

New York Turns Squatters Into Homeowners

By STEVEN ERLANGER

In August 1985, squatters advised by community organizers seized 25 vacant, city-owned buildings in the East New York section of Brooklyn. City officials were furious, 11 people were arrested, and the contretemps became an issue in the Democratic primary that year between Mayor Koch and City Council President Carol Bellamy.

Now the New York City Board of Estimate has unanimously approved a program to give those same illegal squatters — transformed into homesteaders and incorporated as the Mutual Housing Association of New York — 58 city-owned buildings, and money for technical and architectural aid and another \$2.7 million as a revolving loan fund for rehabilitation.

The tale of the transformation is a happy one of struggle rewarded, of community passion channeled shrewdly by institutes and foundations into paths acceptable to government officials who themselves were eager to show their commitment to low-income housing as well as the letter of the law.

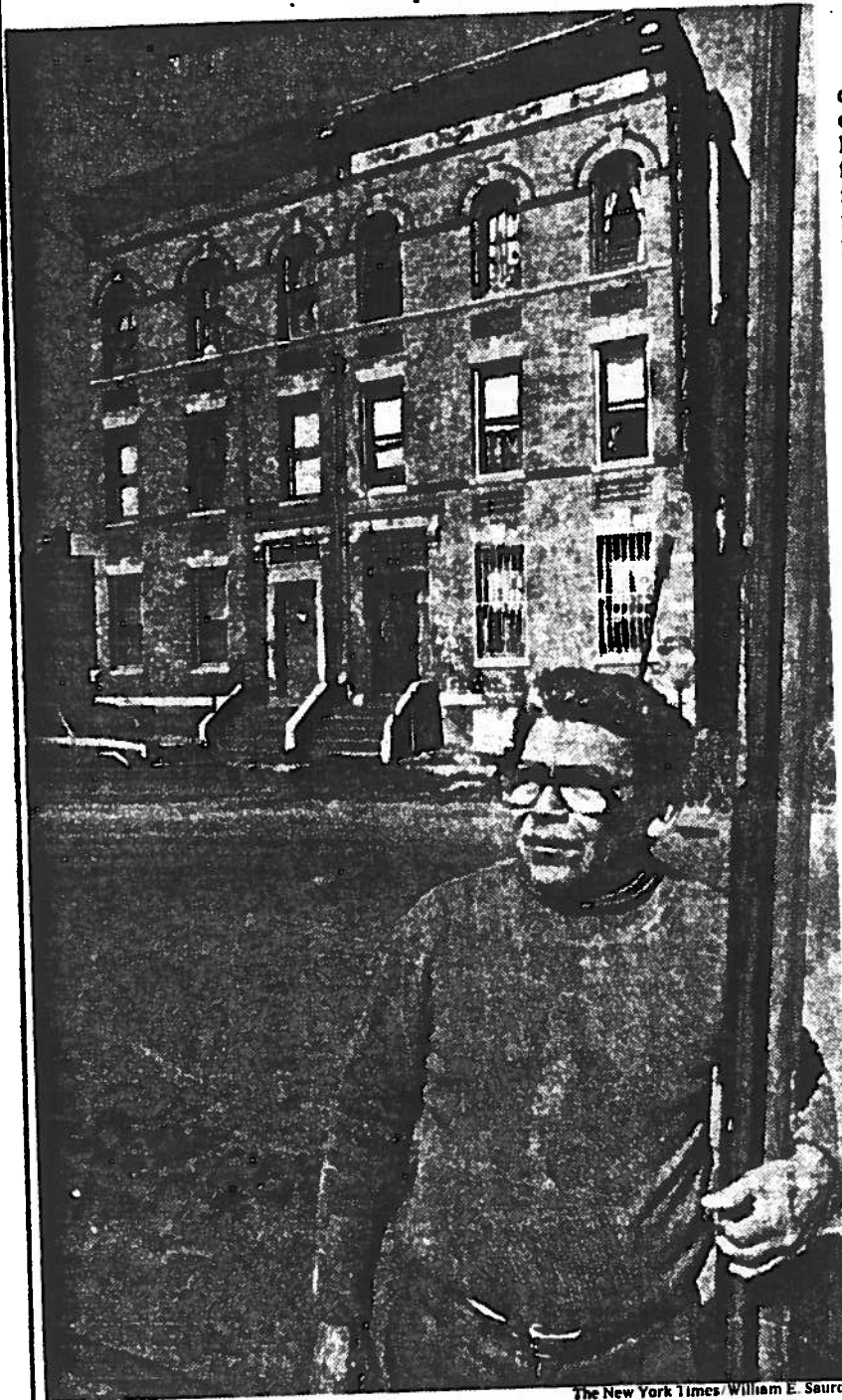
An Attractive Prototype

But what has happened in East New York is interesting for another reason. It is the first test in New York of a much-discussed model for low-income housing development, a neighborhood collective of homesteaders given money and technical help by the city in return for restricted rights of resale. It is believed by some to hold great promise for a city that owns 4,500 vacant buildings and has 200,000 families waiting for public housing.

Mutual housing has been tried in various forms in Western Europe and Canada, Philadelphia, St. Louis and Phoenix.

"This is clearly something new — and the city initially has committed a

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The New York Times/William E. Sauro

Jacinto Camacho outside the building he moved into two years ago on Glenmore Avenue in the East New York section of Brooklyn.

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tremendous amount of resources into making it work," said Felice Michetti, First Deputy Commissioner of the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. "Mutual housing is becoming more and more of an attractive model, and it's being looked at by neighborhood groups across the city."

'I Knew We Were Going to Win'

Galen Kirkland, vice president of the West Harlem Community Organization, said: "People tend not to believe in new things until they have a prototype. This is why East New York matters so much, and why it must succeed. Well over two-thirds of the real estate in Harlem is owned by the City of New York, and the way city policy goes on the disposition of that property is the future of this neighborhood."

Such grand thoughts are alien to Jacinto Camacho and Norma Jusino, two of the East New York residents who have had their faith in themselves, in government and in justice at last

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reconfirmed by the Board of Estimate vote.

Mrs. Jusino, 41 years old, and her husband, Francisco, 47, an ambulance driver, took over a house on Blake Avenue two years ago with their six children and grandchildren. For the first time, they no longer fear eviction. "I knew we were going to win," said Mrs. Jusino, but her husband was not so sure. "I was very nervous," he said. "Little by little, I've put a lot of money into this house, and I didn't want to lose it."

Mr. Camacho, a 69-year-old retired electrical mechanic, moved into his house on Glenmore Avenue two years ago this month. He spent the first six months cleaning up the debris. Since

For a New Homesteader, Struggle Leads to Success

By STEVEN ERLANGER

Twenty years ago, when Jacinto Camacho came to the United States from Ecuador, he worked two shifts a day, doing carpentry, painting and plastering.

Now, a month from his 70th birthday, Mr. Camacho puts in a 70-hour week, but he works for himself and his family. The derelict three-family house in the East New York section of Brooklyn that he took over two years ago as an illegal squatter is now his.

Precisely how a community-organizing group called Acorn — the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now — accomplished that feat, aided by foundations, banks and government officials, is of no compelling interest to Mr. Camacho. He is grateful to Acorn, but he said he had always believed in the virtue of work, and that virtue, in the end, is rewarded.

"I've been working since I was 7 years old, for my father, and my father made me do things seriously," Mr. Camacho said, standing in one of the neatly painted rooms he has slowly resurrected from squalor. "In the same way, I've tried to train my sons to be serious, to do serious work and take care of their families."

'I Was Very Nervous'

For his first 14 years in America, Mr. Camacho lived alone. In the last six years, he has brought his wife here and three of his children, and the house at 925 Glenmore Avenue is for them.

Five of his 14 grandchildren are already here, and 3 of his 7 children, "but they're coming, all my

family is coming," said Mr. Camacho, who became an American citizen in May 1986. "If God lets me live more, I'll work to the last minute of my life."

When Mr. Camacho took over the house he said: "I found about 100 drug addicts running up and down the stairs. I worked from 6 in the morning to 8 at night, clearing the garbage. I was very nervous — they were running up and down the whole time."

Little by little, he said, "I got them out — sometimes by talking sweetly." He continued, "But the police always came." And when the police asked him if the house was his, Mr. Camacho said, smiling, "I always said 'yes.'"

Among the other homesteaders in East New York, Mr. Camacho is known for his ingenuity. When asked, he showed visitors the saw he found on the street. He managed to hook it up to a quarter-horsepower motor, also salvaged from the street. He has secured most of the doors in his house from the same source, but has bought ornamental iron grilles — \$1,400 worth at payments of \$100 a week — to protect the ground-floor windows and doors.

Mr. Camacho, a squatter turned homesteader, sees no irony in this. "Squatter is a good word," he said. "But the person who has a reason, has a reason. It was illegal — four times they wanted to evict me, and Acorn defended me. But now they can't take us out any more."

"I'm happy, content," he said. "My place is here."

then, he has devoted his Social Security check of \$387 a month to the house while living sparingly on the income of his daughter, who works part-time. "What I did was illegal," Mr. Camacho said. "But if you don't try, you don't get anything. I slept here two winters without heat or electricity. I never had any weapons — just my own hands and the help of God."

But he and the other residents of East New York also had the help of a community-organizing group called Acorn — the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Acorn, founded in Arkansas in 1970, has 75,000 members and branches in 27 states. A paid organizer for Acorn, Francine Streich, came to Brooklyn in 1982 to organize a branch that now has 4,000 members who pay dues of \$16 a year. With all the vacant buildings in East New York, Ms. Streich said, home-steading "was the obvious issue."

How to create low-income housing in the special circumstances of Brooklyn, with smaller buildings and more city-owned vacant buildings than any of the other boroughs, was also much on the mind of Borough President Howard Golden and his executive assistant, Marilyn Gelber. "We are the largest borough in population and have the largest number of city-owned buildings, and we felt it wrong for city policy to focus so exclusively on Manhattan," Ms. Gelber said.

Auctions and Lotteries Opposed

But Ms. Gelber's first meeting with Acorn did not go well. "It was quite an introduction," she said. "They held a sit-in in our office." Still, Acorn had done its work in the community, she said, and its demand for more housing for low-income residents in vacant buildings resonated with her.

"We had been pressing Housing Preservation and Development to get these buildings to local people," Ms. Gelber said. "But the city's policy was to sell them, to sell them at auction."

Acorn opposed auction sales, too, as well as a city-sponsored lottery, asserting that poor local residents needed more directed aid and less reliance on fortune. Ms. Gelber said that in August 1985 "Acorn opened up buildings and took things into their own hands."

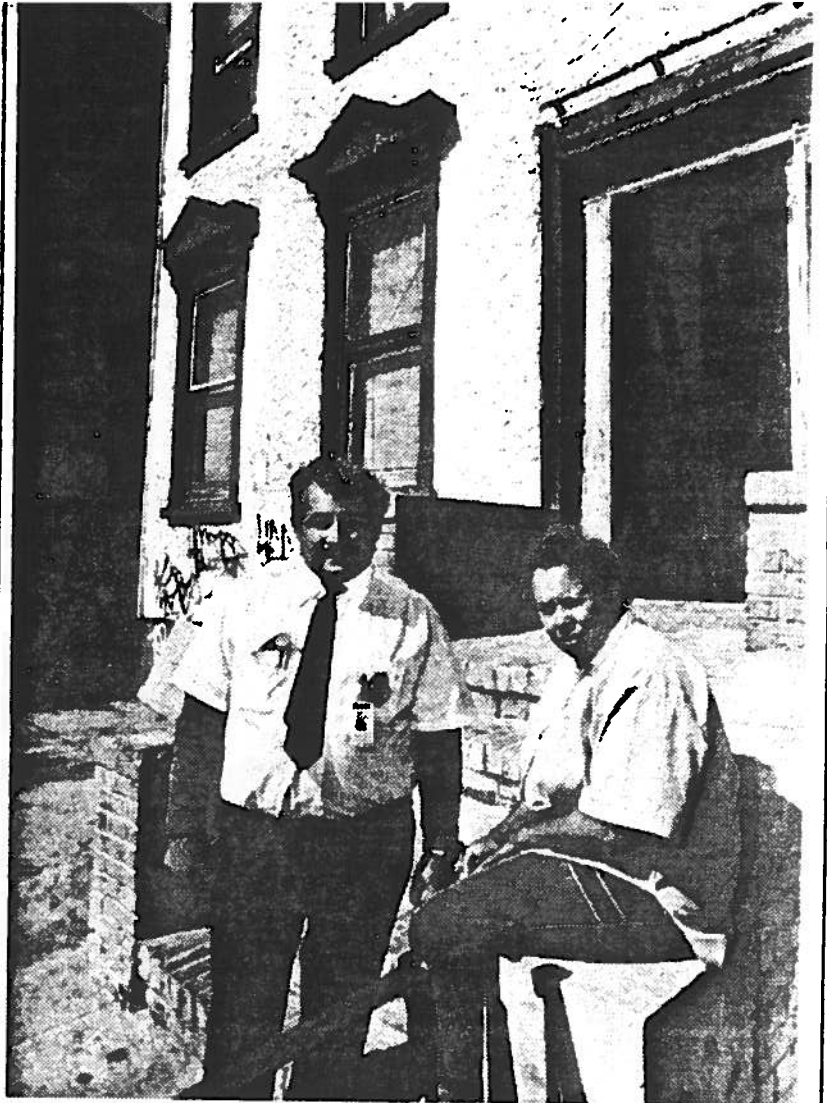
But impressed by the sincerity of the residents, the borough asked the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development, which has a long history of dealings with the city and previous contacts with Acorn, to mediate. Ronald Shiffman, the institute's director, persuaded Acorn to promise to abandon squatting, "which calmed down the city." Over a year and a half, with help from Brooklyn officials and Ms. Michetti and her aides, he negotiated the arrangement approved by the Board of Estimate.

"Once Acorn was willing to recognize that squatting is illegal and not an answer," Ms. Michetti said, "it paved the way for a mutual sharing of ideas and financing by the city."

Lessons of Community Organizing

"At least for an old-timer like me," said Mr. Shiffman, 49, "the city moved quickly. I suppose it's all a matter of perspective."

If Acorn was crucial in its community-organizing role, Pratt and Mr. Shiffman were crucial agents in pulling the



The New York Times/William E. Sauro

Francisco and Norma Jusino outside their home on Blake Avenue in the East New York section of Brooklyn. They took over the house with their six children and grandchildren more than two years ago.

stinger of Acorn's confrontational and illegal tactics. That process was aided by the involvement of the New York Foundation, a philanthropic organization, and especially the Consumer-Farmer Foundation, which agreed to serve as the project's banker, managing the revolving loan fund.

The vice president of Consumer-Farmer, Harold DeRienzo, was a founder in the mid-1970's of Banana Kelly, which organized housing protests in the South Bronx. Now 34, he said he felt that organizers had learned many lessons, not only about how to deal with authority, but about how projects can be designed to sustain themselves.

With Pratt involved for architectural and technical expertise, Consumer-Farmer providing financial services, and Acorn's squatters transformed into the Mutual Housing Association of New York, the project "was something the city could live with," Mr. DeRienzo said.

In a mutual housing association, neighborhood residents form a collective, contributing some money and a lot of "sweat equity" to rehabilitate buildings for their own use in return for public support and limited ownership. The collective — in this case the Mutual

Housing Association of New York — retains title to the land. If owners choose to sell, the association has the right to repurchase for a price reflecting only individual investment, not the market.

To Mr. Shiffman, mutual housing represents "a new form of social contract between the city and its poorer residents, who get buildings at a nominal fee while giving up their right to speculate and maximize profits." He continued, "The transfer of property in return for the promise of housing for low-income residents in perpetuity is a good one."

At the same time, he and others say, the collective provides capitalization, mutual help with construction and economies of scale in purchasing goods and services. Intense community involvement, coupled with the association's waiting list for more housing, also should create pressure on the city to continue transferring property.

Other experts are more skeptical, suggesting that mutual housing requires a level of community organization and sustained commitment that will be hard to duplicate widely. To make a significant impact, the city would have to commit money and property on a large and ongoing basis.