



# Building an Old World in the Shell of the New

Rethinking  
Squatting  
in 2020s  
NYC

Pat Sauerblatt  
September 2023  
v. 1

[chaos\\_star@riseup.net](mailto:chaos_star@riseup.net)

"Many people look at squatting as a thing of the past. The city has sold almost all of its property to developers. In 2020, it's extremely difficult to find a government building that is abandoned, but that doesn't mean that squatting is no longer viable. Rather, it requires a creative approach and a willingness to take risks. [...] Squatting doesn't have to look a certain way. As financial and political uncertainty rises, there is a very high chance that we will see squatting become not only more possible, but more necessary."

- *SURVIVAL WITHOUT RENT (2020 intro)*

Pat Sauerblatt lives in an undisclosed north brooklyn location and occasionally writes with an authoritative we to emphasize ideas formed through conversation with friends "on a similar tip." She first squatted in the fallout of the 2008 economic crisis. Her experiments in renting were reformed by a longterm COVID-induced rent strike, from which she has not yet recovered.

she is the niece of Rat Sauerblatt, Chaos Star poet  
lauryl-sulfate and rodent.

some inspiration for this writing:

*Art + Squat = X*  
Alan W. Moore

*Baltic Worlds: Squatting in the East*  
(for thinking about changing conditions for squatting)  
[balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/BW-1-2-2016-open-access.pdf](https://balticworlds.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/BW-1-2-2016-open-access.pdf)

a talk and zine on La Baudrière, recently-evicted queer squat in Montrieu, France, given at the 2023 Bash Back convergence in Chicago, their writings compiled here:  
<https://labaudriere.noblogs.org>

*Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination*  
Sarah Schulman

*How to Squat in Chicago: a CHA Specific Guide*  
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/unknown-occupants-how-to-squat-in-chicago>

*The Long Crisis: New York City and the Path to Neoliberalism*  
Benjamin Holtzman

*Robinson's Garden*  
Masashi Yamamoto, 1987  
surreal (fictional) film about a woman squatting and creating a futile garden in post-industrial Tokyo, inspired by the filmmaker's time in Berlin among Kreuzburg squatters in the 1980s.  
ft. a troubling cameo of Sakevi from GISM (RIP)

*SURVIVAL WITHOUT RENT (2020 edition)*  
<https://brokenwindownyc.noblogs.org/howtosquat>

a visit to the abc no rio zine library in exile at the Clemente,  
and the wealth of old NYC squatter ephemera:  
PEOPS, Piss Bucket, Squatter Comix, World War III, and more...

digital resources:  
[portal.displacementalert.org](https://portal.displacementalert.org)  
[urbandisplacement.org/maps/new-york-gentrification-and-displacement](https://urbandisplacement.org/maps/new-york-gentrification-and-displacement)  
[whoownswhat.justfix.nyc](https://whoownswhat.justfix.nyc)

my crazy friends and girlfriend who still want to do things together  
and everyone who burned out, too  
thank you

## SQUATTING IS NOT JUST A MUSEUM

New York City has a mythologized history of squatting. Reading the remnants of the 1980s and 1990s on the Lower East Side paints a picture of an autonomous neighborhood with squats on every block. We even have a museum dedicated to it – the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, located in the first floor of C-Squat, now a limited-equity co-op, one of the only surviving spaces of this abundant period.

This history is certainly a gift – It has provided us with inter-generational knowledge such as SURVIVAL WITHOUT RENT, the NYC-specific squatting guide which younger squatters have updated into a relevant and freshly-circulated resource. We collect squatter rags from zine fests and bookfairs published the years we were born (and see the same exact problems persisting in the city today.) Homeless people continue to live on and off in Tompkins Square Park with a political stance, despite intense repression. And as one late-stage squatter friend said, though the LES has been lost as a place most of us could ever hope to live, its character remains distinct from other hellishly gentrified corridors of the city in no small part due to the power that the squatting movement once had.

While grateful for this history, it's small victories, and the cultures that these spaces generated, the mythos of NYC squatting does not serve as an inspiration for what is possible, but a memorial to what no longer is. Workshops on "how to squat" conducted at MoRUS in recent years suggest living in the casino hotel in Atlantic City or living on a boat on Newtown Creek, but dissuade the hopeful attendee that anything like the old days is remotely possible. We believe it, sort of. It's unlikely that entire neighborhoods of NYC will ever be neglected by the city to the degree that made the squatting boom on the LES possible – a set of conditions that came on the heels of two violent decades of "white flight," forced shrinkage, landlord arsons, and grassroots homesteading responses to divestment by Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers throughout the 1970s and 80s.

But squatting has always been contingent on conditions which change according to economic, political and cultural factors. We are facing new contexts, challenges, barriers and windows of potential. They do not look the same as previous generations - if we are looking for the same signs, we will surely miss them. To fantasize about a european style squat with a gallery, movie theater, garden, library and music venue today is to

dream a distant and heartbreaking dream.<sup>1</sup> Nearly every scrap of land in this city is accounted for as an investment, even if it is actively rotting or awaiting the wrecking ball. No longer is our goal to homestead old tenements or achieve ownership through adverse possession.

Millennials and zoomers have less time on our hands than the Gen Xers of squats past. We don't have the same future that previous movements envisioned changing. We have grown up with the insistent nihilism of climate change and the post-9/11 surveillance state.

Our timeline is short, though we wish this were not true.

Now, with capitalism in late-stage hyper-speed and injected with all the uncertainty of the pandemic, our aim is more transient – to be a thorn in the side of developers, to fuck up their work timelines, to use NYC's strong tenant protections in our favor to extract money or lengthy legal processes out of the warehousers of lifeless property. To not move away from the city that is demanding the total commodification of our interests and time. To hopefully learn new skills and build stronger relationships in the process.

To live for free, if only for a little while.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION IS BLEAK

\$1000 rooms on the frontiers of hipster relevance in East New York, Brownsville, and "Cypress Hills." Once rent-controlled Bushwick lofts now requiring an income 40x higher than the rent. The necessity of a guarantor – a family member or close connection with the funds and legitimacy to pass inspection. (No painting of the walls allowed) Landlords who cut up your mesh internet and threaten your invited guests with trespassing because cross-class, interracial, or intergenerational friendship is unthinkable. Longstanding punk lofts evicted after landlords stalk social media to prove that leaseholders no longer live there – illegible spaces passed down between generations of freaks, ironically accused of profiteering off the burden of tying the chaos to your name. A tiny handful of squats-turned-co-ops that have long ceased to be social centers, many of which contain more than one empty apartment held onto by those who no longer live in the city but got in while the getting was good. A 10% loss of rent stabilized apartments between 2019 and 2020, that number growing

<sup>1</sup> Though euro squatters are also facing new conditions – anti-squat laws have recently passed in England, France and elsewhere.

The "golden age" of NYC squatting was intertwined with anti-establishment artists, occupying buildings for the purpose of showing and sharing work in opposition to the commercial art world of the city. Over time, many of these artists were folded into the art world they once worked against. Many more died of AIDS, grief, or abandonment. Although there is no strong through-line of mentorship and mutual recognition, no presently accessible art space for younger political &/or community-based artists to show their work, we can still gain inspiration from this history. The conditions aren't ripe for demanding an art space from the city, like ABC no Rio so many years ago. This mayor isn't giving us shit. But we can still do something weird in a building for a night – if we have time to experiment, if we get comfortable with failure and confrontation.

## CONCLUSION (FOR NOW)

We don't squat today for the same reasons as yesterday. We don't have time to play a long and careful game, nor do we have interest in acting out frontier fantasies.<sup>8</sup> There are few classically abandoned properties, but there are still windows of opportunity for occupancy with possibilities of lengthy legal processes or buyouts. We live in the belly of the beast, where every scrap is fought over – there's even a landlord lording over sinking ships on Newtown Creek! We try our luck in neighborhoods we aren't supposed to be able to afford to live in. We cannot be afraid of confrontation or failure. We aren't interested in improving the city – this city has been improved to death! We squat to make it worse in the eyes of our enemies. To make the unexpected feel possible again and to hate our lives less.

Stability in the end times is a myth – we will find it not in property, but in the relationships we build and the compromises we refuse.

<sup>8</sup> Squatting in NYC has been intertwined (however conflictually) with homesteading, which gained credibility in the '70s in part through a reflection of "American values" – self-improvement and aspiration towards ownership. Movements for poor people's self-determination were ultimately tamed and manipulated by the city.

## SQUATTING = RECLAIMED TIME/SPACE = CULTURE?

History has shown that the conditions for culture are created when there is an abundance of leisure time in relation to energy used towards survival. Humans needed A LOT of free time to develop written language, cultivate grass into corn, map out the stars and realize the earth was round. Art and music flourished only once there were reserves of food. Our current pace of life leaves no time for such revelations. We are actively regressing as the majority of most people's time is spent meeting their basic needs through abstract exchanges.

Squatting can be a workaround to access a level of freedom over one's time and energy that is usually only afforded to the rich. This might not lead to a revolution in human consciousness, but it could have some interesting results.

In recent years, subculture in NYC has taken a steady turn towards commodification, even within underground scenes. Overheads for renting spaces are exorbitant and require some level of capitulation towards profit, usually in the form of a bar and booking shows that have a promise of high attendance. Spaces often require some involvement of secretly or overtly wealthy people and/or organizations with funding. Consequentially, underground culture veers towards popularity, away from experimentation. A show with ten people is felt as a failure. Punk shows and techno parties can now bring in thousands of dollars. There are good things about this, obviously – musicians and nightlife workers can (kind of) make a living, benefit shows in NYC can send chunks of cash to projects and people who need it. But, it makes us more conservative. More rigid in our judgments, more concerned with how we are perceived. More reliant on intoxication and the income generated by providing it. Amplify these tendencies with social media and you have an environment that stifles creativity, encourages comparison, dissociation, objectification and negates the solitude needed to make one's own creative work.

Generator shows and raves, happening more frequently in NYC since the pandemic across different scenes, have been some of the most fun I've had in recent memory, and prompt very different social interactions than seeing the same people at the bar. A show in a squatted space, for one night only, makes the thing purely about itself again – a gathering of people having a shared experience.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, there are safety and security risks to think through, especially for participants who are at increased risk when interacting with the cops.

every year, thousands more intentionally kept off the market by landlords since the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> Chelsea projects' demolition fast approaching.<sup>3</sup> The highest homeless population since the Great Depression. Over 34,000 more adults and children living in shelters since last summer.<sup>4</sup> Routine shuffle of humiliating DHS/sanitation sweeps. Involuntary psychiatric incarceration of those deemed "publicly disturbed," intentionally pushed by the police further and further past their breaking point. Half-constructed condos converted into migrant shelters, profiteering off of their claims of aid while providing less than bare minimum facilities to residents – the slack once again picked up by activists and sensitive people, still burnt out from the pandemic. NYPD impounds of asylum seekers' work vehicles, used to "get back on their feet" like the city supposedly wants them to. Open-air murders of the poor by police and vigilantes during park barbecues and crowded subway commutes. A nepotistic pig mayor bringing his clique of disgraced officers and real-estate developers with him to the top under the fragile facade of black excellence, an ultra-fortified reaction to the liberatory demands of the 2020 uprising.

Our alienation, depression, substance use, inability to focus, health problems, trouble sleeping, fear of isolation, hatred of our jobs, conflicts with our peers, are all symptoms of this climate.

In this unraveling social landscape, even if we were to get approved for a market-rate lease, it's unlikely we would last more than a year without a major increase or an arbitrary non-renewal. With instability and antagonism pressing in on all sides, it feels worthwhile for some of us to take a chance on living for free, in active opposition to the processes that we are being forced into.

With less to look forward to, we have less to lose.

Let this scenario be volatile not just for us, but for those who put us in it.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/2/15/23600261/rent-stabilized-apartments-disappearing/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indypendent.org/2023/07/chelsea-nycha-tenants-urge-halt-to-plans-to-demolish-their-homes>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>



## PITFALLS OF IDEALIZATION

There is not currently a thriving community or scene surrounding squatting in NYC, though there has been much excitement about it as a tactic, especially since 2020. One pitfall we've observed is the idealization of squatting by those who are not currently living its conditions. Though NYC has squatter rights – 30 days of occupancy (proved by mail) theoretically grants squatters the right to a formal eviction – squatting is much more work than just living somewhere for a month. We don't think it's a kind or good idea to fantasize about cracking squats to move homeless people into if you pay rent and intend to keep your stability. First, a lot of homeless people know about squatting and have done it, especially old New Yorkers. Also, many people living on the street long-term don't want more drama with the police than is necessary. Maybe you're homeless and you want to try something new – it's my hope that some scrap of a surviving squatter culture can support your efforts. If you aren't homeless but you have a close and personal relationship with someone who is and you both want to live inside together, by all means, try it. But viewing "houseless people" as an unindividuated mass and believing you have a solution for their condition will only lead to disappointment. It's a perspective usually held by people very far from homelessness.

The first step to glorifying squatting as a tactic in the housing struggle is to live in squats yourself: learning home repair skills, strengthening relationships with the other freaks who you are choosing to live with in such a precarious way, trying and failing a lot. This can be based on circumstance, interest, politics, or some combination... any can be a valid reason, just try it and see how it goes. Live with people you trust, who understand the risks, who can reckon with the possibility to pour all your time into making a space a home only to lose everything after a night, a week or a few months. Squatting is a lot of work – it doesn't make sense for everyone's body, family life, schedule or energy. Don't promise yourself or anyone else anything. Only when we have multiple nodes of people living this way can we begin to fantasize about a movement.

## NEW CONSTRUCTION, or NYC IS A MADDENING BUREAUCRACY – USE IT IN YOUR FAVOR

Many empty properties don't look obviously abandoned, especially new construction. There is an abundance of new construction in every borough that has run into some kind of problem, especially since the pandemic, and is sitting empty, waiting on paperwork or financing.

How to find them? Taping the door is a good start. Look for subtle signs of abandonment – no trashcans, or upside-down trashcans. Overflowing mail.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes these buildings will have cameras or lights on to deter people. Subtly check out cameras – red lights mean they're on. Many more are just props. If lights are on inside the building, observe over time to see if the same light is always on. Once you start to recognize the signs, you will start to see empty buildings everywhere you go.

Researching properties through city databases<sup>6</sup> can be addictive, but many good candidates on paper don't work out in the real world. Don't be afraid to try a bunch of different spots, you'll only find out more about a building's status through acting.

You can luck out with new construction, and get appliances, water and power immediately! Other buildings look fancy from the outside, but are fucked inside. New construction is built fast from cheap materials – its wild to see what just a few years of neglect can do.

Positives to squatting new construction is that it isn't obviously abandoned. Caution should still be heeded, but you're much more likely to pass as a regular tenant to neighbors and cops. New construction, tied up in bureaucratic delays, may run longer as a squat than old, obviously empty buildings that are just waiting for development. (Though there is no set formula – try them all.) NYC may seem like it has "bounced back" from COVID, but the economy is extremely fragile. I don't pretend to understand it, though we know that we have collectively experienced an "unprecedented crisis" and its effects are not fully understood. Squatting is an experiment in a landscape of extreme uncertainty. Only by trial and error will we learn more about what the current era has to offer.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the mail will be "turned off." This can often be righted by going to the Post Office in the zipcode of the building and letting them know you live there and that the building needs delivery resumed – you might even try sending yourself some mail before you attempt to live there, to get a head start on establishing your 30 days.

<sup>6</sup> ACRIS, DOB, etc. compiled on [whoownswhat.justfix.nyc](http://whoownswhat.justfix.nyc) – see end notes