

LAND, WEALTH, AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE

The following dialogue took place in the spring of 1989 with two activists involved in the squatter's movement in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a local Latino man and a mother (**JB** and **RW** respectively in the interview). The period from 1985 has seen a series of building seizures for living and organization, confrontations with police, and a mass occupation of a local park, Tompkins Square Park, by homeless people in the Lower East Side. All of these actions have been organized outside of any official or institutional leadership. We publish this document as our contribution to making more widely known the struggle over land, wealth and self-determination in that neighborhood.

The discussion describes some of the forms of struggle used by squatters and other Lower East Side activists, and reveals the variety of experiences of people in that area. From Liberation Theology to anarchism, from homelessness to punk rock, from the European squatters movement to anti-racist and anti-police struggles, from AIDS organizing to Puerto Rican self-rule, and from carpentry to plumbing. In addition there is the rich history of struggle in the Lower East Side which activists have been able to draw upon (see, for example, Midnight words on the Insurrection of 1741 in "A Letter From a 'Loose and Disorderly' New Yorker," *Posthumous Notes*, Midnight Notes #6).

The existence of organized struggle in the Lower East Side, involving such varied people's and lifestyles, is in itself a rebuke to the New Enclosures, since it represents the coming together of proletarians who have at last found in their journeys both the space for new relationships and a place to defend and enlarge them.

The squatters movement has also grown out of the New Enclosures as experienced in New York City in the form of austerity — severe cuts in social services, raising of transit fares, and dramatic rent increases making whole sections of the City uninhabitable for working people. Austerity was initiated in the mid and late 1970s to defeat a wave of social struggles which, in the 1960s and early 1970s, redistributed considerable wealth from the private sector and the government to public sector workers, students, welfare mothers and tenants. Resistance to austerity, including the insurrection and mass looting in the summer of 1977 during a blackout, hastened implementation of plans for the destruction and depopulation of entire neighborhoods considered centers for resistance.

As we reported in our *Space Notes* issue, "Spatial Deconcentration" is the state's effort to economically isolate and then eliminate the ghetto as a space for organized mass political power. Spatial Deconcentration has been in full swing in New York City for years. The Lower East Side, which extends from Delancey St. north to 14th Street and from about 2nd Avenue to the East River (see map), continues to undergo this attack.

Fifteen per cent of its people and 7.5% of its housing stock were lost in the 1970s. In one 12 block area, between Avenues B and D, which is now a site of concentrated struggle, 70% of the residents were evicted and 3,400 housing units destroyed.

The predominantly Latino neighborhood in the Lower East Side has formed a loose alliance, though not yet fully developed, of Latino residents (who remain underrepresented), and white, black and Latino political activists, homeless, squatters, artists, punks, and anarchists. Although squatters were slowly building a presence there through the mid-1980s, the political potential of the social relations on the Lower East Side were largely unrealized or unnoticed until mass resistance to a police enforced curfew erupted in Tompkins Square Park in July of 1988, when hundreds of local people battled the cops for several nights. As a result of this conflict, the park was adopted as a collective living space by hundreds of people.

The taking of the park as public land to live and the use of collective action to hold it show the extent to which the example of squatters has been absorbed by the local homeless. The demand for wealth, in particular housing and land, is closely linked to the demand for self-determination. The park homeless, for example, insist on deciding where they will live in the absence of adequate housing and reject the authoritarian solution of shelters. The demand for self-determination is obvious in the case of squatting, where bureaucratic co-optation and "poverty pimps" are rejected, and where decisions are made at house meetings based on direct democracy. Mass democracy as the method of decision-making characterizes the informal structure of the movement on the Lower East Side in all its facets, a fact made more significant by the increasingly institutional strategies of much of the US left in recent years. The squatters and park activists have this trait in common with the AIDS activist organization ACT UP, and recent months have seen a co-sponsored demonstration in support of squatting and housing for HIV-positive homeless.

The recent, more effective police tactics, such as the eviction of people from Tompkins Square Park in December 1989 during bitterly cold weather, have prompted new discussion within the movement over the effectiveness of violence, mass civil disobedience, and sabotage of police technology. The discussion has also focussed on how best to strategically expand the struggle to involve more local tenants. One idea, the organization of a city wide rent strike in 1990, has the potential to generalize the squatters movement. Recent militant demonstrations led by African-Americans against the murder of Yusef Hawkins by a group of white youths suggests another opening for a broader proletarian alliance along the lines of self-determination.



LOWER EAST SIDE

STRONG WORDS

MN: Before we talk about the current movement, talk a bit about how you ended up on the Lower East Side, some of the religious movement background.

JB: One day I was invited as a Seminarian to go to the Firing Line show to debate the question of the existence of God — how old was I? I don't know, about mid to late 20s — During the course of the show I commented in relation to the discussion that was going on. I said very little really. But at some point, one of the right wing types said something about "Don't you believe in God?" And I said, well it's not really about object worship is it. And that was really all I said. And I got this incredible amount of hate mail from fundamentalists that was sent to the seminary.

In 1975 we formed Christians for Socialism, which was basically a group of people who translated and disseminated some of the documents from Medellin around the liberation theology conference that was happening there around 73. Or 1971? Yeah, it was the early days of Liberation Theology in Latin America.

It was a meeting point between radical leftists, people who felt some kind of interest in this whole question of religion, and particularly the captivity of that whole issue in the hands of the right. My opinion has always been that people who are leftists closet that question. They knee jerk what the state has taught them to knee jerk — from the male white god right through a kind of passive acceptance of the whole use of "right wing Christianity" by the state, and vice versa. The critique is individualistic, subjective, like "let's wish it all away."

You know, that is not the kind of resistance required. Like I heard this guy on the radio last week talking about going to churches — targeting churches and going there and just standing up in the middle of services and saying, "Hold It! There's problems here with this church." Things like this you hear about so rarely.

Christians for Socialism had a lot of aspects to it. Labor people, members of some of the left-wing parties who were then thrown out of their own parties. In one party in particular people were thrown out. One guy I knew, who was a writer for many years for the *Daily World* was bounced out as a result of affiliating and becoming deeply involved in this radical religious, pro-socialist movement.

We sponsored forums. I remember we did some on the revolutionary priest Camillo Torres. We published propaganda, like the avenues of alliance between radical (roots) Christianity and communism. We also did translations. There was a group out of Columbia University, Church Research Information Project (CRIPS), which did a lot of early Moon research. The whole KCIA connection to Moon was published by CRIPS. That group along with the New York Circus, still does some of the best reporting on the grassroots struggles in Latin America.

The liberation theology movement, if you can call it such, is really broad. For instance I had two teachers. One up at the Union Seminary at the time, James Cone, was one of the early leaders and exponents of black liberation theology. He wrote a book called *Black Power, Black Theology* — late 60s I think it was. And later on, *Black Liberation Theology* and *The God of the Oppressed*. I was very involved in that as a tendency and movement in this country, particularly up in the Harlem area with some other people there, working against evictions and on housing stuff.

And I also took a course with Letty Russell, who was a feminist theologian, and a course with Mary Daly, who is really beyond post-feminist theology. So it was really broad, there were a lot of things going on.

The Latin American variety of liberation theology which I was most connected with tended to be the more anarchistic, Marxist, leftist. Because there was this thing, you know, the Marxist-Christian dialogue, or alliance as Dorothy Solle used to say. The point is to move from dialogue to **alliance**. There were strategic alliances and Nicaragua is a perfect example. Some criticism can be made of the educational structure there and the question of the Jesuits and all that. But there were alliances made between radical base communities who were reading the Bible and going out becoming part of the Popular Army. You know people like Romero. The inspiration and power derived for the revolutionary struggle from these base communities cannot be underestimated.

I've moved beyond that though, because I felt personally at that time the limitations of a group of people who would call themselves neither Church nor Party. That was our slogan in Christians for Socialism and it got to be really boring after a while.

There was one early book by José Bonino called *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* which really got to me. It's one of the books I really liked a lot. It was a short little primer. José Miranda's book *Communism and the Bible*, which is a hundred page gem. Incredible. Things like this really are good. Everybody knows Gutiérrez and some of the bigger known names who were doing

really ponderous theology because they were competing with Western theologians and they would say it right out, which I guess is okay, but I'm more interested in the popular stuff, like the radical comic strips.

The whole question of religion to me is a very interesting and central question to struggle in terms of ideological struggle and in terms of the will to resist and take chances.

MN: Where would someone go to find books and documentation on this effort?

JB: Well the best source for books like that is Orbis Press which is in Maryknoll, N.Y.

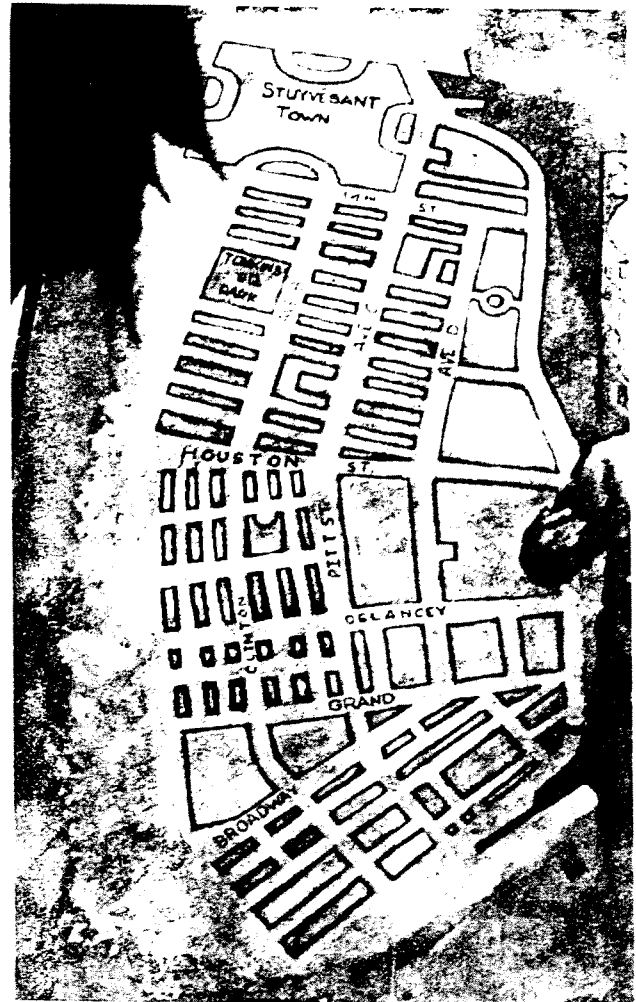
First of all the Book of Acts represents, in part, the structural means by which the sect — the Christian sect — will organize itself. In there it says clearly that everything will be held in common and things like this. Jesus was also very clear saying if you want to follow me you have to sell everything. It was very uncompromising through Jesus to James (Jesus' brother), to Francis and the movement of poverty.

There was a social movement at the time in opposition to Roman Imperial control. One of the tendencies went under the name of the Zealot party. A guy by the name of Brandon did a number of books and things on this. Some of the right wing people at the Heritage Foundation recently have written critiques of these books that are totally — what's the word? — they are not really well done, they are just these kind of broadside attacks. But it's interesting that they are attacking it. It's an example of disinformation and revisionist history.

In any case, this group, as far as can be known, was about direct action and was involved in small scale guerilla activity including this one time when they took over the Temple where a lot of the business was being transacted. And this interestingly enough is the first reported act of the mature Jesus figure coming in — with the whip in hand — in a somewhat violent fashion and inaugurating a campaign. El Greco did a great painting of it. Well it was, you know, a short period of time before they killed him and they killed a whole bunch of other people including a number of the priestesses who were involved, Mary Magdalene being one of them. You know, they came after people and it was smashed.

But the tradition which lived on through James, recorded in the Book of Acts, in the Gnostic Gospels, and other places, points to the desire to maintain these lines of common ownership and each according to their need, peace, things like that.

Miranda, in particular, builds on that and also makes really credible arguments around the whole archaeological question in itself — certain things are just lies, this was never said, the original language was this or that — and he's a scholar so he is taken very seriously. He wrote a couple of really longer more detailed studies. One called *Marx and The Bible*, a critique of oppression, and some other books. Nothing yet, the way I look at it, has seriously challenged from a progressive side the patriarchal, monotheistic conception. Because even liberation theologians, pretty much across the board, even some of the women liberation theologians, still see the divine force as being a liberating force and that force understood in what I would consider a fairly traditional way but given another name. I believe that this kind of ideological confusion in the liberation theology movement again, mimics the ideological confusion in the left.



MN: So how did these interests lead you into the squatters movement, first in the Bronx, right?

JB: This would be 78 or 79 — in the South Bronx. We took a few buildings over.

MN: As a part of a church service, right?

JB: Yeah, I was working in a church. When I worked in churches what I tried to negotiate was to be let to do work out in the streets. And you know, there would be arrangements: all right you have to come in and preach every other week or every week, or you have to come in and have a youth group, or you have to do this or have to do that. Generally, that's what I tried to negotiate for. That's pretty much what I was doing there.

So there was a store front, and direct service type programs, and food, shelter and clothing types of things. There was a clinic and a store front for narcotics counselling. Things that were relevant on 139th Street at that time, which was a period when Jimmy Carter came there, Ronald Reagan came there to see the South Bronx. The Pope came right up my street. Paul Newman came there — *Fort Apache* — we ran him out. There were Japanese bus tours, I remember, that used to go right by my street.

We worked there, and the way I saw what I was doing there was again to be as close as I could be with the people on the street, the poor, in solidarity and in struggle, and trying to

implement what were felt to be collective desires as part of a collective effort.

Now what happened was elements of the state moved on me. Very similar, if I might say so, to the whole New Testament riff. I mean it was very dramatic the way they did it. You know, they tried to crucify me. It's true!

I was working with a group, looking at the land policies of that area, and began to notice that the Pentagon was buying up large segments of the South Bronx. Large, open tracks are owned by the Pentagon up there — and HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development - Ed.].

We had known that HUD had had for quite a while a working relationship with the Pentagon around the question of urban land, because the Pentagon had its' own control motives and HUD had its' own internal needs, as well mirroring the needs of the racist state, the spatial deconcentration plan. So some land had been bought there and there were people being displaced, and we found out that some of the leadership in the Church was involved in these dealings, including the local

minister having met with Sam Pierce, the New York head of HUD [Sam Pierce later became Secretary of HUD under Reagan and is perhaps soon to be indicted on corruption charges — Ed.], and some people from Trinity. Trinity, as you know, owns a lot of Manhattan. We learned of efforts to depopulate a whole area. We let people know. We got death threats. So in any case, some pig priests began to spread rumors about me and different things went on.

RW: Let me stop you here, what you say here can be quoted, and I don't know if you want all this...

JB: Hey, the truth will set you free. The interesting point about this, to me a theological point, was that when the inevitable happened and I received my walking papers for anti-authoritarian behavior and being prone to violence, you know, having outbursts of anger and things like this that were unbecoming a clergyman, people in the community began to circulate a petition saying that I should not be removed and in fact I should be installed as the local minister.

People were ready to occupy the church. There was a tremendous base of opposition to the behavior of this individual, which could be characterized in this way: as racist, very ruling class, colonizer. This guy was really bad. You could do a whole thing on this, the way in which this ideology is used to oppress. I mean this guy was really good at it. He had it down. Patron is the

word in Spanish, you know, real fuckin' pig owner.

In any case what this raised for me — and I spoke about this with Desmond Tutu when he was in New York. He taught a course that I took. You know, he's involved in the South African struggle, he's an Anglican Bishop. And I asked him, when was it relevant to think in terms of insurrection within the Church, you know, like people taking over the churches for positive struggle. And he discounted it as some kind of methodology of violence that I was putting out there.



I feel the question of religion is tied up very closely with the question of violence. That's what I've been working on intellectually so to speak — because we don't get a lot of time to read or write in the buildings, working on shit and defending the squats. We just don't have a lot of time. It's not an excuse, we need to make more time to do this. But I've been interested in the question and done some thinking and a little bit of writing on the issue of violence and understood, criticized violence/force and the question of God.

Anyway, after a while, I was feeling the need to do other things. For one, to get more directly involved in squatting. I didn't want to have to play any kind of a game at that phase. So, I moved out of it.

MN: You wanted to break out of the division of labor. Your special function as clergy?

JB: I guess I'll always identify myself to myself as a priest — but I'm no servant of the ruling class and I hate capitalism. Originally, I felt you could rework it to some extent. You have these ideals, kind of naive in a way. Basically what I feel is that kind of energy is part of the will to fight. If there is a need to ritualize that energy as part of a liturgy or a practice that's part of the struggle, then I'd like to work on that. Maybe there is no material base for thinking or implementing these kind of things. But I do know there are a lot of gaps in, the way I look at it, the

realm of ideologies and strategies and tactics for struggle that make some of these questions relevant even there.

RW: We have a lot of contact with the fifteen to eighteen to twenty year olds. I have two kids in that age range, and there is a real big tendency among revolutionary minded young people to both be vegetarians or vegans and to be into animal liberation a lot. These are some of the most radical people and the most radical bands. For instance, among the Rainbow Gathering, a lot of people consider themselves pagans. They see a need for something to take the place that maybe religion took, not in a negative way, but in a positive way. Because the culture here in the United States among white people is dead. More than any other group of people in the world, for US whites, there is only life at all when people are in revolutionary struggle.

You can say that about everybody in the world, but I think there is some life among a lot of people, like Italians, South Americans, Black people in this country and Puerto Ricans. There is some kind of culture, reactionary as some aspects are. There is something, and in white people it is dead, you know, total absolute death.

So a lot of people are searching for things. People my daughter's age make little altars, and they make flowers and candles and they read, they do yoga. There is an attempt to make



some kind of connection to some meaning in life or something other than absolute total death.

And all these political groups that I've been in contact with since the late '60s, they are all totally sterile also. I mean talk about revolution, it's always in the sense of sacrifice, denying your whole life for the revolution, pleasure and all this. What sense does it make? It has to be for some pleasure in life. Why are we doing all this?

RW: Beyond all this liberation theology stuff, his definition of God is God is the people struggling for liberation. If he wants to define it that way, I have no problem, know what I mean?

JB: Another important thing for me is the ethical demand

that I feel for — to put it in simple words — the struggle for the poor, the ones who have always gotten, you know, put upon by the pigs and exploited and stuff.

MN: Can we talk about the riot a little bit.

RW: Can I just say one thing real fast. I have a big prejudice against the word Christianity, anything to do with the Bible. I can't even look at it. I've been shown some passages of interesting words. Jesus said to people to go sell their robes and go buy knives, swords and stuff like this. It's interesting to see how they were organizing, but I can't read the book. I absolutely cannot read the book. My attitude is based on some of the people who I've known who I've seen call themselves Christians who are total pigs to me. So I have such a deep reaction I cannot even look in that to see anything interesting or positive.

Most young people today who are revolutionaries in the US have a similar problem towards Marx, Marxism, communism, socialism any words associated with that. There is an immense deep prejudice, you know, coming from the same reason — that everybody they see who call themselves that are assholes. And so they by instinct don't want anything to do with it, and it's a very positive at one level that they refuse all the leftist groups around. There is no problem.

This one guy from the RCP [Revolutionary Communist

Party — Maoist] wanted to have the red flag leading the demonstration for the riot and they tore it down. They said we're not having any communist banners and by communists they mean asshole pig, reactionary — banners of these reactionary groups.

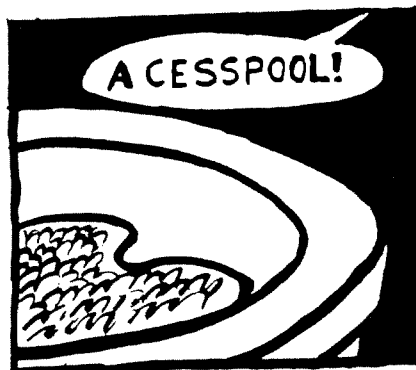
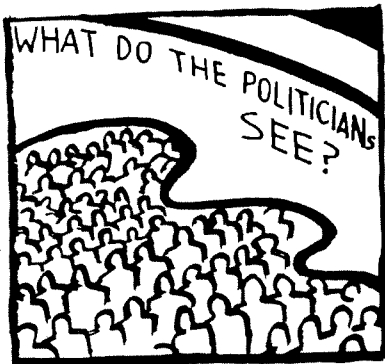
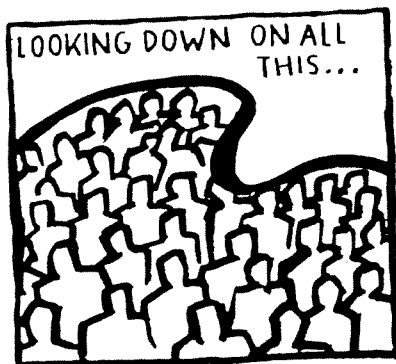
I don't call myself an anarchist, as far as what I understand it to be, but the people I see myself in the same struggle with are people who call themselves anarchists who also aren't anarchists either. It's just a word people choose because they can't choose these other words. It's a word that

appears to be least compromised.

In any case, were not quite at that point that it's crucial to have to raise abstract theoretical questions about communism and anarchism. But we've come across questions that involve theory every step of the way. Specially with the riot, there are lots of things like intra-class relations and things that have been raised.

MN: Can we have some of your own background?

RW: I ended up in NY in '72 after being around different parts of the country, especially Berkeley, in the late '60s. I saw what happened in Berkeley in that as soon as they brought the guns out people changed their mind about the struggle. They brought the guns out and people were killed.



that, and bla bla bla, and no one can meet these new requirements.

And so what the government did, it came in and said, well here is some money. You know, just apply, we'll give you money, we'll fix your place up,

I stayed there 'til it got really sick and saw all these people who I had respected and who I considered to be revolutionaries turn around after People's Park. I think at that time I'd seen students as being the vanguard of the revolution, without using those words, just because I saw people around the universities moving and that's what I thought. It was only based on what I saw, although most people weren't students anyway and I wasn't a student either at that time. I just saw what happened and thought these people aren't going to do it and I left.

I came to New York hoping to find "Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers" and the Young Lords [Latino political organization based upon and allied with the Black Panther Party] and people I heard about who were into neighborhood organizing, hard core street organizing. I came to the Lower East Side in the early 70s and that was gone. But I found in the Lower East Side the first place I ever lived in my life that I felt at home. Other people can describe how it had deteriorated really seriously by 1972, you know, with the drugs coming in.

When I came here, to me it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, even though it had deteriorated. And there were still remnants of what had happened: like you would go to a building and it would be Puerto Rican and Polish and old women who hardly speak English and Irish and poor whites. At that time nobody who could pay more than \$100 rent ever crossed that way. So anybody on the east side of Avenue A automatically, whether you were white or black or Puerto Rican, it doesn't matter you were okay. There was never any of "you're white, you're not from this neighborhood" kind of stuff that happens down here now because of gentrification, associating white people with gentrification.

In any case it was just incredible. People were so friendly. I could sit on the stoop and my kids — this is regressing but — they would just play with the kids on the street. It was just really warm and friendly and lots of people and lots of kids. Not really any possibility for political work around though. The only thing left were the day care centers — parent run day care centers which were all over, all over the place.

It's very interesting. It was one of my first lessons in how government throwing money to the community after the riots destroyed community organization. This is why I don't want to have anything to do with government funding. There is always such strings attached. There were lots of parent run day care centers which was the only autonomous direct action type stuff that was left. And they were destroyed to the point that you now can't even form them because there are so many laws against it. You have to have so many bathrooms, you have to have this and

we'll give you bathrooms, bla bla bla. And then you have to have a president and a vice-president and, they will become the leaders of the center. These people have to function in this particular way. Just by the fact of accepting their form of organization with these rules, you've destroyed the collectivity. It was gone. Totally gone, gone, gone. This is the main thing it destroyed — your organization, your cooperative organization. It would be possible to have a grass roots organization with officers. I have problems with that form of organization. But the form of organization that the government demanded separated these officers from the collective. They had positions, they had to report to officials, directors were paid, etc.

It just destroyed anything left of the struggle of the Lower East Side. So after all these years of the 70s and early 80s on the Lower East Side, it was very difficult to get anything moving. I just felt overwhelmed with this need to study theory, which I couldn't easily do cause I had kids. I don't want to say here what I was doing at the time.

MN: What influenced you?

RW: Besides the usual stuff. The first thing I read that helped me was reading Chairman Mao. I'm not a Maoist but I was at the time. There was a reason people were Maoists at the end of the sixties. I mean I could lay it out, there's reasons... You want me to lay them out (laughter)? Well first of all the revolutionaries in the United States, as far as I see it at that time, the best revolutionaries were Maoists. The black groups, the white collectives, the Puerto Ricans.

MN: What year are you talking now?

RW: Late 60s. The Trotskyists tended to be not there. I could go into it more, they just didn't have it. The anarchists were just like these madmen comic book makers, white always.

China at the time was...well, obviously your own government is your enemy, number one. So the enemies of your enemy are obviously your friends. China, Red China.....China! China! China! It wasn't Russia, it was China that people looked towards. You couldn't even write letters to China, you couldn't visit China. So obviously there is something there that is diametrically opposed to the state you hate, so you have that. Then you have also the fact that there was a recent revolution in China that was fantastic. You just read about the Long March, the way people suffered, and the war against the Japanese, all these things. I mean, you can't help but identify with these people, what they had recently been through, some big struggle that has happened that still has its mark that you naturally identify with. And also the war in Vietnam and identifying — even though China obviously didn't help like they could've — identifying with that

whole area of struggle, that whole part of the world.

And also because you can read Mao's stuff fairly easily — these little books and some of it is easier to read than other theoretical stuff initially. At least it was for me. I used to try and read Marx and Lenin. Even though I did well in school and things like this, I couldn't read Marx's work. I remember when I read the Communist Manifesto it was a major undertaking and I was so proud of myself I got through and read it.

Well, anyway, I went all through these years, went back and forth from Europe. Was working with some European group and ended up...

MN: Did you squat in Europe?

RW: Well, yeah, out of necessity. See I've always squatted out of necessity.

When I was in Germany, I was also in Italy before then, but I ended up in Germany. Let's see. All I can relate it to is when my kids were born. I went to Germany. I was in Germany from the height of the squatters movement to the end of the squatters movement. Just over the height, just when people started to get a little tired but still going very strong. And I ended up in a squat cause I didn't have a place. Same reason I ended up squatting here, you know. But to me it was a wonderful experience because it was the first real live struggle I had been in since the sixties in the US, because it was dead here, you know. Anyway, so it was a like a fantastic experience for me and I could go into it all. I mean, its positive and negative ways and positive and negative aspects.

MN: Go into it a bit.

RW: Well first of all, just the fact you need this refueling every now and then, and inspiration from being involved in struggles. And it really helped me a lot. One thing is that when you are in a real situation of struggle after you've read all this revolutionary theory, then it all starts reprogramming through your brain again, you know.

Then I was a year in London, squatting in London. I came back to the United States because my older kid wanted to come back, be here. I had no intention of staying in the US when I came back because I like to be in a place where things were happening and when I left the US nothing was happening.

But I came back to the US, this was the mid-80s, and got a job making five dollars an hour, found the cheapest day care I could which was \$70 a week, it was the cheapest, and my kid cried when I left him and started running after me it was terrible. But it was the only way I could make it. Going to work, coming back, sleeping in a basement with this horrible mattress and the mice running across me. The worst place I've ever slept, train stations are better.

I didn't have money to pay the rent on the Lower East Side. I could've paid \$100 a month like I'd always paid on the Lower East Side, but not possible. So, I got together

with some people who wanted to squat and I still had in mind going back to Europe for a while. And we squatted this building on 8th Street and we thought if we make it two months we were doing good. It was a depopulated block and all the buildings were empty. It was scary.

It turned out to be a great experience, tremendous building on the Lower East Side. Four of us started it. We had arguments at the beginning whether to break out the cinder blocks in the front to make a door, because people said if we break them the cops are going to come and then we won't have a place to stay. And I said but I can't climb the fire escape in the back with my kid every day, up and down, you know. Cause you'd have to jump and then I'd have to leap up. So people got together while I was at work one day and broke the bricks and fixed the door. There were a couple of other squats around but they were not so active. So people helped and we got it going.

People just came by all the time wanting a place to stay. When you open a building you're filled the first day practically. But we basically let people come in who didn't seem to be junkies, or didn't seem to be dealers, who we didn't have some real incredible negative feeling about. In other words, everybody basically, almost everybody. And dealt with it from there. We had some unstable moments at the beginning, but we ended up getting a very interesting group of people. All were homeless and needed a place to stay. Heavily Lower East Side people, and then we had about 15 people and were going strong. The first battle was always to keep the front door locked, you have to do that, and having the group begin to function as a group, and letting people come in because of group consensus, and dealing with the inevitable problems that you'd have with some people. You know, you never know what someone's like until you live with them. Someone you may think is not okay turns out to be great and someone you think is okay isn't.

Basically the rules were no dealing, no hard drug use, and no violence in the building. In other words, we don't want people ruling by guns. That's basically the only thing people ever got kicked out for as long as we were there, and it was always after lots of warnings, especially with drug dealing.

Then when we have about fifteen people, one day who shows up outside our front door, RAIN and the Joint Planning Council (JPC), so called "community groups" and local politician types associated with the Catholic Church, from the Lower East Side. RAIN is a so-called housing group on the Lower East Side who pretend that they are for low income housing who are not, who are part of gentrification.

MN: Are they Government funded?



RW: They are all connected to the Catholic charities, who are basically at the forefront of gentrification.

MN: What way do they operate as the forefront of gentrification?

RW: Well, by doing what they did with us. By coming to the building and telling us that we had to leave, that we couldn't be there, that no one is allowed to go into the buildings, that everybody was a member of JPC, which is an umbrella group for all these poverty pimp organizations on the Lower East Side who receive government funding and totally sold out. JPC is an umbrella group of which RAIN is a member, and to be in JPC you had to promise you would not go into any of the buildings. So all the buildings would remain vacant, because they were supposedly negotiating a deal and they had to be vacant, but actually it was intended to keep people from going in and holding the land, because they do not intend the buildings for truly low income housing anyway. There's not going to be any low income on the Lower East Side, even though they pretend it. So we are saying, if you want to hold the buildings, go move into them. That's the only way to keep the buildings. And so they tried to kick us out. Basically they couldn't have done it without having guns, cause we weren't going to go and we didn't go.

And we went to the Community Board. We wrote a little letter about our group and explained who we were, cause they were just saying, you're not from the Lower East Side and you have green hair — we didn't have anybody with green hair then but — and we were heavily Lower East Side people on 7th Street. Three buildings between C and D.

These three buildings are heavily Puerto Rican, and they're squats, and they fix up the buildings a lot because they've been working a while on them, and they were really under threat to be legally evicted. And we had this demonstration, in fact a series of stuff to defend these three buildings, and it actually worked! Enough publicity was generated and the squatters on 7th St. had a good lawyer so that they could prevent being evicted by having inspectors come in and condemn the building. The public pressure helped because they could come in any moment and just evict everybody. But we've been able basically to stay ahead on the public pressure aspect.

So that's bringing it up to date. And from there on more and more buildings were squatted. We began to get our network developed by having to defend the buildings against eviction.

MN: There have been more and more run ins with HPD [NY City Housing and Preservation and Development Dept.]?

RW: Yeah, we would develop our strength by fighting against eviction and we'd go around and get each other, get 25 to 50 people around a building when they would try and evict the buildings. And these are basically illegal evictions. The police would come and say you had to get out and we'd say there's the 30 day law. We have a slight legal protection that's not totally been challenged, this 30 day law. It's accepted by the police if you have enough pressure. If you've been somewhere 30 days they can't just come in and kick you out of your house, they have got to take you to court.

This is our only legal protection. It's interesting cause we've been able to use it. But of course we can use it only because

MIDNIGHT DEMOLITION Radio Talk Show, May 1989

I just wanted to give you an update on what's happening down here on 319 East 8th Street. The legal stay has been lifted and the wrecking crew in the dead of the night is on the top of the building demolishing it. They've begun demolishing the building with sledge hammers and they are hard at their dirty deed. We're across the street watching it being done and it's really sleazy. We want to protest in the most vigorous way and ask everybody who is listening to come down and protest tonight at 319 East 8th Street.

You might not be able to really get out to the block because of police presence - about 150 cops - but you'll be able to come out to Avenue B. I just wanted to say that they don't seem to care that poor people like myself lived in it for five years and tried to make that building a better building for everyone that didn't have homes before. Now they're retaking it all away from us because of serious collusion between City Hall and some developer or developers.

So now it seems like five years is down the drain, but I can tell you that the people of 319 East 8th Street and also the people of the Lower East Side are going to stand up for their rights and they're not going to give in to these developers and so the struggle will continue; you can be sure of that. My name is Willie Butler and I lived there five years so I'll tell you it's very sad day for me personally, but it's an even sadder day for the people of the Lower East Side and I think they should try to channel their outrage.

Q. Where will you live now?

I don't really know where I'll live now to tell you the truth. On top of the challenge of that I also have HIV infection which really puts a cloud over my whole life. I don't know what my life span will be. I will continue to live every day as I must live it, preciously. Really for people like myself, there's really very few options left except if you want to go into a concentration camp like hospices and hospitals, and I'd prefer to be with the brothers and sisters down here, a lot of mutual support for people, like one big extended family of artists and activists down here. We all know each other very intimately and I don't think I'd like to give that up for some sterile hospital room where I would be treated with a lot of disrespect. Anyway, I'm not feeling sorry for my own personal condition although I do believe the the issue will come up for people with AIDS or HIV infection who are homeless now who are in squats. Their needs are going to have to be addressed, and I think they should be addressed in a more humane fashion and let them make some decisions about their own future instead of this vast bureaucracy of corruption and sleaze that's been taking over the city here.

* * *

This is a reprint from the mag *World War 3*, (#12).
For info write to: *World War 3*, PO Box 20271, Tompkins Square, NY, NY 10009.

we've been able to get a lot of people in front of the buildings. We call the press and believe it or not we have often gotten good press. Unlike in Germany where they get consistently bad press they won't even deal with the press. But there's some liberal news people around that have been able to put stuff on the air which has helped a lot because we are really small and new and not that strong yet, compared with the European squatters movements. But we just put up a big enough stink and just stay there and don't open the door and barricade it

The whole thing is that we've been attacked consistently, over and over again. If you can use your attacks to always get stronger, to get wider organization and to learn from, then it's not a negative thing that happens. Their attacks help us to get stronger and we've been able to keep up until now. That doesn't mean we'll always keep up, we could have some big defeat, which is okay because things go up and down all the time.

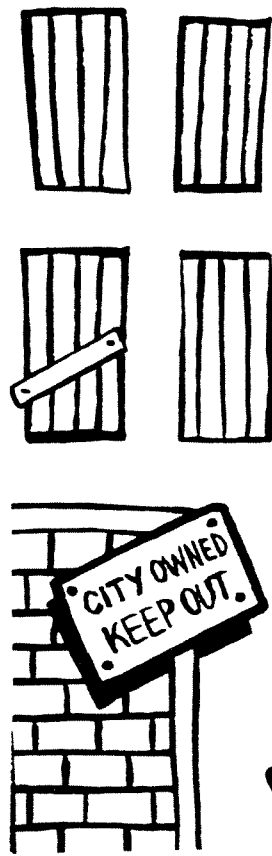
Right now we have a big challenge after the resistance to the park curfew (the so-called riot). If this happens the same way next time... if we haven't learnt something, and aren't able to do something better....cause no one expected what happened.

So we developed a network around anti-eviction stuff and we learned. And I, someone who wouldn't speak to policeman and who wouldn't deal with the legal system at all, cause that was my principles, I found myself going down and looking up the law and talking to policemen and saying, you know, well you can't come in the building without a court order. You have to have a court order to come into the building and bla bla bla.

The barricades helps to convince him. Yeah, it's clear to us without a good barricade you don't have any rights!

We had one case, one building, they made it through the first door — we had two doors — beat up some people, and didn't have time to make it through the second door before we had enough people in front of the building to stop them. And said you can't do this, this is not legal. Enough people, they call the community relations cops, then the community relations cops call the police legal bureau and they come back and say "they're right it's not legal, goodbye," and they all leave. And all these vans around the corner leave too. I mean, that's not going to work always, you know. That works right now, or it's worked up till now. We've been able to hold them off. If there's a point where that doesn't work anymore, hopefully then we're strong enough so that we have other ways to deal with the situation.

So that's how we got together. The squatters are all different kinds of people. It's very interesting on the Lower East Side — this heavy, very radical, young white kids who sort of flock to



WHAT ARE PEOPLE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT ?



ILLUSTRATION BY SETH TOBOGMAN

the Lower East Side, like people flocked to Berlin during the squatting movement. Because the squatters were basically not Berliners. They were like a few people here and there from this or that factory town. A few people here and there from some town who couldn't deal with the life there, and knew something was happening in Berlin and everybody went to Berlin.

So you have that aspect in the Lower East Side, which is a very positive thing. At the same time, if people are going to be on the Lower East Side, they have to be integrated with the Puerto Rican neighborhood. So people have to have a sensitivity which they don't have when they come.

MN: That's a frequent criticism. The big target is that there are a lot of young white kids not originally from the neighborhood, and they don't seem to have a relationship to the Latino community in particular.

RW: You see, some writers don't understand the punk scene either. Cause the punk scene also is maybe only half white. The people that come to my mind immediately are black and Spanish-speaking.

JB: There's a lot of non-whites in the squats.

RW: And if you're a punk, dressed like a punk, you can't tell if that person is Spanish-speaking or not, you can't even tell they're black cause you just see punk, you know what I mean. Some of the young white people you might see a lot because they're quite active. But you also see the young Dominicans too and the young Puerto Ricans, young blacks.

There is a political consciousness on the part of the young white people not from the neighborhood, which is happening all over the country. But as far as the population of the squats it's half/half, if not more than half black and latino, with some Asians. Look at all the squats.

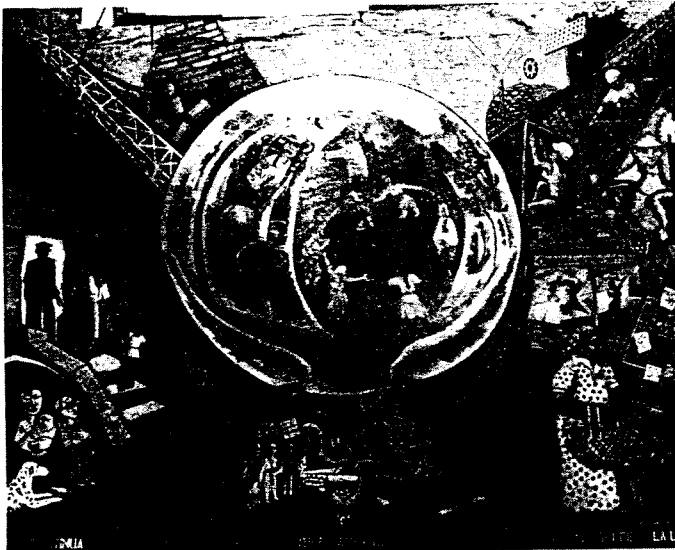
Everybody who attacks us always attacks us for being middle class white people. In fact, most people who attack us for that are middle class white people. Yeah, simply not true at all. I mean I could go through histories of the things that some of the working class kids in this city go through and end up in the squats, and the things that have happened to them all along the line. I mean, it's like one of these Charles Dickens stories.

MN: Was there a representative group of people, racially or culturally in the activity around Tompkins Sq. Park?

RW: The activity around Tompkins Square Park is heavily black and Latino. It's like 60-70% black and Latino, if you look at the people in the Park who have regular contact with each other a lot and who hang out a lot. If you want to say 50/50, say 50/50, but it's not that. I'm just thinking of even the punk bands, you know, if you think only of the punk scene it's at least half.

JB: A lot of the people, particularly blacks and older Hispanics who are homeless, on the streets, or peddlers, whom are very numerous in the Tompkins Square Park area, are on the front lines against the police. They are the ones who are getting beaten up and were getting clubbed by the police prior to the July 30, the first rally, which was the reason why we had the rally. They were getting terrorized, just like they're getting terrorized now. They haven't stopped. Remember, homelessness is state repression of the poor, the human right to a place to live.

But in any case, most of those people, particularly the night of the riot, and in general in terms of being in a squat, whether coming from the street or the shelter, are not prone to want to get out front and draw the heat. This is generally true and you'll hear it from people. Like, you know, "hey let's go to the demo."



"Hey, you know, we're going to bring the heat, man." Like, we're in here, we're holding this building let's do this and not do that. But the night of the riot, by the time there were 2-300 cops on the scene, most of the people there were.....what I'm trying to say is that people who were there, who were ready to fight, felt that they didn't have a whole lot to lose. Maybe they weren't on probation, nor had they gotten beaten up by the police earlier that month or whatever. They were in and around the area. But people had moved out because it was clear Friday night that a military operation was in progress. Friday night they came in — this was before Saturday night's riot — and occupied the band shell. Completely filled the bandshell area, which is a good, what, 40 yards or so across. With all sorts of trucks, computers and who knows what else. It was war preparation.

Needless to say, people in and around the park who had something to lose were not there. The people who were there were strong representation from a lot of the punk bands who use that park and the band shell. There were a lot of artists there, who came as..... you know, one of the demands on the leaflet was "Freedom to Be" and a lot of people came from that perspective. And then there were a lot of people there because

they had witnessed the terrorizing of poor people who happened to be sleeping out in the park and were getting terrorized by the police. They were sick and tired of the pigs and came to fight back.

RW: But the thing is, if you're on Avenue A, that's what you're going to have, I mean, if you're on Avenue C then you're going to have a different thing. Because on Avenue A you're going to have all these people around who sort of hang out there anyway who are just immediately involved in it. It's quite interesting cause we didn't expect any of this to happen, you know, because sometimes you put out leaflets and people come. You never know what's going to happen. And we didn't expect it.

People had been really upset about the cutting down of the trees in the park, and the curfew. People couldn't believe they were going to have a curfew in the park. And people who had been terrorized a lot in the park, particularly Puerto Ricans — Puerto Rican families who were squatting would go sit down in the park and they would just be harassed by the police. And people would try and sleep on the benches and if they looked like a homeless person cops would come and bang the benches and

make you get up. But if you were white and you slept on the grass and looked like a yuppie they just left you alone.

So there was a lot of harassment going around and people were obviously upset, but the possibilities of organizing something against all of this seemed sort of immense. Especially because the local pigs, the poverty pimps, the community board, and all of this, were just so heavily against us. We try and go to the community board meetings and they wouldn't listen to anything that people had to say that was reasonable.

You know, like something big happened. Had we not passed out the leaflets and organized it, well maybe it wouldn't have happened that day. It might have happened a few weeks later over something else or it could happen the next summer. That something happened from passing out a few leaflets shows that there is something in our neighborhood that was happening, that could be sparked off, that was going on. All the little things you do begin to add up — you have to know a loose network of people who know each other, a felt community. "Hello, how ya doin?" in the park and all this kind of stuff. This was the basis.

JB: There is a network of people who are connected already. I would say like three hundred, four hundred people, who are connected up, who share a similar feeling that it's really time to try to take the whole historical project a little further, who are talking, although sometimes they don't use the same language, they're talking insurrection, evicting the police, the representatives of the state, out of the neighborhood. They're talking localism — a very radical kind of localism. Where it will go is uncertain at this point. It's up to conscious people who're influencing it in various ways and so on. I'm not overstating this, I really feel this. There's a real mass thing going on out there.

MN: You said things blossomed and exploded as a result of the riot.

JB: There are two things happening as always. There is the state and its' machinations. The Mayor has a panel on the parks called the Blue Ribbon Panel on the Parks and the Constitution. It is an attempt to do the necessary background work as far as clearing the land for gentrification. Some ruling class type names, Cyrus Vance for example, heading it up. I can show you the thing. And they're studying questions around curfews, forcing people off public land and this type of thing, which is all part of the same effort of spatially deconcentrating the cities, of depopulating the cities of people who would pose a threat — a revolutionary threat to their control.

There's a machine of genocide along with the shelters and so forth. Remember, the shelters came into being to consolidate, re-concentrate those masses who had been dispersed. Sort of stage two of spatial deconcentration. The shelters are not a benevolent attempt at housing, but part of the plan of control and genocide.

So this is what is happening in Tompkins Square Park. This was pre-planned, and when we get more information on it we'll know what meetings were held to plan it, how the communication and so forth went out to involve all these police from different precincts. When were they notified? Friday night they already had a dry run. It's all there, it's just a question of getting that information and what it is from a military kind of war game perspective. The Tompkins Square riot, if anything, was a war game, a pre-planned attempt to quantify the kind of reaction that there would be to this kind of overt attack on a community.

You see, that's what makes it different from other forms of police violence that we are used to. There is Miami and so forth. This is an attack, in the words of the PBA, the Patrolman's Benevolent Association, Caruso [head of the PBA - Ed.], an

attack on an enclave of people who are seen to be a threat, who they don't like. So the war game aspects of it are what it is that have to be looked at more closely. Sort of like the "strategic hamlets" approach in Vietnam. In any case, what that brought about, or what it reflected, was a number of tendencies or struggles that were in progress. They weren't created by the riot. The riot just manifested our strength, it manifested some weaknesses, but mostly manifested strengths. The riot forced the opposition, us, to jell, to come together.

MN: Enumerate some of the strengths?

JB: Some of the strengths are the incredible innovative depth of the movement, in terms of tactical maneuvering. There is a lot of creativity out there. And you know, the enemy they're very uncreative. We see that in squatting. There are almost humorous sides to it, which we don't like to play up. You know, when they come with all their brass to some of the buildings. "You gotta get outta here!" They line up and even McNamara of Tompkins Square Park fame came to a squat recently on a street nearby here. They had tons of cops: "You gotta leave here," and people said wait a minute we've been here for a while now. We said you enforce the law, and also had people there to defend it. Anyway to make a long story short they backed down.

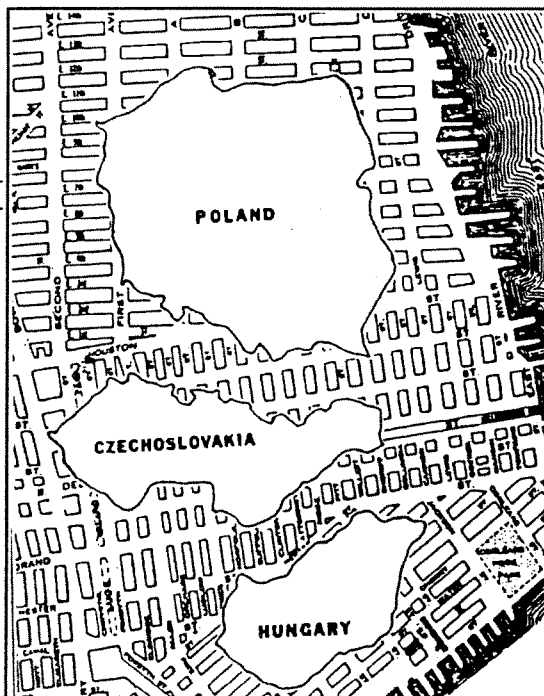
RW: They had letters to prove that they had been there. They had letters addressed to themselves and sent to the place where they were living in the squat. You know, the thirty day law, cause they had been there thirty days. And it was going to be the first time they ever tried to evict someone in this kind of way for a long time. This is also the first squat that ever bothered to get their letters together cause we always say, get them but you never have to show them.

JB: They pulled out their letters and the whole thing. They backed down.

STRONG CONNECTIONS

The efforts of squatters to reclaim buildings exemplify the anarchist emphasis on "self-activity," a notion that seeks to prove that individuals are capable of creating autonomous zones, free from the bureaucratic intervention that characterizes both "liberal" capitalism and state socialism. This desire for new forms of communal organization recalls the anarchist writer P.M.'s concept of the word "bolo," a reinvention of the familiar ideal of the "intentional community" that strives to dismantle the "planetary work-machine." In his manifesto, *bolo'bolo*, p.m. suggests international links between local "bolos." Intimations of this sort of communitarian internationalism are apparent in a recent statement by independent groups in Poland that expressed solidarity with the "alternative culture people" who are being harassed in the Tompkins Square Park area.

From *Motion Picture*, Winter 1989/90



Besides the Marxism-Leninism institutes, the institution that suffered the harshest purge is doubtless Prague's Academy of Fine Arts. The academy's 210 students went on strike, hired a non-conformist artist as their new rector, and fired all but 2 of their 39 instructors.

The new rector is Milan Knizak, a 50-year-old assistant professor with flowing, shoulder-length gray hair and three earrings in each ear.

After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, he live for two years on New York's lower east side. "It was wild, very dirty, but very safe. I loved it," he reminisces.

Mr. Knizak appears to cherish free thinking and disdains the sheepish following of reigning trends. "Three months ago, no one was for democracy. Now everyone is. I hate that. It makes me sad."

From *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 1990

RW: They made them show ID and they all had their ID. You know, they were together.

JB: Well that's what I mean, innovative, non-aligned. The movement is very non-aligned. The example about people coming and trying to opportunistically raise a certain flag and this type of thing and people responding like this [clicking fingers]. There is a real strong all consuming force out there among a lot of these youth, homeless people and elderly people who are fighting back. This is like Miami in a way. The depth of rage is there and the conscious targeting by the state, given the locale, New York City, and certain sectors of the population....

RW: This building that we mentioned, is a really good example of a squat. A couple of these anarchists types, then there is this guy who was sleeping in a refrigerator box in the park, this really great black guy, older, and a women he met when he was sleeping in the box.

JB: She leaned over the box and said come with me and they both went to the squat.

RW: Ohh, so she knew about the squat before. Anyway, then there is this very working class Irish guy. He drinks a lot, but a really good guy, you know, like really solid.

JB: Just put a buzzer in the building. The only squat with a buzzer.

RW: Also, some really young people. And this older guy — the young Irish guy was taking care of this older guy. So anyway, it's a really good example of squats, like who's in it. They've also done a tremendous job of defending it cause they've been attacked over 'n over 'n over 'n over again. They really want them out of this building.

JB: That aspect of it where you have all these different people coming together in a building from all these different places...

RW: Yeah, the Irish guy was sleeping under the bridge.

JB: And then forming a cooperative to work on this building because it's the only way. You can't even get a beam in the building unless you have a lot of people help you with it. It's a cooperative effort. People who don't know each other and they're involved in direct confrontation with segments of the state in the life of the building usually. Creates a certain terrain within which to organize people around. You're all outlaws.

In any case, what happened around Tompkins Square is that various tendencies were in motion: people were fighting gentrification, people who were doing direct service work around homeless; you know, there is a lot of feeding going on in and around the park and those programs have been threatened by Koch and company.

And a lot of people who were involved in anti-repression. People involved in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) work — Emergency Coalition Against Martial Law — in the early days. It was formed in order to publicize the role of FEMA, which maybe I'd say briefly at this point, we felt was very important for a couple of reasons. One, the Ollie North connection.

But the role of FEMA, in particular, with the shelter system in the U.S. created a politics and a dialogue that expanded the bounds of the politics of homeless, squatting and so forth, to include an anti-war emphasis given FEMA's dual role, i.e. detention for those who oppose intervention as well as its role in funding shelters. What the shelters represent is a second stage in

a way: create a dispersal, militarily speaking, and then you have a consolidation or reconcentration in these concrete shelters which really is slow motion death.

RW: They are making it impossible for any other legal place to stay except for the shelter.

MN: Could you address directly the link between FEMA and the shelters?

JB: Okay, there's a couple of things. One, FEMA was founded in Washington D.C. in 1979/1980, which is the same year that the National Coalition for the Homeless was founded in Washington D.C. Yolanda Ward was assassinated in 1980 in D.C. [See "Spatial Deconcentration," *Space Notes*, Midnight Notes #4]. FEMA is also a conduit for Federal funds to the United Way in New York, which was related to the National Coalition for the Homeless in New York here.

The National Coalition, the United Way, and FEMA and the Red Cross and some other agencies, the Salvation Army, sit in a national board which has to do with the management of the "homeless problem." The Federal Board was just appointed recently by Reagan. I can't remember who heads it up right now. It is a sort of think tank and coordinating body on dealing with the political/military problem of dispersed poor people under the guise of the "homeless crisis."

The shelter industry is a very booming industry and has been rationalized and legalized by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the local coalitions who have sued in the individual locales around the "right to shelter" and then sold the bill of goods to people that this was a joyous, momentous occasion that homeless people have won the right to shelter, "or the right to be sheltered," if you know what I mean. And they've done that nationally and it's been coordinated by the National Coalition for the Homeless.

MN: They get funded by FEMA?

JB: Sure the local coalition for the homeless in New York receives funding from FEMA. It's not their major source of funding. But the point we were interested in making was that not only was FEMA involved in planning for emergency situations whether they be insurrections or earthquakes, Hurricane Hugo or atomic bombs, but they also get involved in planning around the "homeless crisis." They have all the — I don't know how to describe it, it's comical almost — work books and documents. Look at what FEMA's doing, particularly in the last 5-10 years. They've gotten involved more with HUD, so they're getting into the homeless issue. They do these studies, with an eye towards containing, pre-empting insurrection. They've gotten involved in the shelter system, along with work around detention. Under Ronald Reagan's Executive Order in 1984, FEMA - this is when North worked with them — would be in charge of incarcerating 400,000 Central Americans in the event of intervention. So on the one hand they're running these detention centers and on the other hand they're working with the shelter system. I find that illuminating insofar as it helps objectively to draw the links between issues of homelessness and anti-war. It's the same fight.

In part, our goal was to publicize the role of FEMA so we had a demonstration, a series of articles that came out. I think it's very important, particularly around detention and strategies of control on the part of the state. But for us the impact had to do with homeless, shelters, squatting, as a strategy to counter the state's plans.