

# HOW TO TAKE OVER A BUILDING

a purim minizine 5769/2009  
for the JFREJ & Workmen's Circle/arbeter-ring purimshpil

with words from  
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the lower east side

and information from  
the LES squat zine dedicated to Eleanor Bumpurs  
the Homes Not Jails "Squatters' Handbook"  
"Living Without Permission" zine

galut גלות galus  
exile  
sherith korakh zine project #three  
for a vibrant jewish anarchist rebel culture & the embrace of love and resistance

## **The Group**

the people you live & work with are more important than the building you choose. six people should be about enough. every group has its own style – political, artsy, partying, businesslike, just trying to get over. whatever yours is like, you'll need to relate to the neighborhood as well as each other. if you only have token members of its main community, you could wind up in some trouble.

it's useful to have a set of rules agreed on and written down beforehand, including things like amounts of time per month working on the house, money into the house fund, how new members join, whether alcohol and drugs are allowed, and so on.

*she got all that together, always with a particular building in mind, she matched the building with the group. the son of one family could work with the father of another, because they had the talents to do something specific to the gut rehab of the building. /VP/*

you'll have to look at more than one building. look for a block that's less gentrified already. try to figure out whether anyone – developers, politicians, community groups, &c – has their eye on the building.

use oasisnyc.org to find out who owns the building, and so on – city-owned is MUCH better, because it makes it harder to evict you.

*oh yeah these buildings were up for years empty. so after we had moved out and i was like seventeen years old, i came back and i opened up one of the buildings along with people in the community. thirty-six attorney street. /TD/*

## **Looking for a Building**

## Looking at Buildings

go in & look around. after dark will be easiest. BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU STEP AND WHAT YOU HOLD ONTO. bring a person who knows about old buildings if at all possible. from the back, you can go up the fire escape to a window or the roof; from the front, you can go up a 12' ladder to a window, with two lookouts and a ladder-steadier; at worst, one person with lookouts can chisel the blocks out of a ground-floor window.

look for: [outsidel] holes in the masonry; bulging or sagging foundations; gaps where there should be mortar; detached or missing fire escape; [roof] holes; missing, burnt or rotted joists; parapet walls and cornices; [stairs] missing flights; damaged cement or supports; [floors] missing, burnt or rotted joists; more than 1" of slope; [sewer pipes] holes; missing pipes or segments

*that was the era landlords regularly torched buildings.  
you'd watch the fire department not show up for a while.  
you'd make an assessment of the building. stairs  
deliberately smashed in so no one could live there. /AL/*

claw hammer cold chisel electric jigsaw  
mortar  
angle grinder 'home improvement' book pots & pans  
sewing kit wire stripper/clipper cement

*we wanted ownership because rent stabilizers changes. it changes every year. every year it goes up. they could do away with it. /TD/*

*carol watson and LES Catholic Area Council had a firm belief that housing can only be preserved for low-income families if the land that it was on was held in perpetual trust, that it could never be used for profitable purposes. call that what you want. /VP/*

## Tools

12-pound sledge hammer crowbar hacksaw  
knife

## Neighbors

be friendly, polite and outgoing in the neighborhood. meet the people on your block. keep your sidewalk clean. don't throw your trash in neighbors' garbage cans. go to block association meetings. be a helpful and reliable member of the community.

*from what i remember it was mixed. these were the artist freaks, and then they'd bring in recent immigrants, people from the neighborhood. the demos were about housing being a right, whether it was low-income housing or reclaiming buildings. /AL/*

paint your group name and address on the door: "The 613 E. 2<sup>nd</sup> Street Homestead Association & Neighborhood Improvement Committee", &c.

*you'd go for a city-owned building, go in with a sledge hammer and knock into the cinder blocks. /AL/*

*we took the chain down, we opened it up, and we moved people in. people from the neighborhood that were being pushed out. we moved them in, and we took it over, and we fought the city for about three years, and we won. /TD/*

## Getting In

the door comes first!

get a door and frame ready to put in. break out the concrete blocks from the inside, with a lookout or two outside. clean up the blocks and sweep the sidewalk quick. then immediately put the door and frame you've prepared in place. use a home-improvement guide to figure out how – basically, mortar and broken concrete blocks around a precisely squared frame. keep a low profile – work quickly and quietly.

## **Basic Needs**

the longterm maintenance of a building depends more on the roof than anything. clear off debris, patch the holes with felt paper & roofing tar, ask roofers for advice on more complicated problems.

heating possibilities include kerosene heaters (with proper precautions – no fuel in the room with the stove; no sleeping with it on), wood stoves (you can make one from a steel drum; use shipping pallets for fuel), and electric heaters once you get power hooked up. run a flue to bring smoke up to 5' above the roof.

candles and coleman lanterns can be good alternatives to battery-powered lights.

a propane burner or camp stove can be very practical and economical; a regular gas stove can also be fueled from a small propane tank.

until you figure out how to connect to the sewer system, you'll need a latrine set-up. a bucket with lime or sawdust for piss; a composting toilet arrangement or a bagging system.

be sure to make some provisions for washing even is you mainly do it at friends' houses, churches, or the Y. after checking your pipes, try turning the water back on at the point it enters the building. hoses and clamps can make temporary plumbing if the pipes are in bad shape.

if the wiring is okay, you have a right to get the electricity turned on (maybe by paying a deposit). it's probably not a good idea to tell them you're squatting – insist on your right to service as a resident.

*thirty-six attorney street was a victory. there's no attorney anymore, that block doesn't exist. but if you go in back of st. mary's rectory, there's a little building there, looks like little house in the prairie. we have people here that if the city would have been able to get away with what it wanted these people would have been living in a shelter - disabled people, they're poor people, they wouldn't have made it in a shelter. they couldn't make it. we won the right to stay there. and thirty-six attorney street is still there. /TD/*

## **Defense**

don't talk to cops or officials - no one comes in without a warrant.

don't accept registered mail unless you can see it's not from the city government. don't identify yourself or answer any questions. don't answer anything that has someone else's name or 'Jane Doe' on it, but do go to a court clerk and get it on record that no one of that name lives at the address.

do not leave your building unattended, ever. keep your ground/floor windows sealed or barred; eliminate hand & footholds; be sure that the door to the roof is secured.

establish yourselves as residents, not trespassers. have mail sent to you. get ID (library cards, &c) with your address.

*always the treat of eviction. some buildings, folks would force their way back in. /AL/*

## **Creativity**

think about whether and how you want to be visible. decorating your building can attract attention, but can also interest people in what you're doing and gain you support. if you already have support from your neighbors and community, making a spectacle of yourself can be an important and powerful thing.

*we would then have one of the local priests come to the building, no matter what the weather was, but it was*

*always on a saturday, and gathering all the prospective homesteaders for the building. he would bless the building. it would be para-liturgic kind of ceremony. it was taken very seriously. the priest would bless the building, sprinkle holy water on it, make sure the press was there. the door would then be painted red, with a black cross painted on the front. in a sense, the building was christened with a name selected by the group. it was given a name. the whole ceremony was a signal to the administration "that was your building, downtown, HPD, but now it's ours. we're taking it over, and we're going to develop this building for housing people who need it." /VP/*

## **Making a Home**

keep your place safe, clean and healthy. put up curtains, make shelves, organize your kitchen, wash your windows. make a cozy spot for reading. arrange your chochkes. put up pictures. invite your friends over for a celebratory dinner.

*a big challenge within the whole movement was that since it was this whole social experiment, it could only be as successful as the level of communication, maturity, social skills of the people involved. /AL/*

*once i got involved with the tenants i realized that this was home, because if you got through the building, totally integrated building, all poor people with a heart. i'm home. i'm home. i had a very good job, i have a very good job with the federal government. i get good pay, i could live somewhere else. but i don't want to live anywhere else. /TD/*

## **Reclaiming Land**

returning abandoned buildings to life and taking them out of the cycles of profit and speculation is not only important because it puts roofs over folks' heads. it is part of the long struggle over whether land and resources will be used for people or for profits, as part of living communities or for individual advantage. it may be called squatting, homesteading, or reclamation, done by catholic base communities, displaced renters, or punks and artists. no matter what, it insists that human needs come first. that communities have the right to control the space they live in.

and it is simply one face of a global surge of movements that ask no one's permission before acting, creating new structures for living together, and starting to bring into being the world we want to live in.

*it's a very human environment. an attempt at creating community, providing alternative solutions, social fabric that's based on sharing of skills, taking advantage of resources, self empowerment. /AL/*

*i don't think we could have done housing any other way because at the time it was radical thinking in response to really radical problems. /VP/*

## **Resources**

for more detailed information on how to take over buildings,  
the zines we used as sources are a good place to start:

LES squat zine dedicated to eleanor bumpurs

[text only] <http://www.squat.net/archiv/squatbook2/index.html>

[scan of complete zine] <http://zinelibrary.info/squat-zine>

Homes Not Jails “Squatters Handbook”

[scan of complete zine] <http://zinelibrary.info/squatters-handbook>

[abridged text from an australian group]

<http://www.squat.net/archiv/squatbook1/index.html>

for more on the broader political questions around reclaiming land and taking back our cities, check out:

the Right to the City Alliance – [www.righttothecity.org](http://www.righttothecity.org)

the Brazilian landless movement – [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org)

the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty – [www.ocap.ca](http://www.ocap.ca)

and the “Living Without Permission” zine on the dos blocos eviction

[text only] <http://www.squat.net/archiv/nopermission.html>

[scan of complete zine] <http://zinelibrary.info/living-without-permission>

and please support the work of the groups involved in the creation of this show:

Jews For Racial & Economic Justice – [www.jfrej.org](http://www.jfrej.org)

Workmen’s Circle/arbeter-ring – [www.circle.org](http://www.circle.org)

Good Old Lower East Side – [www.goles.org](http://www.goles.org)

CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities – [www.caaav.org](http://www.caaav.org)

Domestic Workers United – [www.domesticworkersunited.org](http://www.domesticworkersunited.org)

the SPURA Matters project - [placematters.net/pdfs/spura.pdf](http://placematters.net/pdfs/spura.pdf)

Seward Park Area Revitalization Committee