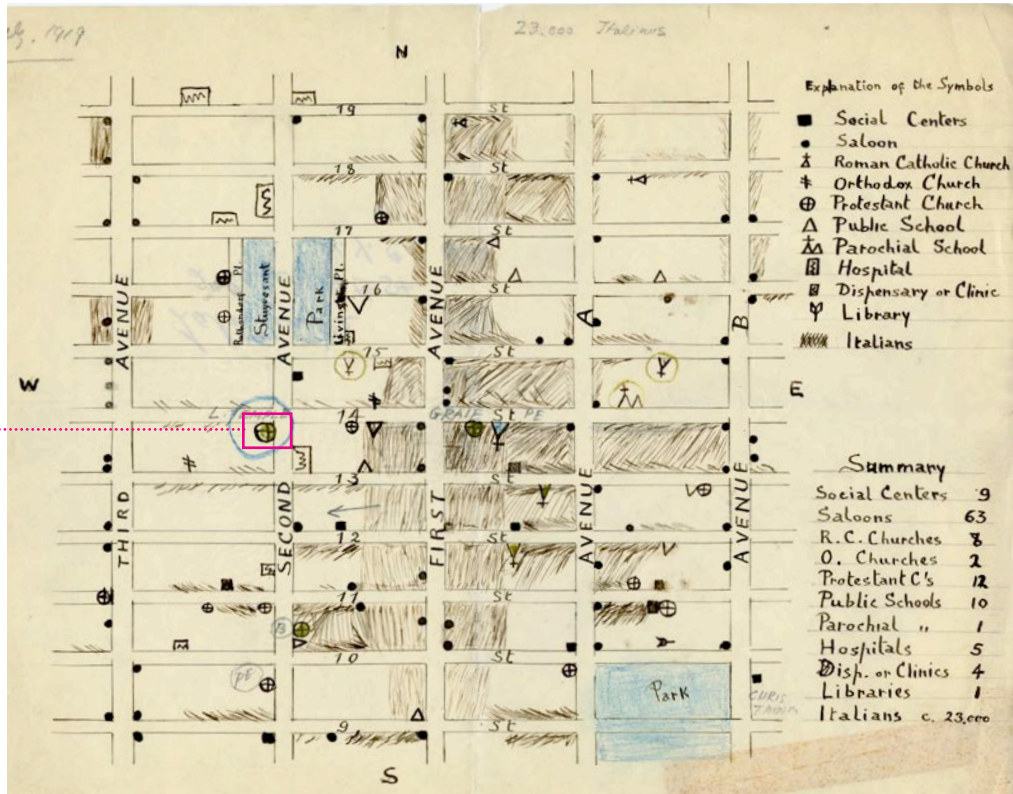
conventions, political rallies, military functions, concerts, performances, festivities, sporting and fund-raising events. All the way up to the Second World War, this hall was the preferred venue for leftist rallies with speakers such as Margret Sanger, Samuel Gompers, and, later, Emma Goldman drawing large crowds.⁴⁷

LABOR, CHURCH, AND THE INTERWAR YEARS (1910–1940)

With the rise of the organized labor movement and the changing demographic of immigration, the churches, which were long supporters of immigrant life on the Lower East Side, struggled to find relevance. St. Mark's Church on East Tenth Street and Judson Church to the south of Washington Square expanded their parishes to provide amenities such as hospitals, parish halls, and schoolhouses to meet the demands of an Eastern European and Italian immigrant community respectively. These socially responsive religious establishments thus integrated themselves into the twentieth-century landscape of the city by expanding their programs to address the immediate needs of a working-class congregation.⁴⁸

Charles Stelzle, a Presbyterian missionary and onetime union machinist, had a different vision for the future of the religious establishment in an era of labor organizing. In 1910, at a time and place when other churches were closing, he took over a chapel on Fourteenth Street at Second Avenue and transformed it into the “Labor Temple” on behalf of the Second Presbyterian Church. His experience as a minister in the labor movement and roots in the Lower East Side made him keen to breach the growing divide between the church and the working men and women within the neighborhood.⁴⁹ As the name suggests, the Labor Temple was meant to attract union members, socialists, and religious thinkers in equal measure. Despite the formidable competition from the many entertainment establishments in the neighborhood (Figure 1.11), the sermons and lectures at the Labor Temple were well attended. The “highlight of the Labor Temple’s Program,” wrote historian Richard Poethig, was the open forum where “radicals of all stripes, labor leaders, social gossellers” were invited to speak.⁵⁰

It was at this church, in 1915, that Jessie Wallace Hughan—a devout Christian, a suffragist, and a member of the Socialist Party—addressed the congregation and urged them to join the “Anti-Enlistment League.” Hughan, along with others of the interwar generation, came to the pacifist platform from a religious perspective that was reinforced with a political belief that the root causes of war lay in the



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"Sketch of a neighborhood map around the location of the Labor Temple, at Second Avenue Fourteenth Street in New York City, 1919." The Labor Temple is encircled in blue. The inventory shows the community services around the church. Of note are the sixty-three saloons that provided competition to the social and communal gatherings at the labor church.

Illustration of the Labor Temple from the Edmund B. Chaffee Papers in the Arents Library, courtesy of Syracuse Special Collection Archives. Map of the neighborhood courtesy of the Presbyterian Historical Society.

inequalities engendered by a capitalist economy. In 1923 she founded the War Resisters League (WRL) in New York as the first secular pacifist organization whose membership was not restricted by sex, religion, or political affiliations.⁵¹ While motivated by a religious belief in nonviolence, Hughan recognized the importance of a broad-based secular and socialist anti-war movement. The WRL slogan attributed to Hughan, “Wars Will Cease When Men Refuse to Fight,” was instrumental in the later development of the personalist politics of a small but committed cadre of men and women that became a key strategy of the anti-war resistance during World War II.

In 1937, as Japan attacked China and triggered a chain of global reactions that headed toward World War II, the new minister at the head of the Labor Temple, Abraham Johannes Muste, articulated an explicit theological position that forged a link between the peace, labor, and social justice movements within the nation.⁵² A. J. Muste, a Quaker, an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, and a former member of the Trotskyist party, spent a lifetime reconciling his vested interest in labor organizing with his theological calling. As general secretary of the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America (1919–1921), Muste was a dedicated Marxist union organizer. In his later life he rejected the rigid economic bias of Marxism while maintaining his faith in its proposition of a radical political revolution.⁵³

PERSONALIST ESTATES (1941–1955)

*The Communitarian Revolution is basically a personal revolution.
It starts with I, not with They.
One I plus one I makes two I's and two I's make We.
We is a community, while “they” is a crowd.
—Peter Maurin, *Easy Essays, Catholic Worker.**

Opposition to World War II, the so-called good war against Fascism, was an unpopular position in the United States. The peace churches—the Quakers, Mennonites, and the Brethren—that had historically refused to participate in wars were officially granted the position of conscientious objectors (COs) in past wars. During World War II, those who qualified as COs were sent to civilian camps to work in some indirect way to support the war effort. Secular pacifists who failed the religious test or religious pacifists who refused to work in these civilian camps were denied conscientious objector status and were incarcerated in federal prisons as traitors.⁵⁴ It was in these prisons that the COs protesting the Jim Crow separation of black inmates in the prison dining halls initiated a series of hunger and work strikes.

The first of these began in a correctional facility in Danbury, Connecticut, and generated a chain reaction in prisons across the country where COs were being held.⁵⁵

In 1943 Danbury prison became the first federal prison in the country to be desegregated and proved to the war-resisters that a small handful of people could bring about reform within the system through nonviolent direct action.⁵⁶ The civil disobedience doctrine of Gandhi, long admired by the members of the American pacifist left, was thus implemented with success in these prison strikes. The WRL and Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) members were key participants in the prison strikes. For WRL members Jim Peck, William Sutherland, Bayard Rustin, David Dellinger, and Ralph DiGia, this experience was formative and initiated a new direction within the pacifist movement upon their return to a small WRL office in New York.⁵⁷ The isolation within the prisons created a strategic shift in the anti-war activism, where the broader agenda of social injustice was experienced firsthand by the COs. The focus on individual perseverance and a call to brotherhood and action-based pacifism emerged as the new form of left-wing activism in Cold War America.

The personalist politics of the American left was a reaction to the global events and shift in national perspective that challenged the organized labor and socialist movement within the United States. For Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, self-proclaimed anarchists and cofounders of the Catholic Worker movement, the “gentle personalism of traditional Catholicism” was the basis for a political and spiritual activism.⁵⁸ In 1933 they launched the *Catholic Worker*, a newspaper directed toward the unemployed during the Great Depression, and distributed in Union Square for one cent (Figure 1.12). This newspaper reported on human rights, labor unions, and other non-cooperation movements dedicated to nonviolent direct action. Differentiating itself from other labor newspapers, the *Catholic Worker* extolled the idea of “work” as a “gift from God” that rightfully needed to be re-gifted back to the community.⁵⁹ This co-option of work back to serve society was an innovative meshing of a Catholic dogma with Marxist labor theory.

The successful sales of the newspaper allowed the Catholic Worker to expand their movement. They set up communal catholic worker houses in cities across the country. In 1939, Dorothy Day set up houses of hospitality in two buildings on Mott Street in downtown Manhattan. In these houses, volunteers lived in self-imposed poverty, caring for those in need of food and shelter. The combination of Catholic solidarity with the less fortunate combined with a radical



anti-capitalist critique of the nation was fiercely debated at Friday night meetings and lectures by invited speakers. Fourteen years later, Day purchased a five-story red brick building on Chrystie Street, just south of Houston, and organized the St. Joseph's Catholic Workers House. In 1957 this building was demolished as part of a large urban renewal scheme and the operation relocated further east to a smaller building on First Street.⁶⁰ In this volunteer-run soup kitchen and boarding house, each Catholic worker lived and served the community by an ethical code that was based on personal conviction. In contrast to the earlier model of the settlement house worker living with the urban poor, the reciprocal relationship between the "worker" and the "poor" in the Catholic House was blurred and less didactic vision of charity. Furthermore, unlike the settlement houses, the Catholic

1.12
People reading the *Catholic Worker*,
Union Square, New York City, 1940.
Courtesy of the Department of Special
Collections and University Archives, Mar-
quette University Archives.

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Worker was staunchly opposed to a government and accepted no tax breaks, subsidies, or government aid. This radical, anarchic philosophy of the Catholic Worker was however tempered by a deep humanity and personal empathy toward their fellow men and women.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, FOR, under the leadership of A. J. Muste and the WRL, regrouped in Downtown Manhattan at a rented office at 5 Beekman Street, directly opposite City Hall. The handsome nine-story brick and terra-cotta structure, which was built in 1889, had seen better days. At the time, when the WRL moved into one of the top-floor spaces, the grand atrium court extending through the entire height of the building was boarded up and closed. The poorly maintained and mostly vacant office building provided a well-hidden and affordable working zone for the political dissidents. By the end of the Second World War, it was here that a new left pacifism, influenced by the personalism, was shaped.⁶¹ The building became the peace movement's headquarters, as the generation of activists forged through the CO camp and prison experience, emphasizing civil disobedience and direct action as the way forward. This militant stance put the younger generation at odds with some in the older guard that saw in their actions a violation of some core principles of pacifism.⁶² Critical of both the United States and the Soviet Union, the WRL and related pacifist groups, such as the Catholic Worker, FOR, and the Peacemakers, distanced themselves from American Exceptionalism and Soviet Communism in equal measure. The historian James J. Farrell describes this new form of leftist formation as "a third way between capitalism and communism, between radical individualism and collective radicalism."⁶³

Internationally, with the specter of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki heavy on the American conscience, the anti-war activists organized street actions and public forums. They also built ties with global and national justice movements and sent emissaries to Africa and Asia to connect anti-apartheid and anti-colonial struggles abroad to racial struggles back at home. In the '50s the WRL sponsored Bill Sutherland, a pan-Africanist who spoke to audiences in Birmingham, London, Paris, and the Gold Coast.⁶⁴ At home, Bayard Rustin, the WRL secretary, was "released" to work and advise Martin Luther King, Jr., on the many nonviolent direct actions that marked the beginnings of the civil rights movement in the United States.⁶⁵

The office's location in Downtown Manhattan allowed for lunch meetings on Wall Street and protests at City Hall (Figure 1.13). On June 15, 1955, the various peace and justice activists at 5 Beekman Street protested the civil defense drill enforced by the U.S. government to

1.13

Starting on June 15, 1955, anti-nuclear pacifists gathered in City Hall Park and refused to take cover every year when there was a drill. The demonstrators brought attention to the fact that the shelter was not going to save lives in the event of a nuclear attack.

Disarmament, they pointed out, was the only way.

Flyer from Records of SANE Inc., 1957–1987, DG 58, Courtesy of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

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prepare for the future nuclear attack. While the rest of the nation hid in their official bunkers, thirty-one friends from the Catholic Worker, FOR, and the WRL remained above ground, highlighting the futility of the bunker defense. The dissenters were arrested and charged with violating the New York State Defense Emergency Act of 1951. Among those arrested were the thespians Judith Malina and Julian Beck. The *New York Times* reported that Malina was sent to Bellevue Hospital for “observation” after she argued with the magistrate, and her husband was ejected from court for objecting to the magistrate’s decision.⁶⁶ The staged nature of these protests and the disruption of court proceedings were ways in which the political and the personal were explored through the medium of Malina and Beck’s performative tactics. The confrontation with the disciplinary institutions—police, justice, and feds—were a recurring theme within Malina and Beck’s performance work as well as their real lives.

ARTISTS ESTATES

THEATRICAL ESTATES (1947–1963)

Judith Malina, along with partner, Julian Beck, founded the Living Theater in 1947. This experimental theater company explored the critical link between performance and political dissent. The deliberate act of getting arrested during the civil defense drills and spending jail time with veteran activists such as Dorothy Day activated the political imagination of the younger Judith Malina.⁶⁷ In her diaries, Malina describes her interactions with the Catholic Worker’s Ammon Hennessey and deep admiration for Dorothy Day, in whom she saw “fire and poetry.”⁶⁸ The anarchist pacifism of Day, with its focus on showing by example and public action, had resonance for Malina. The theatrical aspect of the protests found their way into the performance repertoire as Malina and Beck challenged the political and formal expectations of theater audiences. A pioneering experiment on many fronts, the Living Theater was influenced by the avant-garde theories of the French director Antonin Artaud and the radical pacifism of activists like Day in equal parts. From Artaud, the Living Theater developed its distaste of commercial Broadway productions and explored, instead, a stark, aggressive realism that sought to jolt the audience from passivity to awareness. From Day came the commitment to a revolutionary pacifism by bringing attention to violence and injustice as a way to live peaceably.⁶⁹

These two subversive positions against the romantic, passive model of theater engagement symbolized by Broadway and their participation

in the actions of the emergent new left in the '50s made the existence of the Living Theater group very precarious. Looking for a stable venue, the group performed in various makeshift storefronts, basements, and lofts all over the city that were serially shut down by the fire department or the police on the pretext of safety and security. In 1951, after having been ousted from a small basement space on Wooster Street on the allegation that the space was being deployed as cover for a brothel, the couple decided to move the venue to their apartment in the Upper West Side. The "Theater in the Room" was the performance that emerged in this intimate and unlikely environment. They hosted an audience composed mainly of their bohemian friends—painters, writers, and musicians.

Over the years, the Living Theater staged performances that invited composers such as John Cage and Lou Harrison, dancers such as Merce Cunningham, and the beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti to collaborate with them on projects that challenged the formal boundaries of performance art in general. Beck, who designed all the sets and costumes for the productions, shared an interest in the formal interdisciplinary innovation that was a part of the culture of music, painting, and performance in the '50s. However, the increasingly political content of the Living Theater performances set them apart from some of their friends and contemporaries who remained, at the time, more centrist in their political views.⁷⁰

The Living Theater subsequently moved their productions from the apartment to the Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village, and then further north to the Playhouse on Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue. In this location, the company repurposed an old department store and converted the second floor into a 150-seat theater. It was here that they produced Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959), a play about drug addiction, and Kenneth Brown's *The Brig* (1963), a brutal portrayal of life in a U.S. Marine Corps prison in Japan (Figure 1.14). Artaud's concept of a "Theater of Cruelty" was used in these staging's to depict the violence and dehumanization within society. The

1.14
Frames from a film by Jonas Mekas that documents the performance of the play, *The Brig*, by the Living Theatre, 1964.



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unflinching representations of heroin addicts shooting up onstage and the in-character verbal abuse of the actors on- and offstage in rehearsal were meant to reveal the stark realities of addiction, war, and incarceration. These two productions approached pacifism in a paradoxical way by making the violence palpable to a point that made the audience uncomfortable.⁷¹

As part of the mission to make the work accessible, the Living Theater charged low admission fees and survived financially with grants from foundations and personal loans. The productions, run on a shoestring budget with a small following in the downtown theater scene, allowed the Living Theater to barely break even after fifteen years of challenging existence. In 1963, toward the end of a five-year lease, the Fourteenth Street Playhouse was padlocked by the IRS for the nonpayment of taxes.⁷² On October 19, the cast and crew of the Living Theater, along with a few hardy audience members, broke into confiscated property and even as federal police prevented a hundred-plus crowd of agitating supporters from entering the premises, the Living Theater staged its final performance of *The Brig*. Twenty-five people were arrested and carried out of the building by the police and charged with obstruction of federal rulings. In the court proceedings that followed this arrest and the trials for tax evasion, Judith Malina and Julian Beck proceeded to turn the courtroom into a theater—using dramatic language and disruptive tactics to plead their case.⁷³

The aspect of performance and dramatic reenactments were also an integral part of civil rights activism in 1960s America. The year 1963 was filled with civil rights demonstrations and nonviolent direct actions protesting racial segregation. Sit-ins, marches, and boycotts in Birmingham, Alabama, among other places, fired the imagination and desire for participation in the supportive east and west coast activist communities. The focus on everyday life and the staging of public protest against segregation in schools, parks, restaurants, and schools captured the attention of the nation. The images of the stoic nonviolent resistance of the civil rights activists in the face of police brutality was transmitted through newspapers, radio, and television. The demonstrations of collective strength and street actions reverberated across the country and gave momentum to the new left. Collectivity, a phenomenon that was previously associated with organized labor party politics, was interpreted by anti-institutional activists and artists in its anarchic communitarian dimension. These enactments of dissent and the effective use of public space in its potential to generate theater were a precedent to the many civil disobedience actions during the Vietnam War years.

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VANGUARD ESTATES

The Living Theater's underlying critique of war, prison, and the capitalist state on stage was fortified by the involvement of the founders in the anti-authoritarian, pacifist, and artistic movements mobilizing in Greenwich Village in the early '60s. With a focus on antinuclear proliferation, a coalition of peace activists and artists began the Greenwich Village Peace Center in 1961, in a rented storefront at 133 West Third Street. At this point in time, Vietnam was a small country on the other side of the globe, one that few Americans had heard of. With the active engagement of the United States Army, first in an advisory role, and then with the deployment of ground troops in the mid-60s in a directly offensive role, the Greenwich Village Peace Center became a hub of anti-war organization. Educating themselves about Vietnam and forms of nonviolent resistance, the Peace Center showed films and engaged audiences through theater and teach-ins to prepare for the most contentious period in the war history of the country. The novelist Grace Paley, a founder of the center, in an interview with the *Nonviolent Activist*, described how theater, music, and art played a vital role in supporting and shaping the anti-war movement in Lower Manhattan.⁷⁴

In this same milieu, Peter Schumann, a friend and co-conspirator of the Becks, began building puppets in a loft on Delancey Street, on the Lower East Side. Reviving a European folk tradition, Schumann, along with his wife, Elka, hosted puppet shows that examined urgent political issues using archaic, larger-than-life puppet characters. The Bread and Puppet Theater grew from these shows to become a part of the radical artistic and political scene unfolding around Washington Square Park. The doleful puppets, often as tall as fifteen feet, became a staple of the many anti-war demonstrations and parades in New York for the next few decades (Figure 1.15). The reciprocal relationship between art and anti-war activism is clearest in the direct relationships between theater and public protest fostered through the relationships between the artists and activists around Washington Square.

As the demographics of what had been an immigrant Italian neighborhood around Washington Square changed, artists, writers, and musicians moved into the neighborhood and transformed the Italian cafés, churches, squares, and narrow streets into a bohemian haven for countercultural experimentation.⁷⁵ Judson Memorial Church, designed by McKim, Mead and White, with its distinctive campanile and spacious interior on the southern edge of Washington Square, an institution that had provided support for the Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century once more broadened its

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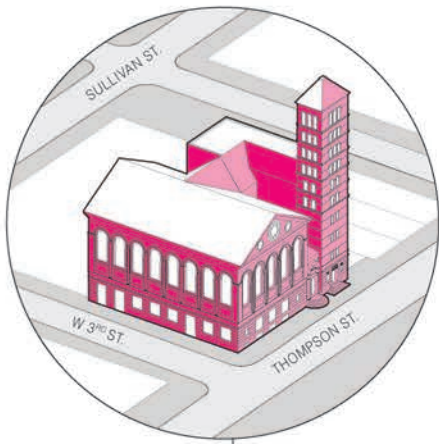


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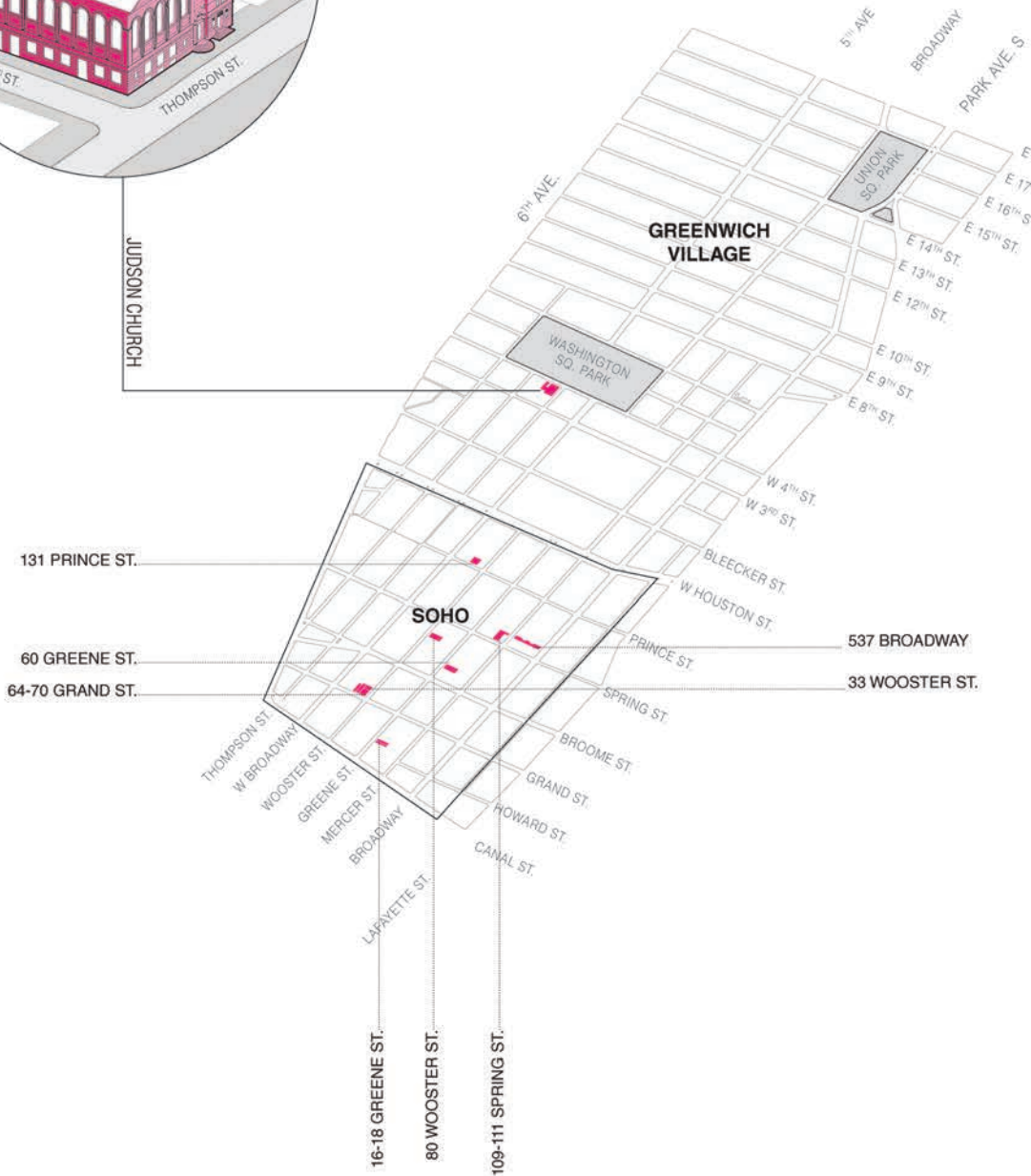
1.15
Bread and Puppet Theater at an anti-Vietnam War parade, Greenwich Village, 1965.
Photograph courtesy of Robert Joyce papers, 1952–1973, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.

mission as the constitution of the neighborhood changed (Figure 1.16). Under the leadership of the activist pastor Howard Moody, the church advocated for civil rights, abortion rights, treatment of drug addiction, and later, patients with HIV. Alongside these social campaigns, the church also opened its spaces to the growing colony of artists who were active in the area. The Judson Gallery (1959), Judson Poets Theater (1961), and Judson Dance Theater (1962), coordinated by young avant-garde painters, performers, musicians, and dancers, respectively, transformed the church into a place of experimentation with little constraint and no censorship.

Young artists looking for opportunities outside mainstream museum and performance venues found room to explore and collaborate within the sanctuary. The question of authorship and authenticity examined by artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Alan Kaprow at Judson resulted in “happenings” and multimedia events where the artwork was part of an environment that the audience experienced as a whole rather than a singular commodity object.⁷⁶ Influenced by these happenings, George Maciunas, a Lithuanian émigré with pro-Soviet affinities, formed the art collective Fluxus. Fluxus was a loose



JUDSON CHURCH



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1.16

Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village and SoHo buildings converted to Flux Houses by George Maciunas, 1967–1977.

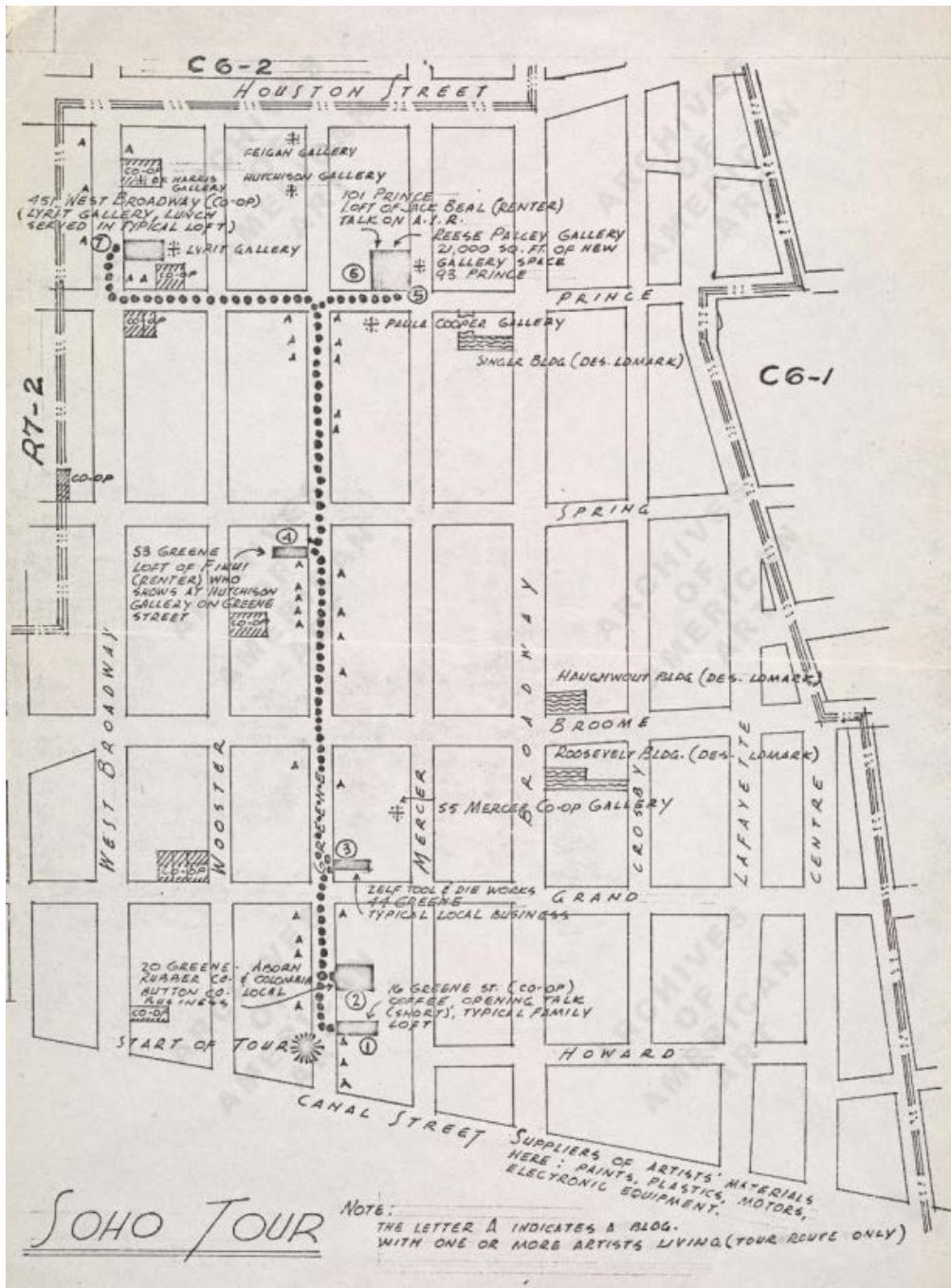
Illustration by Nandini Bagchee.

conglomerate of participating artists, including Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, George Brecht, and La Monte Young. They were influenced by, and sometimes collaborated with, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, and Alison Knowles. The exact membership was unclear, as they collaborated with each other and with outsiders as well. Maciunas likened the group to a “fluid discharge,” and in a manifesto he described the project as an effort to “purge the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual,’ professional & commercialized culture,” and in its stead to, “PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART, Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.”⁷⁷ This aspiration of Fluxus to make art a part of the everyday led Maciunas to engage in a series of experiments that pushed the limits of art by extending into the living space of the artists.

LIVE-WORK ESTATES (1967–1971)

In 1967 Maciunas advertised his plan to develop an artists’ co-op in the neighborhood south of Houston Street (SoHo) to the well-connected Greenwich Village art community.⁷⁸ Maciunas’s project, called the Flux House, involved creating a cooperative of affordable housing for artists on a large multi-building scale. To achieve this goal, Maciunas purchased sixteen loft buildings over a period of ten years and converted them into live-work spaces for invested artists. He began purchasing existing buildings by cobbling together small sums of money from fellow artists who were willing to enter into a precarious investment, as future co-op owners, within manufacturing lofts.⁷⁹ Maciunas renovated these spacious, commercially zoned work spaces with the help of an otherwise under-employed workforce of artists and carpenters and created an internal real estate/ construction economy. Flux House II at 80 Wooster Street, a pilot project with two or three artist-owners, was the first to be established. In its first rendition the co-op housing included a cinematheque on the ground floor, which was run by fellow Lithuanian-born filmmaker Jonas Mekas.⁸⁰ Some version of this arrangement, which combined work spaces with residences, was owned and run by an artist’s cooperative. Maciunas conceived this as a model of a collectivized estate designed for and by the Fluxus community.

The task of handling construction and making the buildings available while keeping the fire and building department at bay was the kind of challenge that Maciunas enjoyed. The ad hoc management of the properties and a series of run-ins with the workmen and city agencies ultimately frayed the patience of the loft dwellers. However, the



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Map of SoHo tour, SoHo Artists Association 1968-1978.

Map courtesy of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

collective spirit that Maciunas and other artists had hoped to cultivate did materialize in some measure, despite the tensions that arose from the wheeler-dealer methods of purchase and the setting up of the mostly illegal cooperative. The artist/investors of the Flux Houses and others that followed in their footsteps managed to gain a foothold in the loft-scape of SoHo. They did so, perhaps not as radically opposed to the bureaucracy as Maciunas envisioned, but rather more pragmatically like other communities in New York by forming the SoHo Artists Association in 1968 and by lobbying for political support. Maciunas, having instigated the co-op and injected the artists into the industrial neighborhood, left the city dissatisfied with the outcome.⁸¹

In 1971 the New York Board of Estimate finally passed a zoning resolution that legalized the use of SoHo lofts as living quarters for bona fide artists. This victory for the artists marked the beginning of what many urbanists would subsequently regard as a city policy that used the artist community to further their agenda of gentrification and urban renewal without the trauma of destruction and dislocation.⁸² In 1973 SoHo artists opened their lofts to the outside world to see how they lived. This event showcased their work, and a map outlined a “tour” along Greene Street (Figure 1.17). The lives of the artists living in SoHo, in this case, became more interesting than their work. In a reversal of the Living Theater project to make life a part of art, personal lives and the living conditions of artists had, here, become a part of life. The bare-bones loft aesthetic that emerged as a result of the scarcity of materials and means, later became attractive to investors and symbolic of the escalation in value of these same live-work estates in the '80s.

ACTIVIST ESTATES: A SWARM OF POINTS

Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.

Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities.

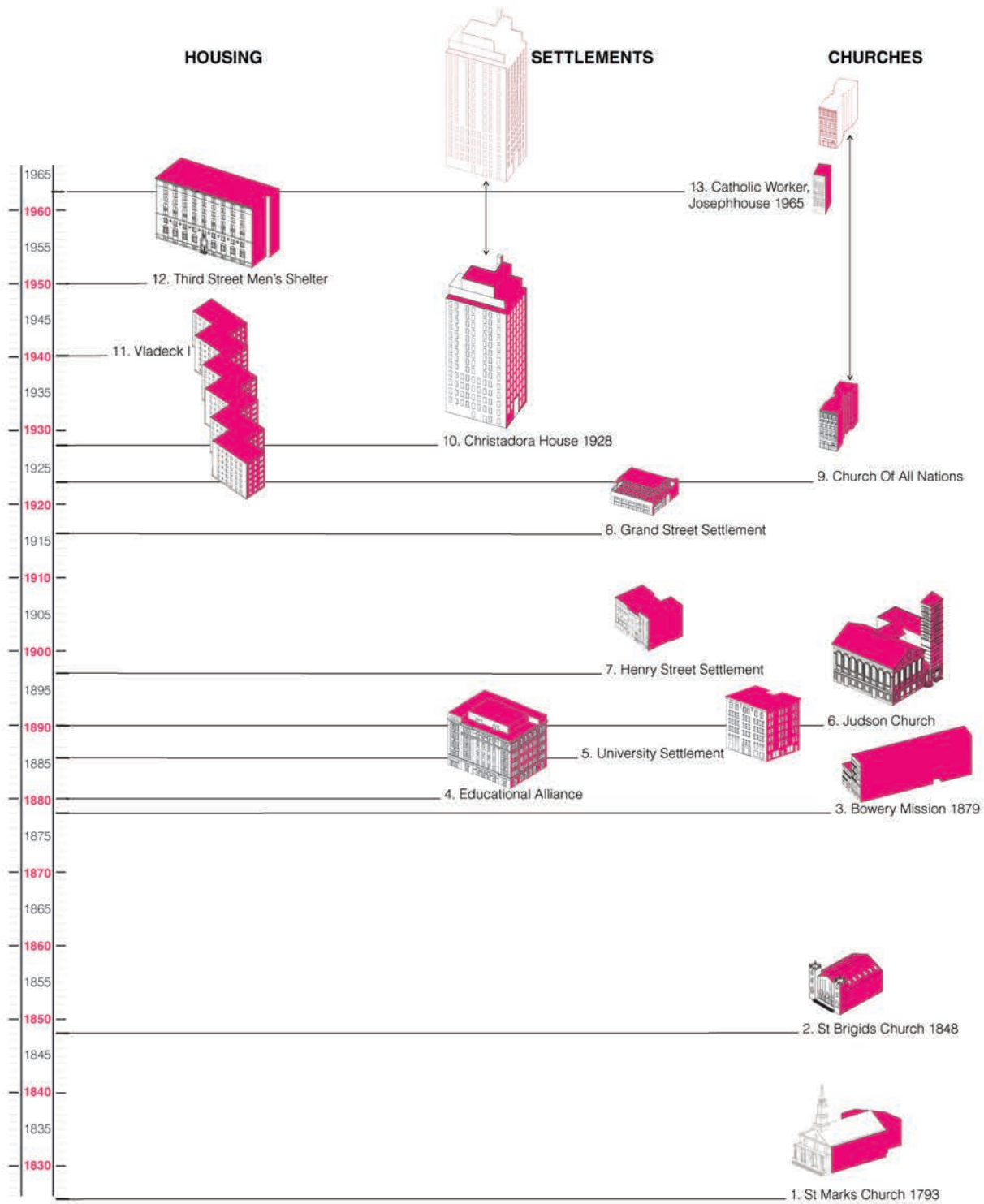
—Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*

The activist estates described herein are, as Foucault suggests, embedded in the larger matrix of power relationships in a place through time (Figure 1.18). Their forces, are distributed within a geographic terrain but their institutional goals are multi-centric, and hence, there is a

dynamic of overlapping resistances. They operate in many ways like the larger institutions they seek to challenge and dismantle, creating their own networks that pass through the many different locations and spaces described here.

From the purpose-built settlement houses, public housing, churches, and social clubs to the appropriated theaters, churches, and live-work lofts, the spirit of activism found a place to challenge and mesh. The landscape of resistance as established through the *Progressive*, *Radical*, and *Artistic* imperatives of a wide-ranging but well-connected network of dissidents paradoxically intertwined with the fungibility of real estate. The existing infrastructure of properties (a swarm of points) and the meanings inscribed by the practices of generations of activists described in this chapter provide a background for the three types of counter-institutions that emerged in response to the militarism of the nation, the urban crisis of the city, and the commodification of culture within the fluid geography of the Lower East Side. Examining the ideas and ideals of the progressives, radicals, and artists in the late nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century makes it possible to understand why this small part of a large city has been a cauldron of progressive action for more than a century.

In the '70s, as the fiscal crisis affected New York's municipal structure, the existing network of people and the practices provided the foundation for different types of space-based resistance. The three case studies presented in the main body of this book represent three different but overlapping political constituencies that emerged in the Lower East Side in the '70s. Bolstered by widespread civil rights and anti-war movements nationwide, the first of these buildings, nicknamed the Peace Pentagon, was bought by the War Resisters League in 1969 and set up as offices for groups advocating for peace and social justice. The second building, El Bohio Community Center, set up by the Puerto Rican collective CHARAS in 1977, was a place to celebrate the culture of Loisaida (the Latinized pronunciation for the Lower East Side). The third building, ABC No Rio, was developed in 1979 as a storefront gallery by members of an artist's collective to pursue "non-commercial, community-oriented, experimental art practices." Despite profound changes in the neighborhood, in many respects the concerns and achievements of the earlier years continued to inform the next round of developments in the area.



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