COOPER SQUARE
Here to stay!
Over five decades of struggle against displacement in the Lower East Side / New York City
ANOTHER CITY IS POSSIBLE
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WE ARE FOREVER BEING SQUEEZED BETWEEN WALL STREET AND MIDTOWN REAL ESTATE!

The Lower East Side overlaps and intersects with portions of Chinatown, the East Village, Alphabet City, Little Italy and NoLita. Parts of the neighborhood with a Puerto Rican population are known as Loisaida.

1.1 THE LOWER EAST SIDE OF MANHATTAN

As New York boomed in the nineteenth century, the city’s population moved north from lower Manhattan. Big speculators bought and developed land but they skipped over much of the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village, instead developing on blocks created by the famous Manhattan grid layout. Beginning in the 1920s, Midtown Manhattan then became a commercial center that surpassed Wall Street in size and economic importance.

Since it is between Wall Street and Midtown Manhattan, potential land value gains in the Lower East Side have attracted speculators and giant public works projects that promoted new development. But the people resisted. They slowed down and stopped many upscale development projects while welcoming housing for working class people. But the Lower East Side is still in the sandwich! Gradual gentrification has eaten away at the working class and multi-ethnic character of the neighborhood. But we are still here!
1.2 ORGANIZING AND RESISTANCE IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE

For over two centuries the Lower East Side has been a dynamic working class neighborhood populated by diverse immigrant groups, first from Europe and later from Puerto Rico, Latin America and China. Community organizing is in its bones! We have been an important part of organizing for radical, left, anti-racist, pro-labor, feminist and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender rights.

RADICAL REFORMERS

Ideas for radical social reforms, especially housing reforms, came out of the settlement house movement that is still prominent in the neighborhood. Settlement houses were committed to the integration of immigrants in the neighborhood. The first major citywide tenant union, the Metropolitan Council on Housing, started over 50 years ago in the Lower East Side. It organizes tenants and advocates for strong rent laws. The Mobilization for Youth, a pioneering service organization, began in the Lower East Side.

The Lower East Side is also the site of First Houses, the nation’s first public housing, which opened in 1935.

THE LEFT

The neighborhood was home to the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies), the Socialist and Communist parties, and other anti-capitalist political groups. The Catholic Worker and The Jewish Daily Forward were published here.

64 East 4th Street, once headquarters of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and now a theater on the Fourth Arts Block (2016)

LABOR

Samuel Gompers addressing the Triangle Shirt Waist Strike meeting at Cooper Union Hall (1909)

Organized labor sprouted throughout lower Manhattan. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) drew their members and leaders from the clothing and textile shops in the Lower East Side. The founding meeting of the ILGWU was at 64 East 4th Street.
CIVIL RIGHTS AND PEACE MOVEMENTS

Community activists from the Lower East Side have been active participants in the Civil Rights Movement through labor and left organizations as well as groups such as the War Resisters League. In 1909 the National Negro Committee met in the Lower East Side. It evolved into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Leading feminists, suffragettes and radical women leaders who lived for a time in the Lower East Side include Emma Goldman, Mother Jones and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

LGBT RIGHTS

As the HIV/AIDS epidemic hit the city in the 1990s, activists and organizations from the neighborhood led the struggle for government action to combat the epidemic through the organization ACT-UP. As part of this organizing push, Housing Works helped secure and develop housing for people with HIV/AIDS. Not far from the Lower East Side the historic Stonewall Uprising in 1969 marked the beginning of the Gay Rights movement. Tolerance for interracial partnerships has long been a characteristic openly visible in the area.

2 / THE COOPER SQUARE STORY

The Cooper Square story started in 1959 when the City of New York and development czar Robert Moses released an urban renewal plan for a group of tenements and small businesses in the Lower East Side. The plan would have resulted in the displacement of thousands of residents and the construction of new housing that would have been unaffordable to almost all neighborhood residents. It would have displaced 2,400 families, 450 occupants of single room units and 4,000 homeless men.

The struggle to stop the urban renewal plan and develop an alternative community plan resulted in the construction of new low-income housing and preservation of existing housing for low- and moderate-income households in the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association, and the preservation of this housing through the Cooper Square Community Land Trust.
2.1 THE 1959 COOPER SQUARE URBAN RENEWAL PLAN

THE FIGHT BACK
Furious at the city’s disregard for its low-income renters, neighborhood activists were quick to organize to stop the Cooper Square Urban Renewal Plan.

THE COOPER SQUARE COMMITTEE FORMED
A group of community activists, residents, business owners and artists formed the Cooper Square Committee to fight the Moses plan. They included Thelma Burdick, from the Church of All Nations Settlement House, Esther Rand from Met Council on Housing, Helen DeMott, Marvin Carpenter, Frances Goldin, Walter Thabit, Charles Kaswan, Margaret Richie, Staughton Lynn and Morris Moskovitz.
2.2 THE COOPER SQUARE ALTERNATE PLAN

Unwilling to accept the urban renewal plan, the Cooper Square Committee members organized and developed a community plan. After hundreds of community meetings, the Alternate Plan was made public in 1961. The community plan proposed that the blocks with the best tenement housing remain in place and that new apartments be built. The committee also proposed innovative solutions to meet the needs of seniors, artists and homeless men on the Bowery. Demolition and new construction would be arranged to prevent displacement of residents and businesses.

After struggling for decades to win recognition of the Alternate Plan from the city, two new low-income housing projects were built and occupied in 1985:

- Thelma Burdick Apartments
- JASA-Green Senior Housing
BUT FUNDS FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSING WERE THEN CUT

Starting with a national moratorium on funds for low-income housing development in 1969, the federal government began to withdraw its support for low-income housing. New York City followed suit during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Instead, government began to promote public-private partnerships such as the Low Income Tax Credit program, rent subsidies (Section 8) and what was called «affordable housing» that would be available to people with higher incomes. The problem with public-private partnerships is that the private sector often makes big profits and ends up being the senior partner.

Our neighbors in public housing were also affected by this shift as government funds needed to adequately maintain the projects dried up. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the largest in the nation, gradually followed the national precedent of turning public housing into a public-private partnership. Local government failed to step in to make up for federal cutbacks.

2.3 THE REVISED PLAN OF 1990

Faced with the lack of funding for new housing, the Cooper Square Committee shifted its focus from new construction to the rehabilitation of existing housing. This resulted in a revised plan.

The Committee had the power to block city plans but no funds were available to build low-income housing. There were also 20 buildings in deplorable condition occupied by families. The city wanted to bring in higher income tenants, falsely claiming this would result in the «economic integration of the Lower East Side and not gentrification». The Committee proposed that the city develop two mostly vacant urban renewal lots for 75% market-rate housing and 25% low-income housing, and at the same time provide some $20 million to fully renovate the existing buildings at no cost to the tenants. After about three years of negotiations, the city agreed to the compromise.

A series of binding legal agreements with the city secured the transfer to the buildings to the Cooper Square Community Land Trust and Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association. The city moved ahead with the construction of new housing on the remaining portion of the urban renewal area.

1990 Protest: «Cooper Square Here to Stay»
3 / COOPER SQUARE’S INSTITUTIONS

3.1 THE COOPER SQUARE COMMITTEE

TENANT ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY
Cooper Square helps tenants form a tenants association and advises how to approach landlords, file complaints and get legal assistance. Individual tenants can also receive advice on matters such as lease renewals.

The Committee worked with tenant leaders to develop the Stand for Tenant Safety (STS) campaign to help tenants in buildings dealing with disruptive renovation work and construction work (both with and without permits). The campaign pushes for Department of Buildings reforms to safeguard tenants and prevent harassment and displacement during gut renovations.

Cooper Square is an active participant in city-wide campaigns for the rights of tenants and proudly took part in the successful efforts to obtain a rent freeze.

GREENING PROGRAM
Cooper Square’s Greening Coordinators reach out to low income buildings, primarily cooperatives, that are in need of energy efficiency upgrades. Buildings that qualify for assistance can receive valuable upgrades that save energy and money through various assistance programs.

SOCIAL SERVICES, SENIOR SERVICES
The Cooper Square Committee provides housing counseling and social services, free of charge, to area residents. This includes help in applying for income support and subsidized housing and referrals for job training and ESL lessons.

The Senior Health, Advocacy and Recreation Program (SHARP) provides social and recreational opportunities to promote healthy aging.
3.2 THE COOPER SQUARE COMMUNITY LAND TRUST (CLT)

Some of the original 400 apartments in the urban renewal area were combined into larger units to accommodate families, resulting in 328 renovated units of housing in 21 buildings. Ownership of the land and buildings was transferred to the Cooper Square Community Land Trust. The trust leases the buildings to the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association, which is responsible for maintaining the housing. One of the key elements in the lease is that the housing must remain permanently affordable. The CLT is responsible for insuring that the MHA meets the terms outlined in the lease.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY LAND TRUST?
It starts by separating the land and buildings.

**BUILDINGS**
The MHA leases the buildings from the CLT

**LAND**
The CLT owns the land

LONG TERM OF AFFORDABILITY
- The lease is for 99 years and renewable.
- The CLT and MHA must serve households earning under 80% of the government-defined Area Median Income (AMI).
- However, the goal is to reach households earning less than 50% of AMI.
- Presently affordability levels range from 28% to 36% of AMI.

HOW IS THE LAND TRUST GOVERNED?
The CLT is governed by a board of directors with nine members, three of them MHA residents. Directors are chosen for their demonstrated commitments to the principles of community solidarity, low-income housing and social justice. The CLT appoints five people to the 15-member board of the MHA. The CLT is a federally-approved non-profit organization.
3.3 THE COOPER SQUARE MUTUAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION (MHA)

In 2013, the MHA was recognized by the Attorney General of the State of New York as a limited-equity cooperative in keeping with the original agreement made with the city. Residents bought shares in the cooperative at very modest prices, and when they move out they can get their investment back, with a small increment that roughly keeps up with inflation. This promises to keep the housing affordable in the long-term future.

GOVERNANCE OF THE MHA

The MHA Board is made up of 15 members. Ten are elected by shareholders and five are appointed by the Cooper Square CLT. The Board reviews and approves financial statements, management policies, and personnel decisions. The board generally meets on a monthly basis.

Each building has a Building Captain, and they meet jointly on a regular basis with staff.

THE STAFF

The management staff consists of seven people including the Executive Director, Resident Relations Specialists and other administrative workers. There are ten maintenance workers including a Maintenance Supervisor, mechanics and porters.

COMMERCIAL UNITS

The MHA rents out 24 ground-floor commercial spaces. Our preference is to provide space for businesses that are needed in the neighborhood but are being forced out by skyrocketing rents and chain stores. At the same time, commercial rents serve as a means to keep residential rents affordable and cover some 27% of total expenses.

Some of the commercial units belonging to Cooper Square (2016)
3.4 OTHER COOPER SQUARE HOUSING

THE CUBE BUILDING
The Cooper Square Committee secured this 22-unit building under the New York City Dollar Sales Program. The program sold buildings to developers for as little as a dollar but provided no city subsidies, making it inevitable that they end up as market-rate housing. Cooper Square objected, overcame opposition by the city, and secured $2.1 million in federal and state funding for its renovation in 1988. It is now a low-income cooperative for formerly homeless families.

COOPER SQUARE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING
This 53-unit residential building at 29 East 2nd Street includes supportive housing services. It was developed in partnership with Community Access.

The 53 residential building at 29 East 2nd Street (2016)

BEA ARTHUR YOUTH RESIDENCE
With the Ali Forney Center, Cooper Square Committee renovated an historic townhouse to create housing for 18 homeless LGBTQ youth.
OTHER NON-PROFIT HOUSING PROJECTS
IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE

Among several other non-profit housing developers in Lower Manhattan, THE LOWER EAST SIDE PEOPLES MUTUAL HOUSING ASSOCIATION stands out. Created in 1987 as part of the Lower East Side Cross-subsidy Program, this MHA includes 24 renovated formerly-vacant buildings and a new 30-unit building. They are all rental units.

PUBLIC HOUSING:
THE MOST ENDANGERED
LOW-INCOME HOUSING

There are about 15,000 units of public housing in the Lower East Side and East Village. They are operated by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). These include: 45 Allen Street, Baruch, First Houses, Gompers, Hernandez, La Guardia, Meltzer, Lower East Side Infill, Lower East Side Rehab, Riis, Rutgers, Seward Park Extension, Smith, Stanton St., Two Bridges, Vladek and Wald, among others.

In 2016 the waiting list for public housing in New York City totaled 258,880 households, and 147,033 households had applied and were waiting for rent subsidies (Section 8).

In 2014 then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg came up with his Infill proposal - to build new housing on already densely developed public housing sites in the Lower East Side and Harlem. The new housing would have been 80% market-rate and 20% “affordable.” Residents saw this as a formula for displacement and did not want to lose the open space around their apartments. They organized and successfully defeated the proposal. However, the current mayor Bill de Blasio incorporated some of the same elements into his proposal for the Next Generation NYCHA, which seeks to bring in private developers instead of fighting to increase public funding. This plan, which is now being implemented, proposes to lease NYCHA buildings to private owners and guarantee rents using publicly-financed rent subsidies (Section 8). Some infill projects are also planned.

We support the continuing efforts by public housing tenants to turn back the privatization of public housing and protect this significant stock of truly affordable housing in the Lower East Side.
4 / MORE THAN JUST HOUSING

Valerio Orselli, Walter Thabit, Frances Golden and Carlos Perez during the early years of Cooper Square

4.1 BUILDING A STABLE COMMUNITY

Improving our community – with better schools, health care, sanitation, and safer streets – is important to everyone. But when things improve our residents and businesses should not be forced out by high rents. It’s not just gentrification that’s a problem, it’s displacement. No one should be forced to move because they can no longer afford to live here. This is why we work with tenants, to insure they receive the protections they have a right to under our rent laws. This is why we collaborate with other community-based institutions that make it possible for working people with limited incomes to stay in the neighborhood.

4.2 LOWER EAST SIDE FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

Created in 1986 the Credit Union has served over 30,000 members and has reinvested around $84 million in the community. It was started in 1986 as the result of a successful campaign to challenge Manufacturers’ Hanover Bank under the Community Reinvestment Act. The campaign was organized and led by the Lower East Side Joint Planning Council, of which Cooper Square Committee was a member.
4.3 LOWER EAST SIDE FOOD COOP

Founded in 1971, the coop provides quality organic food to the Lower East Side community, with discounts for seniors and Cooper Square MHA members.

4.4 THE BOWERY RESIDENTS COMMITTEE

Created by the Cooper Square Committee in 1971, originally as one of its committees, it has since become one of the largest providers in the city of social services for homeless and alcohol/drug dependent populations.

4.5 EAST 4TH STREET CULTURAL DISTRICT

BREAD AND ROSES

Cooper Square is at the center of a lively arts community, where affordable entertainment survives and thrives.

This unique cultural district, located alongside Cooper Square offices and buildings, helps to promote the Lower East Side as a center for affordable cultural attractions. Established in 2005 as a coalition of community and cultural organizations, it includes La Mama ETC, Rod Rogers Dance Company, the NY Theatre Workshop, Teatro Duo, Creative Time, WOW, IATI, and Works in Progress, as well as the Cooper Square Committee and Mutual Housing Association.

La Mama, Lower East Side (2016)
On another block, the historic Nuyorican Poets Café (2016)

4.6 COMMUNITY GARDENS
The neighborhood is also known for its murals and uniquely equipped community gardens.
GET INVOLVED!

What have we learned in the over half-century of community action in the Lower East Side? We have learned that there are only three things that work: ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE!!!

ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE !!!

Organizing works when we do it right and persist.

We need to protect our community land and community-controlled housing. They are products of our many struggles against displacement and for the right to live as full citizens in our city. As we face the relentless pressures of a real estate market that is out of control, we need to organize to defend our community. We must combine community organizing with community-based planning. We can adapt and sometimes compromise but without sacrificing fundamental principles.
COOPER SQUARE,
OR THE “SAXIFRAGE” DRILL-STONE
OF NEW YORK CITY

The word comes from Latin: « saxifrage » made up of « saxum » the rock, and « frangere » to break. Saxifrage, a small star-shaped flower that grows in direct sunlight on the low, dry stone walls of Mediterranean scrublands, is profoundly underestimated.

Saxifrage has the surprising ability to sprout and develop in the narrowest cracks of austere walls, the chinks of the hardest rocks, barriers of the driest stones, on which rare rains fall from time to time, but never stop... With infinite vitality, the saxifrage knows how to thrive in the absence of natural resources: no rich soil in which to grow, no fresh, shaded humus in which flourish, no fertile ground in which to bury its roots. Quite the reverse: everywhere lifeless stone, solid rock, under the hot sun.

It is there, in hostile terrain that the saxifrage takes hold and grows more beautiful, with its lively red and green peaks stretching toward the Mediterranean sky, before it displays, at the end of spring, its tiny bright purple flowers.

So goes the saxifrage, at once fragile and strong, needing few resources, thriving where plant life was never expected to survive... And yet...

So, in its own way, goes COOPPER Square Mutual Housing Association, the « SAXIFRAGE » drill-stone of real estate speculation in New York City, a multicultural community of a few thousand people, stemming from the working class immigrants who came to put down roots from the fifties until now in the « Lower East Side » right in the heart of the rich and powerful business district of Manhattan.

Cooper Square MHA, a small organization dedicated to non-speculative housing, is always fighting against the forced displacement of the most vulnerable populations, protecting the rights of minorities who face unscrupulous owners and speculators. Proud of its twenty buildings, armed with iron staircases, so recognizable in the New York urban landscape, flanking red brick facades; the red, color of the saxifrage and of Cooper Square MHA, proud of its holdings of four hundred housing units with affordable rents and resources distributed fairly for the benefit of a unique, diverse, and tolerant human community. It is urban saxifrage, drill-stone, to which nothing was ever given, but which, by means of tenacious struggles, implanted its robust roots despite the current laws of the market, speculation and profit, which reign supreme in New York City.

But, the Mediterranean saxifrage is fragile, just as Cooper Square can be, with pollution, concrete work, loss of the diversity on one hand, wild speculation and the rampant search for profit on the other. Let us make sure that, for lack of vigilance, both do not disappear. Long live the saxifrage drill stone and the Cooper Square MHA!

By Yann Maury, Chairecoop

Yann Maury is the author of the documentary film about Cooper Square Community Land Trust :
“Homes and some million $” 2014 (International version) - Free download on : https://chairecoop.hypotheses.org/5736
STORY OF COOPER SQUARE AND THE LOWER EAST SIDE /
Tom Angotti / Director - Hunter College Center for Community Planning & Development
Valerio Orselli / Executive Director - Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association

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LAYOUT AND ARTWORK /
Ganaëlle & Emilie
Adequates Conseil Agency
Saint-Jean-de-Védas - France
(+33) 4 67 47 54 97 | mc@adequates.com

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CSC - Cooper Square Committee
MHA - Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association
CLT - Cooper Square Community Land Trust
61 E 4th St, New York, NY 10003
(212) 228-8210 | csc@coopersquare.org | www.coopersquare.org

WITH SUPPORT FROM /

Pr Yann Maury
Political Science PHD Chairecoop - ENTPE - University of Lyon / Chairman of chairecoop
Vaulx en Velin - France
www.entrpe.fr | www.chairecoop.hypotheses.org

Hunter College Center for Community Planning and Development
City University of New York
www.hunter.cuny.edu

Prof. Arch. Hubert Guillaud, PHD
École Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Grenoble (ENSAG) CRAterre
University of Grenoble - France
www.craferre.org

Région Auvergne Rhône Alpes
Direction de l’enseignement supérieur et de la recherche
Lyon - France
www.auvergnerhonealpes.eu

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COOPER SQUARE COMMITTEE
61 E 4th St, New York, NY 10003
(212) 228-8210 | csc@coopersquare.org | www.coopersquare.org