



Defensive and expansionist struggles for housing justice: 120 years of community rights in New York City

Oksana Mironova

New York

Oksana Mironova is a writer and researcher who was born in the former Soviet Union and grew up in Coney Island, Brooklyn. She writes about cities, housing, and public space. Read her work at oksana.nyc and follow her on Twitter [@oksanamironov](https://twitter.com/oksanamironov). **Contact:** oksana.mironova@gmail.com

Abstract

In struggles for dignified housing and greater agency, housing justice organizers often rely on an alternative valuation of urban space, based in community rights, which elevates the shared social value generated by residents over the market determined value of real estate. To parse the complexity of New York City's contemporary housing landscape, this piece outlines a typology for categorizing housing justice struggles as defensive or expansionist. The contemporary use of community rights as an ideological and ethical framework for these struggles is historically informed by successive housing justice campaigns throughout the twentieth century. And the concept of community rights may evolve yet again, as housing justice organizers expand their fight across geographies and build bridges with broader economic and racial justice movements.

Keywords

community rights, community control, tenants' rights, displacement, gentrification

Introduction

New York City's housing justice organizing faces a difficult political and economic consensus, which privileges development and private property rights. In a hyper-commodified real estate market 'the right to the city...[is] restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires' (Harvey, 2008, p. 38). Homeless people and the vast majority of tenants have minimal control over their immediate living arrangements and the fate of their changing neighborhoods. In struggles for dignified housing and greater agency, organizers often rely

on an alternative valuation of urban space, which elevates the shared social value generated by residents over the market determined value of real estate. This valuation allows tenants and homeless New Yorkers to stake a claim to community rights, an alternative to property rights. Today, using community rights as an ideological underpinning, housing justice organizers in New York City engage in struggles to defend people and neighborhoods. Organizers also use community rights to argue for the expansion of legal frameworks, policies, or practices, and to lay claim to public and private resources for community use. In this piece, I develop a typology for categorizing housing justice struggles as defensive or expansionist, based on campaign targets, goals, and strategies.

New Yorkers at the edges of economic and political power have used community rights as a basis for housing justice organizing throughout the twentieth century: to fight for rent control in the 1920s, against urban renewal in the 1960s, and against disinvestment and organized abandonment in the 1980s. The framework has evolved with each successive campaign. Some have used it to reject the dominant property rights paradigm, others for legal and policy reform. Organizational scale, professionalization, and access to capital all play a role in this strategic decision making process. The hyper-local grounding of community rights can be limiting, because of scalar mismatch (Casper-Futterman, 2016). Aware of this limitation, organizers are looking for ways to expand their fight across geographies and to build bridges between housing justice organizing and other economic and racial justice movements.

In this article, I aim to provide a historically-informed reading of contemporary housing justice organizing in New York City. I focus on organizing efforts that engage with community rights and reject –partially or fully–both the dominant system for valuating urban land and the infallibility of property rights. I distill the goals and strategies of recent major housing justice campaigns into an organizing typology, grounded in historical case studies of New York City-based housing campaigns that relied on alternative valuations of urban land. The community rights frame allows me to elevate tenant- and homeless-led organizing efforts. New York City’s broader housing field also includes, and is often defined by, affordable housing development, which is governed by a traditional relationship with the real estate market and property rights.

An analysis of organizational and campaign literature and key interviews with organizers¹ inform the typology, as well as my own experiences as a former public housing resident, rent regulated and unregulated tenant, limited-equity cooperator, and researcher of New York City’s housing programs and policies. The history section is based on a rich volume of literature exploring housing justice movements in New York City, with a focus on pieces informed by first person organizer interviews. Any attempt to categorize organizing leads to a loss of complexity and texture. Nonetheless, categorization can help clarify intentionality and unearth underlying ideologies that influences decision making. With

¹ For this piece, I spoke to seven organizers currently or previously engaged with anti-gentrification and tenants’ rights organizing in New York City, including campaigns against rezonings, for rent regulation and right to counsel, as well as building-level organizing. All interviewees explicitly consented to publicly share their real names and places of work.

this historically-rooted typology, I hope to contribute to ongoing activist and academic debates—in the pages of this issue of the *Radical Housing Journal* and beyond—about strategic approaches to organizing for dignified housing and greater agency among renters, homeless people, and others marginalized by the real estate state (Stein, 2019).

In this piece, I provide an overview of the community rights framework and contextualize it in a history of New York City’s housing justice campaigns. After a brief overview of the contemporary housing field in New York City, I introduce the housing justice organizing typology, and end the piece with the possibilities and limitations of the community rights framework for the future of housing organizing.

Claiming urban space: from community rights to commoning

Housing justice organizers often use power relationships to describe their campaigns. Alejandra Nasser (2018), organizer for the Brooklyn-based and tenant-led Flatbush Tenant Coalition (FTC) frames her work as an effort to support tenant struggles against erasure and for a basic level of stability, which then allows them to exercise collective political power. Susanna Blankley (2018), coordinator for the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, which successfully fought for a tenant’s right to an attorney when facing an eviction, also describes the Coalition’s work in terms of tenant access to political power. Picture the Homeless, a homeless person-led organization, was founded on the principle that homeless people should be able to exercise full civil and political rights.

The right to stay and the right not to be erased are all claims to urban space, which call back to a lineage of twentieth century place-based organizing. In ‘When Tenants Claimed the City’, historian Roberta Gold (2014) describes a unique valuation system—community rights—developed by tenants in post-war New York to stake a claim to their neighborhoods, which were under threat from urban renewal. Community rights are based on resident-generated social value and are a direct challenge to the ‘conventional ideology of property rights’ (Gold, 2014, p. 5). By rejecting a valuation based on property ownership, community rights allow both the unhoused and the precariously housed to claim a right to shape their living environment.

While Gold’s excavation of community rights focuses specifically on tenants in post-war New York, homeless people, informal housing-dwellers, and others with precarious tenure have made similar claims to urban space in Los Angeles, Berlin, Barcelona, Mexico City and elsewhere (Card, 2018; Hermsmeier, 2019). Community rights build upon Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ (Harvey, 2008; Purcell, 2002), a concept developed in the context of political ferment of 1960s Paris, which has been thoroughly theorized and is a continuing inspiration to contemporary organizing, like that of the Right to the City Alliance. The ‘right to the city’ stretches beyond urban infrastructure to include the imagined city and residents’ actual lived experiences (Purcell, 2002). Community rights claims use collective lived experiences to fight for residents’ rights to imagine and shape the fate of their neighborhoods.

Activists and scholars have noted the limitations of rights-based frameworks, given the uneven and often punitive application of state enforcement (Bridges, 2017). Rather than focusing on a right to the city, some choose instead to lay claim to the urban space as ‘commons’ on the basis of the ‘existence of a common stake or common interest in resources shared with other urban inhabitants’ (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 284). Organizers often use this framing to fight privatization and commodification of land. Commoning can be the end result of a community rights-based claim. While community rights allow tenants and homeless people to organize for access and greater agency, commoning is a vision of a total transformation of the property rights system.

Historic use of community rights in housing justice campaigns

Housing justice organizers have used community rights to value land in New York City throughout the twentieth century. The parameters and targets of housing campaigns have changed as the government’s and private sector’s roles in housing provision have shifted. The strategies used by housing organizers today developed as generations of people marginalized by the dominant property rights regime fought for dignified housing and greater agency.

Rent control and experiments in self-management (1900s-1930s)

Early twentieth century organizing for rent control was one of the first times New York City’s tenants politically defined themselves as a class to challenge the city’s property rights regime. These challenges were grounded in broader socialist, communist, and anarchist theorization of alternatives to the market economy generally, and private land ownership in particular. Defensive actions against individual landlords laid the groundwork and helped sustain an expansionist struggle for rent control. Leftist militancy, particularly within the labor movement, created the infrastructure for rent strikes among the predominantly Jewish working class residents on the Lower East Side in Manhattan and Brownsville in Brooklyn (Fogelson, 2013). The bulk of the organizing was done by working class immigrant women, who were maligned as foreign agitators threatening the sanctity of private property. Organizing for a new set of tenants’ rights was an early claim to community rights. These efforts stood in stark contrast to the work done by charity organizations at the time, which attempted to alleviate the difficult housing conditions among ‘deserving’ working class immigrants without shifting established power structures (Fox Piven & Cloward, 1993).

The real estate industry’s racist practices limited the city’s Black population to a small subsection of the rental market in just a few neighborhoods, primarily the Manhattan neighborhoods of San Juan Hill and Harlem. Black tenants were especially vulnerable to price gouging and landlord reprisal. Throughout the 1910s, women-led neighborhood groups partnered with secular, religious and media organizations to stage rent strikes, marches, and other actions against high rents and poor conditions in Black neighborhoods (King, 2016). Tenant organizing in Harlem in the 1920s both helped position the

neighborhood politically and to claim community rights for the city's black population in the confines of the neighborhood, within the pre-civil rights era context (King, 2016).

Dozens of tenant unions across Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx supported individual and collective action and engaged in city and state-level lobbying. With a growing housing shortage as a result of the economic upheaval following World War I, housing-focused mobilization scaled up, with hundreds of thousands of tenants participating (Fogelson, 2013, p. 61). Sustained organizing and a worsening housing crisis pushed the state government to pass the 1920 Emergency Rent Laws, which limited evictions and established a process for rent arbitration through the courts. This time period also saw the development of early examples of community-controlled housing, which were also experiments in alternative valuation of urban land by working class immigrants. Political organizations like the Brooklyn Finnish Socialist Club, the communist United Workers, and the socialist Workmen's Circle developing limited-equity cooperatives for their politicized constituencies (Bloom & Lasner, 2015; Forman, 2018).

New resources and the right to stay put (1930s-1960s)

Responding to the devastating impact of the Depression, the city's tenants' unions engaged in localized defensive efforts through *unevictions*,² which challenged both the landlord's property rights and state power. Organizers would move evicted tenants' furniture back into their apartment and block marshals from taking it back out (Lawson, 1986). With the New Deal and a succession of Housing Acts, federal funding became available for public housing (the 1939 Housing Act) and for middle-income/luxury housing, highways, educational, and cultural institutions (through the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts). Working class neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color became targets for redevelopment. As early as 1939, the communist National Negro Congress (NNC) waged a defensive campaign against racially-motivated 'slum' clearance in San Juan Hill (New York Amsterdam News, 1940).

As more evidence of the negative impact of urban renewal mounted through the 1940s and 1950s, tenants began to launch more frequent defensive campaigns against public action. With support from the socialist American Labor Party, organized tenant opposition against an urban renewal project in the Manhattan neighborhood of Morningside Heights in the mid-1950s challenged the development with a claim to community rights (Gold, 2014). Similar efforts were mounted against development in other parts of the city. While most of the groups fought locally, they did coalesce together to form the Metropolitan Council on Housing (Gold, 2014), which played a major role in the fight for rent control in the 1970s and continues to be active in city-wide tenant organizing today.

The mass displacement resulting from urban renewal, paired with continued residential segregation, systematized by redlining, worsened the conditions in privately occupied housing in Black and Latinx neighborhoods. The 1960s saw increasing organizing focused

² A form of eviction defense where community members would move an evicted tenant's belongings back into an apartment after they have been placed on a sidewalk by the marshals.

on poor living conditions in private housing, including a wave of rent strikes. While seemingly defensive actions against individual private actors, rent strikes in Harlem and elsewhere were a direct claim to urban space by Black and Latinx low-income families excluded from the vast majority of the housing market (Issacs Jackson, 2006). Residents politicized by urban renewal battles fought expansionist battles over the city's public housing, claiming a community right to greater control over the (at the time) growing public resource (Juravich, 2017). For example, residents staged rallies, meetings, city office takeovers, and hunger strikes to shape the affordability, apartment size mix, and the tenant selection process in public housing under development in Coney Island, Brooklyn (New York Times, 1970).

Community control and anti-austerity (1970s -1990s)

Tenant claims to community rights intersected with revolutionary organizing for Black and Puerto Rican self-determination by the Young Lords Organization (YLO) and the Black Panther Party (BPP). In 1970, the New York City chapters of the BPP, YLO, and the Metropolitan Council on Housing put Mayor Lindsey's administration and the city's financial sector on trial in a mock court, calling for all rental housing to be put 'into public ownership under tenant control' (Gold, 2014, p. 169). This cross-sectoral organizing led to a major expansionist campaign. Housing organizers and members of the YLO launched Operation Move-In on the Upper West Side in Manhattan, one of the largest coordinated squatting efforts to date. Squatting as a tactic for community control spread across the city (Asbury, 1970), with organizers targeting buildings owned by either the city or private institutions like hospitals, churches, and universities.

The city's 1970s fiscal crisis served as an opportunity for austerity measures and market-based realignment of urban policies (Moody, 2007). Even as squatting yielded some short-term victories, policies that challenged property rights came under threat. The real estate lobby worked with the conservative legislature to gut the rent control law in 1971 (Fried, 1971). Mounting a defensive struggle—which would become more common as more programs came under assault in the 1980s and 90s—tenants mobilized and won a new, albeit weaker, rent regulation law (Gold, 2014). Disinvestment and organized abandonment (Wallace & Wallace, 2001) expanded the city's tax foreclosed housing stock to 112,000 units by 1981 (Stegman, 1982). As the state retrenched, community development organizations became more and more responsible for direct housing provision. Drawing on an evolved understanding of community rights that stressed local control in neighborhoods abandoned by capital and neglected by the state, community development groups like Los Sures in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Banana Kelly in the South Bronx began to take over and redevelop these temporarily municipalized properties, with a tacit understanding from the city's housing agency.

The community development field split into two camps: some nascent organizations pursued 'radical visions of revitalization that challenged the relations that had produced the crisis, while liberal... organizations attempted to reformulate those relations in a more moderate and regulated form' (Guimond, 2013, p. 22). As with the shift to service delivery

in the antiviolence movement (Rojas Durazo, 2007), local and federal funding provided strong incentives for community development professionalization. In order to access federal low-income housing tax credits, introduced as part of Reagan's tax reform in 1986, and local funding under Mayor Koch's affordable housing plan, community development organizations had to formalize (Guimond, 2013). Many community development organizations shifted away from loose, tenant-led organizational structures (Axel-Lute, 2000).

New York City's housing justice field

Many contemporary housing justice organizations trace their lineage back to community control and anti-austerity struggles of the 1970s. For example, city-wide tenants' rights groups like Tenants & Neighbors (n.d.) and the Metropolitan Council on Housing (2018) have undergone organizational changes to respond to shifting threats to renters, but at their core, continue to both provide technical support to hundreds of tenants associations working on building-level issues, and to organize larger scale campaigns, like the fight for rent regulation expansion. The city's housing field also includes member-led city-wide groups that focus on homelessness, like Picture the Homeless and VOCAL-NY, and multi-issue groups, like New York Communities for Change (NYCC), that organize among low-income people, people of color, and immigrants, because housing affordability is a core problem for their constituencies.

Among neighborhood-based groups, many trace their lineage back to the community development movement of the 1980s and continue to engage in both tenant organizing and affordable housing development. At the same time, neighborhood-based groups explicitly focused on anti-gentrification and anti-displacement organizing, like Queens Neighborhoods United (QNU), often do not have organizational connections to development. The network of tenant, homeless, community development, and anti-gentrification groups is supported by legal services, policy, and research organizations that engage in both representation and advocacy, and trade associations and intermediaries which provide technical assistance, finance, and advocacy capacity.

Housing organizations exist on a broad ideological spectrum, with organizational structure, fundraising mechanisms, relationships with the city and state, ideology, and geography all shaping organizational goals and strategies. As Wilson Gilmore (2007) and Rojas Durazo (2007) write in 'The Revolution Will Not Be Funded', foundation and state funding can discipline organizational focus, shifting it toward direct service provision and away from movement building. Groups like QNU and CAAAV are keenly aware of this dynamic (Cabanillas, Chou & Kaufman-Gutierrez, 2018; Dang, 2018). QNU has decided to stay unincorporated, to remain free of politically-aligned funding obligations.

While the development and organizing sides of the housing field hold different goals, they often bleed together. The friction this causes –across the housing field and sometimes within organizations that have both development and organizing arms–is not unique to New York City. Geographer Kenton Card writes that for the city-wide Los Angeles Tenants

Union (LATU) relationships with affordable housing developers are an area of tension because ‘some LATU members see [them] as occasional allies and others dismiss them as part of a fraudulent system because many residents can’t afford the so-called affordable housing’ (Card, 2018). Despite mistrust and core disagreements about how to address housing affordability, LATU members work in broader coalitions on campaigns, like the fight for stronger rent control laws.

In New York City, groups across the ideological and geographic spectrum often come together to work on discreet campaigns, like strengthening rent regulation or increasing federal funding for New York City Housing Authority’s (NYCHA) capital needs. The typology below uses the community rights framework to describe those defensive and expansionist housing justice struggles.

A typology of contemporary housing organizing in New York City

With community rights as the ideological basis, housing justice campaigns focus on defending people and neighborhoods, expanding legal and policy frameworks, and claiming material resources for community use. In the following typology, I focus on strategies and goals pursued by organizations that are expanding marginalized individuals’ political power based on an alternative valuation of urban space. Claims to community rights often stand in contrast with housing organizing that is more rooted in the existing property rights regime, often led by entities with a direct stake in affordable housing development: both non-profit and for-profit developers, as well as state actors. This type of organizing often focuses on expanding resources for affordable housing development, like increasing the federal low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC) cap. This approach aims to meet the housing needs of income-tested residents, but usually does not aim to transform power relationships in the way that Nasser or Blankley describe in the previous section. However, given the inter-woven nature of New York City’s housing field and the radical legacy some community developers carry, some organizations that engage in development also rely on alternative valuations of urban space.

Further, certain forms of development directly pose a challenge to the dominant property rights regime. For example, community land trusts can both remove land from the speculative housing market and redistribute power through community governance of land. The development of a community land trust—like the Cooper Square Community Land Trust or the East Harlem/El Barrio Community Land Trust in Manhattan—can be an example of a community rights claim prefiguring the process of ‘commoning’ (Foster & Iaione, 2016). At the same time, the definition of the community land trust model—whether it should primarily be applied as a tool for community control over land or the provision of affordable homeownership—is currently in contest, highlighting the tension between claims to community rights and development (Defilippis, Stromberg & Williams, 2018).

I have excluded organizations that focus exclusively on direct service provision from this typology. While emergency rent assistance and similar services are incredibly important to low-income New Yorkers, these types of programs take the ‘responsibility for persons

who are in the throes of abandonment rather than responsibility for persons progressing toward full incorporation into the body politic' (Wilson Gilmore, 2007). Further, as Willse argues, certain forms of housing service provision operate 'as part of, rather than a challenge to, the very economic systems that reproduce and distribute housing insecurity' (2010, p. 158). Many defensive struggles undertaken by housing justice organizers and described in this typology—including eviction defense and programs that help tenants navigate city and state bureaucracies—are functionally similar to direct service provision. The difference is the end goal: to decrease precarity in people's lives and thus make it easier to claim political power. In some ways, defensive strategies undertaken by organizations challenging the property regime are a narrowed contemporary version of survival programs developed by the Black Panther Party, which provided services like free breakfast for children and free medical care to not only meet basic community needs but to also raise political consciousness as a precursor for radical change (Newton, 1972).

While this typology separates defensive and expansionist campaigns into distinct categories, they rarely function as a dichotomy. Organizers often view defensive struggles as a step toward expansionist struggles, both to build a base for more ambitious campaigns and to shift the public discourse about what is possible (Dang, 2018; Nasser, 2018; Weaver, 2018). This iterative process is built into the organizing models of both local and city-wide member-led organizations like CAAAV, the Flatbush Tenant Coalition, and New York Communities for Change (NYCC) (Dang, 2018; Weaver, 2018). The scaling process often expands beyond individual organizations. Susanna Blankley, who is the coordinator for the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition, describes how organizing against evictions in rent regulated buildings in the Bronx led to the campaign for the right to counsel in housing court, which resulted in new material resources and legal protections for tenants. Organizers are working to use this new legal framework to empower tenants to claim additional rights (Blankley, 2018). Many organizations pursue defensive and expansionist struggles at the same time. For example, the 2019 Housing Justice for All campaign of the Upstate/Downstate Housing Alliance included a defensive effort, to strengthen New York State's rent regulation system, and an expansionist effort, to pass a statewide good cause eviction law and to expand funding for permanent rental assistance (HJFA, 2019).

Defensive housing struggles

Defensive housing struggles are those where the end goal is to defend an individual or a group, or a program, policy, or law against government or private action. Organizers have used the community rights framework to challenge a landlord's legal right to evict a tenant, a developer's right to build out a parcel of land to its 'highest and best use', and the city's right to rezone a neighborhood to spur development. Organizers elevate the rights of residents marginalized by the property rights regime, including tenants and homeless people, to not only access dignified housing, but also to shape the future of their immediate environment.

Defensive housing struggles often include struggles against private action like evictions, tenant harassment, and deferred building maintenance. They occur at the apartment or building-level, and often function as building blocks toward larger defensive or expansionist campaigns. Tenant associations, often with support of larger tenant unions or advocacy groups, elevate the tenants' right to stay over a landlord's right to neglect their property or to evict. Organizing against private action can scale up across building portfolios in New York City and beyond. For example, after the 2008 financial crisis, tenants living in buildings owned by Pinnacle Realty organized against the firm's systematic deregulation of stabilized apartments across New York City (Pincus, 2009). In 2015, groups like NYCC and VOCAL-NY staged a solidarity action against the multinational private equity landlord Blackstone, which was systematically displacing tenants and homeowners in Spain (McShane, 2015). Today, organizers primarily rely on legal and government enforcement to block private actions. The use of direct action, including eviction blockades and rent strikes (Gold, 2014; Lawson, 1986), has waned as a strategy because of increased surveillance and the threat of tenant blacklisting (Blankley, 2018). However, organizers are exploring ways to address the barriers that have led to this decline (Blankley, 2018; Cabanillas, Chou & Kaufman-Gutierrez, 2018; Dang, 2018). They are looking to historic examples of coordinated rent strikes in New York City and to contemporary examples, including rent strikes staged by City Life/La Vida Urbana in Boston, the Los Angeles Tenants Union, and Rochester Take Back the Land (Ortiz, 2018).

Struggles against government action to weaken housing regulations or to privatize publicly owned land, including campaigns against neighborhood rezonings, legislative proposals to weaken rent regulation, and attempts to increase rents in public housing, can also be classified as defensive. They occur on the neighborhood, city, state or federal scale. These campaigns are generally spearheaded by city-wide and multi-issue organizations and employ community rights as an ethical and ideological underpinning. Strategies against government action range from lawsuits and lobbying to rallies and civil disobedience. Recent actions by the federal government have brought together organization across the ideological spectrum. For example, proposed work requirements for public housing residents aligned city agencies, local elected officials, and a range of housing justice and anti-racist groups (Andrews, 2018). At the same time, defense against local government actions, like rezonings, often highlight the ideological fault-lines in New York City's housing field. For example, city agencies and many groups engaged in development view gentrification as inevitable, and the government's role as a corrective force that can capture some benefit for the public through policies like inclusionary zoning. Tenant unions and anti-displacement groups, which are not directly engaged in the development process view rezonings as government-induced gentrification (Stein, 2018).

Defensive struggles for the preservation of existing programs and laws generally follow a similar pattern to struggles against private action, occurring on the city, state or federal scale, and engaging larger housing justice organizations. Preservation campaigns often focus on protecting legacy low-income housing programs like project-based Section 8 and public housing from full privatization. The preservation of privately owned, publicly-subsidized

housing often draws together the widest coalitions because it offers a clear benefit to both low-income tenants and the affordable housing development industry. Organizations participate in these campaigns with different end goals: to gain additional resources for property management and development or to meet tenants' basic needs to make political engagement possible. Similarly to rezonings, the preservation of public housing highlights the ideological fault-lines among housing organizations in New York City. There is consensus among liberal and left housing groups that systemic federal underfunding has created NYCHA's US\$32 million capital backlog and that the given situation is unsustainable. However, housing groups do not agree on whether the conversion of a portion of NYCHA's portfolio from public to publicly subsidized, privately-managed affordable housing (project-based Section 8) is a viable solution to the crisis, or if the privatization will endanger of the last deeply affordable stock in the city.

Expansionist struggles

Decades of austerity and market-driven urban policy have put housing justice groups on the defensive. While the preservation of scant public resources often takes precedent over expansionist struggles, the past few years have seen an increasing number of such organizing efforts. Housing justice organizations use community rights to back up moral, legal, and policy claims to public and private resources, or for expanded protection by the state.

Expansionist struggles include legislative and policy campaigns for just cause eviction protection, the right to counsel in housing court, and stronger tenant harassment protections. These campaigns are often taken up by coalitions of neighborhood, city and state housing justice organizations. Because of the devolution of responsibility by the federal government since the 1970s (Davis, 2006), grassroots campaigns have largely focused on city and state level policies. Similarly to larger-scale defensive struggles, expansionist struggles employ community rights as an ethical and ideological underpinning to argue for the expansion of regulatory frameworks that redistribute power to marginalized people, including tenants on the verge of eviction and people living in shelters. Within the context of a hyper-commodified real estate market, organizers employ the community right to stay put to fight for the expansion of legislative and policy protections from displacement.

Policy-focused organizing frames the government as either a protective barrier from private action or as a vehicle for redistribution. For example, the Upstate/Downstate Housing Alliance's campaign for expanding rent regulation has stressed how the legal framework both protects tenants from sudden rent increases and extends their tenure rights. Organizers learn from similar campaigns in the US and beyond. New York State's rent regulation campaign is informed by recent efforts to expand rent control in Oregon, Chicago and California. Expansionist struggles rarely conclude with the adoption of legislation or policy. As said by Nasser (2018), the monitoring burden often falls on tenants. In 2017, the Right to Counsel NYC Coalition and the Coalition against Tenant Harassment both succeeded in getting their target legislations passed, but continued to meet, refocusing on implementation. The role of grassroots groups in ensuring compliance often becomes

institutionalized. For example, fair housing testing, done by groups like the Fair Housing Justice Center is one of the primary tools for enforcing federal fair housing laws (Fair Housing Justice Center, 2018).

Community claims to public resources, including public land and funding can be classified as expansionist. Organizing for new government resources for community use is predicated on the idea of government as a redistributive force. These types of organizing efforts have faced the challenge of ongoing austerity politics, which translate into policies like New York State's two percent tax cap (DiNapoli, 2018). Campaigns focused on specific parcels of public land are often led by local coalitions, and include organizing and development groups. For example, the tenant-led campaign to oppose the private redevelopment of a city-owned armory in Brooklyn worked closely with a community developer on an alternative plan that would have turned the parcel in to a deeply affordable community land trust (Weaver, 2018). Broader campaigns for new public funding streams, like pied-à-terre or warehousing taxes, are led by larger city and state organizations, and like preservation struggles, often include both developers interested in new resources and member-driven organizations interested in building their base's political consciousness. Member-led homeless groups, including VOCAL-NY and Picture the Homeless are often central to these efforts, because existing housing subsidy programs do not create permanent housing affordable to people below the federal poverty level.

Expansionist community claims to private resources, like private property, are exceedingly rare. When organizers do use community rights to fight for turning private land over to community use, they focus on extractive institutional actors, like banks. A recent example of a housing justice campaign with a private target occurred in the direct aftermath of the financial crisis, when a post-Occupy coalition of housing justice groups including Picture the Homeless, VOCAL, and Take Back The Land moved a family into a bankforeclosed property in East New York (Anderson, 2011). While occupations of bank-owned properties in other parts of the country, like Chicago, directly provided housing to formerly homeless people, New York's occupation was more symbolic than functional. The energy generated by the action was channeled into a Picture the Homeless policy campaign to count and tax vacant property. While large-scale efforts to claim private property for community use are infrequent, organizers do look to examples in the U.S. and beyond, including the use of eminent domain by the Dudley Square Community Land Trust in Boston and a recent effort to expropriate and municipalize 200,000 privately owned homes in Berlin (Hermsmeier, 2019).

Community rights and hyper-commodification: possibilities and limitations

Community rights continue to resonate with housing justice organizers today because they offer a compelling way of valuing urban space, privileging use over monetary value. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the cost of urban land collapsed under the weight of redlining and organized abandonment, community rights illustrated the place-based social value of devalued neighborhoods. In the contemporary hypercommodified housing market—where a

building's function as a tool for capital accumulation is privileged above all else (Madden & Marcuse, 2016)—community rights offers a valuation that challenges market logic and the political power of the real estate sector. Community rights also provides a way to call on the expertise of marginalized people, whose voices are either excluded or tokenized within business and policy conversations on real estate. The contemporary application of community rights as a tool against displacement emerged in the 1980s. Yolanda García, an organizer with *Nos Quedamos*, which fought a defensive battle against a government plan that would have spurred private redevelopment of a Bronx neighborhood in the 1990s explained, 'Melrose residents had a right to stay because they had stayed and cared for the area when everyone else had abandoned it' (Guimond, 2013, p. 98). Similarly challenging a rezoning that would spur private redevelopment of a Manhattan neighborhood in 2018, Nova Lucero, an organizer with the Metropolitan Council on Housing said, 'we are trying to create responsible development without driving speculation and preserving the culture of the neighborhood' (Mays & Robertson, 2018).

While community rights has shown to be an effective framework for shifting power relationships over time, it is also limiting. Its hyper-local focus can present a challenge to building city and state political power, as said by Housing Justice for All campaign coordinator, Cea Weaver. As New York City's housing market becomes more dominated by international private equity firms (Fields, 2015), local organizations have greater difficulty scaling their fights against multinational corporate landlords. Community rights has shown to be a highly flexible framework that evolved to suit the changing needs of New York City's organizers. NYCC's and VOCAL-NY's solidarity action against private equity firm's evictions in Spain, and municipalist organizing in cities facing similar challenges (Finley, 2018), could be a new pathway for the concept. When decoupled from movement building, community rights loses its analysis of power structures, including white supremacy and capitalism. This creates the danger of slippage into parochial protectionism, which reinforces the community rights of groups with access to power at the expense of those without. Echoing New York City's early twentieth century housing justice organizing, groups like CAAAV and QNU are actively exploring ways to bridge their housing justice work with broader racial and economic justice movements. The campaign to repeal Amazon's plan to build a headquarters in Queens, may be an early example of successful bridge building.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Susanna Blankley, Jorge Cabanillas, Patricia Chou, Cathy Dang, Carina Kaufman-Gutierrez, Alejandra Nasser, and Cea Weaver for taking the time to talk to me about their work and housing organizing in New York City. I would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers and the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective for their helpful edits and recommendations.

References

- Andrews, J. (2018) HUD considering work requirements for federal housing assistance, *Curbed*, February 5. Available at: <https://www.curbed.com/2018/2/5/16974774/hud-work-requirements-federal-housing-assistance> (Accessed 11 October 2018).
- Anderson, M. (2011) Occupy Wall Street re-occupies foreclosed home in East New York: A report from the scene, *Village Voice*, December 11. Available at: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/12/07/occupy-wall-street-re-occupies-foreclosed-home-in-east-new-york-a-report-from-the-scene/>. (Accessed 13 October 2018).
- Asbury, E. (1970) Squatter movement grows as housing protest tactic, *The New York Times*, July 22, p. 42.
- Axel-Lute, M. (2000) Back to the streets: Why community developers should join the fight against corporate globalization, *Shelterforce*. Available at: <https://shelterforce.org/2000/05/01/back-to-the-streets/> (Accessed 8 September 2018).
- Blankley, S. (2018) Personal interview, September 20.
- Bloom, N. & Lasner, M. (2016) *Affordable Housing in New York*, pp. 63-66 (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- Bridges, K. (2017) *The Poverty of Privacy Rights* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press).
- Cabanillas, J., Chou, P., & Kaufman-Gutierrez, C. (2018) Personal Interview, October 9.
- Card, K. (2018) Thinking across tactics of tenant movements: Los Angeles and Berlin, *Progressive City*, February. Available at: <https://www.progressivecity.net/single-post/2018/02/05/thinking-across-tactics-of-tenant-movements-los-angeles-and-berlin> (Accessed 20 April 2019).
- Casper-Futterman, E. (2016) Overcoming the 'scalar stalemate' in community development, *Metropolitiques*. Available at: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Overcoming-the-Scalar-Stalemate-in-Community-Development.html> (Accessed 20 April 2019).
- Dang, C. (2018) Personal interview, September 21.
- Davis, J. (2006) Between devolution and the deep blue sea: What's a city or state to do, in: R. Bratt & M. Stone (Eds) *A Right to Housing: Foundation for a New Social Agenda*, pp. 364-398 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- Defilippis, J., Stromberg, B. & Williams, O. (2018) W(h)ither the community in community land trusts? *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 40(6), pp. 755-69.
- DiNapoli, T. (2018) Tax cap at two percent for 2019, Press release, July 12. Available at: <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/july18/071218.htm> (Accessed 11 October 2018).
- Fair Housing Justice Center (2018) *Fair housing testing investigations*. Available at: <https://www.fairhousingjustice.org/our-work/fair-housing-testing-investigations/> (Accessed 8 Oct 2018).
- Fields, D. (2015) Contesting the financialization of urban space: Community organizations and the struggle to preserve affordable rental housing in New York City, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 37(2), pp. 144-165.
- Finley, E. (2018) The new municipal movements, *ROAR Magazine*. Available at: <https://roarmag.org/magazine/new-municipal-movements/>. (Accessed 29 October 2018).
- Foster, S. & Iaione, C. (2016) The city as a commons, *Yale Law and Policy Review*, 34(2), pp. 282-307.
- Fogelson, E. (2013) *The Great Rent Wars: New York, 1917-1929*, pp. 360-386 (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Forman, E. (2018) How unions can solve the housing crisis, *In These Times*. Available at: <http://inthesetimes.com/features/unions-housing-crisis-labor-coop-apartments-new-york-homeless-rent-control.html>. (Accessed 17 October 2018).
- Fox Piven, F. & Cloward, R. (1993) *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage).

- Fried, J. (1971) Legislation easing rent control under consideration in Albany, *The New York Times*, April 27.
- Gold, R. (2014) *When Tenants Claimed the City: The Struggle for Citizenship in New York City* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press).
- Guimond, C. (2013) Battle for the Bronx: neighborhood revitalization in a gentrifying city, Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.
- Harvey, D. (2008) The right to the city, *New Left Review*, 53, pp. 23–40.
- Hermesmeier, L. (2019) Berlin’s radical housing activists aren’t afraid of expropriations, *The Nation*, March 27. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/berlin-housing-gentrification-referendum/> (Accessed 20 April 2019).
- HJFA (Housing Justice for All) (2019) *Our plan*. Available at: <https://www.housingjusticeforall.org/#our-plan> (Accessed 8 Oct 2019).
- Issacs Jackson, M. (2006) Harlem’s rent strike and rat war: Representation, housing access and tenant resistance in New York, 1958–1964, *American Studies*, 47(1), pp. 53–79.
- Juravich, N. (2017) ‘We the tenants’: Resident organizing in New York City’s public housing, 1964–1978, *Journal of Urban History*, 43, pp. 400–420.
- King, S. (2016) *Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway?: Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era*, (New York: NYU Press).
- Lawson, R. (1986) *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904–1984*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press).
- Madden, D. & Marcuse, P. (2016) *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis*, pp. 3–17 (New York: Verso Books).
- Mays, C. & Robertson, A. (2018) Fighting over the future of Inwood, Manhattan’s last affordable neighborhood, *The New York Times*, August 7. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/07/nyregion/inwood-rezoning-nyc-manhattan.html> (Accessed 11 October 2018).
- McShane, C. (2015) Activists gather worldwide to protest against housing ‘vulture fund,’ *Vice News*, October 15. Available at: https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/9kj3a7/activists-gather-worldwide-to-protest-against-housing-vulture-fund (Accessed 20 Apr 2019).
- Metropolitan Council on Housing (2018) *What is the Metropolitan Council on Housing?* Available at: http://www.metcouncilonhousing.org/about_us (Accessed 11 October 2018).
- Moody, K. (2007) *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present*, pp. 9–61 (New York: The New Press).
- Nasser, A. (2018) Personal Interview, October 12.
- Newton, H. (1972) *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*, Morrison, T. (Ed), p. 99 (New York: Random House).
- New York Amsterdam News (1940) Tenants seek rehousing aid: Lincoln Square group discusses topic at gathering, *New York Amsterdam News*, December 7.
- New York Times (1970) 12 city aides held prisoner in Coney Island housing protest, *New York Times*, June 24.
- Ortiz, L. (2018) Tenant power: Organizing for rent strikes, landlord negotiations, *Shelterforce*. Available at: <https://shelterforce.org/2018/07/30/tenant-power-organizing-for-rent-strikes-and-landlord-negotiations> (Accessed 8 Oct 2018)
- Pincus, A. (2009) Pinnacle portfolios pulled from broker site, *The Real Deal*, April 13. Available at: <https://therealdeal.com/2009/04/13/pinnacle-portfolios-pulled-from-broker-web-site/> (Accessed 11 October 2018).
- Purcell, M. (2002) Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant, *GeoJournal*, 58, pp. 99–108.
- Rojas Durazo, A.C. (2007) ‘we were never meant to survive’: Fighting violence against women and the Fourth World War, *The Revolution will Not be Funded*, INCITE (Eds), pp. 113–128, (Cambridge: South End Press).
- Queens Neighborhoods United (n.d.) *About Us*. Available at: www.queensneighborhoodsunitied.org (Accessed 8 Oct 2018).

- Stein, S. (2018) Progress for whom, toward what? Progressive politics and New York City's mandatory inclusionary housing, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 40, pp. 770–781.
- Stein, S. (2019) *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London: Verso).
- Stegman, M. (1982) *The Dynamics of Rental Housing in New York City* (New York: New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development).
- Tenants & Neighbors (n.d.) *About us*. Available at: <https://tandn.org/about-us> (Accessed 8 October 2018).
- Weaver, C. (2018) Personal Interview, October 9.
- Wilson Gilmore, R. (2007) In the Shadow of the Shadow State, in: INCITE (Eds) *The Revolution will Not be Funded*, pp. 41-52 (Cambridge: South End Press).
- Wallace, D. & Wallace, R. (2001) *A Plague on Your Houses How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled*, pp. 21-80 (London: Verso).
- Willse, C. (2010) Neo-liberal biopolitics and the invention of chronic homelessness, *Economy and Society*, 39(2), pp. 155-184.