

Survival Without Rent

This book was originally published in 1986. It was revised and expanded in 1989. Not all text, it included some fantastic illustrations, some of which can be viewed at a site that contains images by squatter, activist and artist Seth Tobocman. Small stylistic changes were made as it was keyboarded for uploading to the internet in February 1997. This book is intended to help people take back the homes that have been taken away from them by government and business. It is dedicated to Eleanor Bumpurs and to the East Fifth Street Squat.

[intro] [form a group] [find a building] [getting in] [repairs] [light etc.] [toilets] [legal hassles] [organisations]

INTRODUCTION

The housing situation in NYC rapidly becomes worse and worse. Abandoned buildings deteriorate with every winter. Low income housing and homesteading programs have disappeared along with our elected officials' promises. Now is the time to take the situation into our own hands. What we're saying is that housing policy is dishonest and an insult to anyone living in welfare hotels, crowded conditions or in the park. These laws are put together by people who can only be described as common criminals who wear nice clothes and live in two or three nice homes. They would never dream of living in the conditions that we are used to. These people profit from our misery. They don't have a grain of sympathy for us, our children, or the sometimes unbearable conditions in which we are forced to live.

This little book has been put together to help people with little or no money find a solution to their housing problems. We hope that after reading it, people will look at an abandoned building in a totally new light. You might think that living in the conditions we describe in this book is pretty crude. We hope you won't be forced to live like this. But if it sounds better than what you've got now, we hope you'll be inspired to give it a try.

We will go through a step-by-step guide on how to find your building, what to look for, and the cheapest and easiest ways of making it comfortable. Once you are in the building, you will have to deal with the law eventually, so we have included a section covering some basics to keep the police from messing you up. We aim in this book to show methods that you can use to live more comfortably and safely than on the street. We believe that -- even if you have no money at all and don't want to have anything to do with other people -- you will still find the ideas in this book useful. It may be less work and in some ways more comfortable to live in a shelter. However, we believe that if you can manage to take an empty building, you will have a home with more self-respect and more independence than just about anyone. You can get off the street or out of the shelter and make a decent home for yourself very simply. If you do, we hope that you will use whatever political, legal, or other means you can to keep the powers-that-be from making homeless again.

Mayor Koch once said that if you can't afford to live here, you should get out. Let's give him [and his successors] our answer: We're taking our homes for ourselves here. Koch and his cronies can take it or leave it themselves. You can improve a vacant lot without being busted for trespassing -- insist on your right to squat on unused PUBLIC property.

Here are some [now outdated] facts to consider if you are not sure whether it is right for you to make a home for yourself in a building that you don't "legally" own.

Two-thirds of New Yorkers pay 40 percent or more of their income for housing, while most of the top quarter of the income scale pay less 40 percent.

One hundred thousand people are homeless in New York City.

The city government owns 65 percent of the vacant properties in Harlem and other areas of the city.

Thirty-six thousand apartments were converted to co-ops and condos between 1981 and 1984.

Twenty-seven percent of homeless people were forced out of their homes by eviction.

Three hundred and ten thousand units have been emptied by abandonment, disinvestment and arson.

1. HOW TO FORM A GROUP

This first part is often the trickiest, since a bad, untogether group will do more damage to the project than the city government will in many cases. The people you live and work with are more important than the building that you chose. One of the most important aspects of a group is diversity. Every group has its own style: some are more political than others; some like to party; some like to be real business-like and legal; some are arty; others are just trying to get over and off the street. Whatever your group is like, you should keep in mind that not only do you have to relate to each other, you also have to relate to your community. If your neighborhood is all the same ethnic group as the members of your group, you don't have to worry about diversity. But if your group has only token members of the main ethnic group in the neighborhood, then you could get yourself in some trouble.

A group of people living and working together who all agree on everything cannot exist: someone in the group is always going to have to shelve, give up or compromise on an idea. As you will be living in the unfamiliar condition of having no landlord, no way of calling in the police to settle your differences, you should give some thought to the kind of people you want to live with.

Once you've decided to squat, it's up to you to make the first contact. How you do this depends on your situation. If you live in a welfare hotel or a shelter, you will have a readily-available supply of people who are in the same situation as you. After studying this book, the next time someone says to you, "God! I'm sick of this shit," spring the idea on them. Sit down, have a coffee and go over the pros and cons of squatting. We're sure you're going to disagree with some of the things we say, just as sure as you will come up with ideas of your own (with enough energy and luck). Communicating with people in this way you will soon find yourself in a group which is seriously considering the option of squatting.

We feel that six adults is a big enough group to go to a building (figure out yourselves what "adult" means). If for some reason your group is only two or three people, don't be discouraged. Go ahead with the project, since once a building is opened, within weeks you'll have people coming around, looking for a place to stay.

If for some reason you happen to be isolated, that is, living alone in a hotel, or even in the park, and you can't get enough people interested or organized, then don't give up! Remember that this city is full of homeless people and all you need is a few of them to start your group. You could advertize on lamp posts and bulletin boards. For example: "Wanted: people interested in homesteading. Contact ----." (Note: some squatters call themselves homesteaders when dealing with the public, but in many areas no one understands what this means.) The groups listed at the end of this book may help you make contacts. We have found that a set of rules is must for any new group. The rules should be discussed in detail and agreed upon by all concerned. They should be written down, since verbal agreements tend to get pretty vague after a few months.

Here is one set of house rules you can think about if you need ideas for your own:

No hard drugs: they can be used as a pretext to throw everyone out of the building.

No violence.

No stealing.

Breaking any of these first three rules can get you thrown out of the squat, though everyone should remember that squatters have no legal right to throw anyone out or evict them.

Every member must work a minimum of hours per month on the common areas of the building. Jobs may include childcare and other nonconstruction work. What work people do depends on their abilities.

Every member must pay a certain amount per month to a construction fund for the common areas of the building: roof, stairs, plumbing, electricity, etc.

The construction funds should be deposited in a joint account, which requires at least two signatures to get money from. The name on the account should be something like "The 537 E. 5th St. Homestead Association."

All new members must go through a trial period in which they work on the building with old members for a month, and can then be accepted as a member by agreement of all the other members.

We want to emphasize again that these rules are our own, and you will probably need to adapt them to your own circumstances. We also hope people will keep in mind the cruel wave of evictions that has made so many people homeless when they consider whether or not some offense is serious enough to throw a member out.

2. FINDING A BUILDING AND INVESTIGATING IT

New York City is full of empty buildings that range from totally destroyed shells all the way to buildings that are in OK shape. The way to find a building is to simply walk around the streets with your eyes open. Try to concentrate on areas where people are already squatting or homesteading, as you will usually get less hassle from the neighbors if you squat there. Look at the buildings surrounding the one you've got your eye on.

If the surroundings look as if they've been renovated for well-off people, this may mean more hassles from neighbors and police. The neighbors can be dealt with just by talking to them and explaining your case. Give them some figures on how many people are homeless. Tell them who is in your group and how you came to be in the situation you're in. Be realistic and honest. See what you can find out from them. Ask about the history of the building and whether or not any one has been using it since it was abandoned.

Try to get an idea if any community groups, politicians, gangs or real estate operators have an eye on the building. If so, figure out if they are for real and, if not, whether you will be able to take the building and keep them off your back. If you think they are for real, you might approach them and see if you can work together. You may also meet squatters who still have room in their buildings and are looking for new members.

Be polite, but be careful of people who are in too big a hurry to be your friend. Be particularly careful to avoid antagonizing any of your neighbors during the first month, that is, until you've established your residence. As for dealing with the police, refer to the chapter on legal hassles.

You will notice that some buildings have been painted with squares. These squares are painted by the city government to indicate the status of the building. An empty square indicates that the building is abandoned. A square with a slash in it indicates that fire fighters should be cautious entering the building. A square with an X in it indicates that the building is condemned. Don't presume the building is not good: perfectly good buildings get condemned all the time.

It's worth knowing whether a building is still privately owned or has been taken over by the city government. If the owner of a building shows up and wants you out, it is easier for him to get you evicted than it is for the city to get you out of one of their buildings.

Also, if it ever gets to the point that you want to hold on to the building you have squatted and stay there over a long term, it is possible to do so with city-owned buildings, but practically impossible with privately-owned buildings. People on the block may know if the city owns a building or not, but to be sure you should check at city hall. In NYC, the place to go is the Office of the City Register, Room 20531, Chambers Street.

Take the exact address of the building with you. In the office, look first at the Lot and Block maps. Find the block number and the lot number of the address in which you're interested. The records are kept according to these numbers and not according to addresses. When you have this information, check out the micro film for the building (you need ID to do this). When you're reading the microfilm, go directly to the last few pages in the records to find the last transaction, because this will tell you who owns the building now. The city government ends up owning a building when the previous owner didn't pay the taxes on it; the city takes the building (forecloses) in lieu of back taxes. So look for a statement of foreclosure.

Have a look at the exterior walls of the building you're researching. You may have to wait until you've gotten inside before you can get to the back of the building, but what you need to look at is the same. Are there major holes in the masonry? If they can't be filled or covered, they might be significant structural defects. Are there signs of bulging or sagging? Are there wide gaps where the mortar joints should be? If the answer is "Yes" to any of these questions, find another building to squat.

Is the fire escape pulling loose from the wall? Is it falling apart? Is the cornice (the part that sticks out from the face of the building along the roof) broken apart and dangling? If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes," you've got dangers to people walking on the sidewalk in front of the building, and so you will have to fix these problems. But remember: though a cornice is just a decorative frill (and so can be removed or tied back so it won't fall), its deterioration can be a sign of overall deterioration. A dangerous cornice is a building code violation and can get your squat closed down.

OK, so at this point you've got your eye on a certain building and, from the outside, it doesn't look too bad. Now for a look inside. To be on the safe side as far as getting hassled goes, it may be best to go in the evening when it is dark. But it may be that, after familiarizing yourself with the neighborhood, you feel comfortable with entering the building during the daytime. Either way, bring a strong flashlight and be very careful where you step and what you hold on to. It's very easy -- if you are not watching what you are doing -- to step through a rotted floor board or lose your balance when a piece of broken window frame comes loose in your hand. The riskiest part of an abandoned building is usually at the top, because there are usually some bad leaks in the roof that will cause rot. But dangers can be found aplenty on the lower floors, too: vandalism and fire damage can be found anywhere in a building, and

years of leakage will result in lower-floor rot as well.

Normally the easiest way in is through the back. You can climb up the fire escape and go in a window. Even if the back is bricked up, you can get to the roof, and from there it is often easy to find a way in. Now, say there's no way into the back -- what do you do? You're going to need about five people and a 12-foot ladder. Two people are needed as lookouts; one person holds the ladder while the remaining two enter the building. It's always useful to have one person with you who has some knowledge of old buildings, so if no one in your group knows old buildings, you should get someone who does to help out.

If you are unfortunate enough to choose a building that is totally bricked up, your only way in will probably be on the roof. If you can't get up to the roof, you will have to chisel out a couple of concrete blocks from a window and get in through the opening you've created. We recommend that as few people as possible do this so that too much attention isn't attracted.

It is easy to get in if you can get friendly with someone who lives next door: you can get onto the roof of the building you're interested in through this person's building.

So! After days of planning, hassles, people not showing up, and trying to get organized, you're finally inside and ready to inspect the building. It will almost certainly look and smell like shit: it will be full of old rotting furniture, rubble and ceilings that have fallen down all over the place. Some apartments in the building will be burnt-out. Don't be discouraged by any of this, for it's all quite normal.

Inspect the roof. Check it for holes. Look for missing, burnt or rotted joists, which are the timbers that support roofs and floors. Rot can be tested by sticking a knife in the lumber as far as it will go. When checking for rot, find a spot where the leaking water soaks in and doesn't dry up right away. Up to an inch may be rotted or burnt, and the timbers might still be OK. The ends of the joists can suffer a lot of deterioration without endangering the structure, but the joists in the middle cannot be weakened without risking collapse. Check the parapet walls around the roof to see if (or how badly) they are falling apart and what will need to be done to them to make them safe.

Inspect the stairs. If you're lucky, there will be nothing wrong with the stairs except for some missing steps. If the building has no staircase at all, you will have a lot of work to do, perhaps too much. Until you are able to replace the stairs, you will have to use the fire escape or a ladder in place of stairs. There are enough buildings with stairs around that you may be wasting your time on one that doesn't have any staircase at all. One squat in NYC was evacuated by the Fire Department for not having stairs. Eviction by HPD (Housing Preservation and Development, which is the landlord of city-owned buildings) can be delayed by legal means for a long time. But evacuation by the city's Fire, Health or Buildings Departments is swift and hard to contest.

Inspect the floor joists. These are the timbers that support the floors. Make note where they are missing or damaged. If the floors are sloping more than an inch or so, this may mean that the structure has shifted so much that it has become dangerous. If timbers are dangerously damaged, they can be braced by scavenged lumber (four-by-fours are best).

Inspect the sewer pipes. The toilets will typically be smashed or missing, but the water pipes may be in salvageable condition. Follow the waste pipes through the building down to the basement, checking for holes along the way. Look for holes in the walls which HPD -- upon taking over the building -- may have made in order to damage the pipes and thereby discourage squatters. Copper water pipes will certainly have been stripped, but if there were steel pipes originally, they may still be in place and useable. If your plumbing is in OK condition, you can probably get your water running pretty soon. Otherwise you can get water from a fire hydrant, which can be opened with a pipe wrench.

Inspect the front door. If the front of the building has been sealed with concrete blocks, make sure that the door or any windows are ready to use before you knock the blocks out. If there is already a working door you can use or if you have to knock a hole in the block wall and install a door in the opening (see below), make sure you are ready to keep the building secured once you have opened it and made your use of the building public.

3. GETTING IN

Now, you're ready to move in. If the area you're in is run-down, it's possible that no one will bother you while you smash out the concrete blocks. With a twelve-pound sledge hammer, a door sized opening can take as few as seven-and-a-half minutes to create. Quickly get all the broken blocks off the sidewalk and into the building; sweep up to remove signs of your work. You may want to keep a low profile and do this while look-outs watch for the cops, or bring along lots of friends and supporters, and dare the cops to intervene. It is also possible, and it may be preferable, to work from the inside out, to chisel the blocks out discreetly, one by one.

You should have a door and frame prepared to set into the new opening. Measure and mark the hole you've opened with your new door in mind. In any case, work quickly and as quietly as possible. Once inside, unless there is a useable door in place, either set up a barricade or install a door. Steel door frames and doors are easily scavenged from demolition or rehab sites. Unless you're pretty strong, it will take two people to carry a steel door or a cart to roll it on.

To install the front door, set the frame in the opening and fill in around the edges with pieces of broken blocks and some mortar (a couple of bags of mortar mix should be enough). Make certain that the bottom of the door frame is exactly as wide as the top when it is set in place. Otherwise the door won't work. Use a board that has been cut to exactly the right width to keep the correct space at the bottom of the frame while it is being installed. Make sure the frame is straight up and down and not crooked, bent or twisted out of line in the opening. If the frame you have is bent, you can straighten it with a hammer, laying it on the pavement and using a block of wood to protect it from getting dented up too much.

Install the frame so that the door will open into the building. There are steel tabs on the inside of the door frame that are meant to be bent out so that they will anchor the frame into the mortar joints in the block wall. As you fill in the opening around the door frame with mortar and block, be sure that the inside of the frame itself is filled with mortar and block pieces, because the frame is not solid by itself. If you're not able to afford or install a heavy duty bolt lock on the door, a heavy chain and a padlock will do the trick. Pass the chain through a hole in the door and around the door frame.

Paint the name of your group and your address on the door. For the example: "The 537 East Fifth Street Homestead Association and Neighborhood Improvement Committee." Do all the work that you can in advance so that on your opening day you can simply set your door, lock and door frame in place all in one go.

If this is more than you can manage right away, you'll need to rig up some sort of barricade for the doorway and have someone inside at all times to let others in and out. You should not leave your building unattended in any case, especially right after you move in. It is good to have someone on hand to watch the place when most people are out during the day. The risk from police and other evildoers is high right after the building is occupied. Don't let anyone in that you're not sure about; don't let any cops or city officials in under any circumstances unless they have a warrant. (See the legal section for what to do if the police do have a warrant.) Keep the door closed and locked at all times, don't sit out on your stoop with the door unlocked or open. Needless to say, you're in the

building illegally, and so there is no need to make your front door an open invitation to cops and thieves.

Nothing is worse than coming home to find that your tools, sleeping bags and heaters have been ripped off -- except maybe walking upstairs to your apartment and meeting a junk-sick thief running downstairs with your radio in one hand and a knife in the other.

Your security depends on making it so difficult to enter your building that most thieves will pass it up. If your building looks funky and people on the street can see that only poor people live there, you won't need as much security. You should keep your ground floor windows barred or sealed with concrete block or even plywood. Eliminate hand and footholds by knocking them off or by setting nails or broken glass in masonry cement or roofing cement. More of the same or coiled barbed wire around the base of the fire escape and continuing across the face of the building at the second floor level will help to deter climbers. Grates on windows facing the fire escape are good, but it will take a lot of them to do your whole building. It might be good enough to bolt full sheets of plywood to the outside of the fire escape railing on the second floor. This will make a wall around the fire escape too high to climb over. You can top it off with a coil of barbed wire or nails. The roof is another point of entry, so be sure that the penthouse door is secured.

Note well that having a front door with a lock, beds and other basics such as a kitchen is good for your own well-being, but it is also important in establishing that you are a resident and not a trespasser. It may seem like a small point, but it is actually quite important. It can make the difference between getting run out of the building by the cops if they feel like doing it and getting them to back down so that they will have to wait until HPD manages to go through the lengthy proceedings necessary to legally evict you.

4. EMERGENCY REPAIRS

In most cases, the most important repair that abandoned buildings need is work on the roof, which will almost certainly leak. The roof will typically have a large hole or two in it caused by a fire, fire fighters or vandals from the city government. For your own comfort, it may only be necessary to locate a room into which there is no leakage. However, a building in which the roof leaks will have lots of spaces in which no one will be able to live. You want to avoid squatting in a building such as this, because the more people you have living in your building, the better your chances of resisting eviction and protecting yourself against hassles from the city and from thieves and drug dealers. The more people you have, the more comfortable and secure you can make your place.

The long-term maintenance of a building depends more on the roof than on any other single thing. If the roof is not maintained, it will eventually rot until it collapses. The floors will go and, sooner or later, the exterior walls will collapse. Then what you got is a pile of useless, rotten timber and broken masonry -- which will cost the city a lot of money to clear out and turn into a vacant lot. Unfortunately, letting abandoned buildings rot until they collapse is just what HPD is doing with the buildings it owns. Don't let the city get away with it!

Clear the roof of any debris and sweep it clean. Patch the holes. You can lay 5/8-inch-thick plywood boards over them. Try using mineralized felt paper and roofing tar as a way of patching holes. If your roof is so far gone that you have to cover it entirely, get someone who works as a roofer to help you out. To do this kind of work, you should be able to get the materials you donated by groups or organizations such as the Riverside Church, the Church of Saint John the Divine, or the Listener's Auction or radio station WBAI-FM.

[Note: if you have some work to get done, its helpful to write your plans down on paper, step by step, and keep track of any changes you make in the plans as you work. Make drawings or diagrams that describe and show how to do the jobs that are hard to explain in words; they will make it easier to organize and help get people involved in the project. Books such as the Reader's Digest Complete Do-it-Yourself Manual or Carpentry and Construction are handy for dealing with construction problems and can be found in the public libraries. We've found that books dealing specifically with roofing, electrical work, plumbing and other "specialized" trades are also easily obtained.]

If repairing the roof is too big a project to take on right away, you can use polyethelene plastic sheeting to protect the roof temporarily. Get a hundred-foot roll of 4 mil plastic that is twenty feet wide, and a couple of buckets of flashing cement. (Be sure to get flashing cement, because other kinds of roofing tar won't do the trick.) Begin by clearing and sweeping the surface of the roof clean. Fill or cover up all the holes. Make sure that the roof drain is clear and unclogged at all times. Unroll the plastic so that the entire roof is covered. If you have to cut the plastic to cover the entire roof evenly, make sure the lap joints where the edges of the plastic meet each other are perfectly sealed with flashing cement, leaving not even the smallest gap. Drape the ends of the plastic over the parapet walls on all four sides. Lay bricks or boards on top of the plastic so that the wind doesn't blow it around. Fasten the ends to the walls with the flashing cement or with boards that have nails driven in to the mortar joints between the brick in the parapets.

This is a somewhat temporary protection, but if you do a good job, it should make it through the winter. But summer heat will certainly cook the plastic until it breaks apart. To make your plastic roof a bit more permanent, spread flashing cement over the entire surface of the roof before laying the plastic down. Make sure that there are no bubbles in the plastic and that all of the plastic is stuck to the cement below.

If you have leftover plastic, you can use it to seal the places where window are missing. Use lath, which is the thin slat with which plaster walls used to be made, to nail the plastic to the window frame or staple it up using strips of cardboard as reinforcement. You can also use leftover plastic to make tents for your living areas: these can be really handy in the cold winter months in NYC.

Shore the place up. Close off any areas of the building where the floor or the roof is unsafe. Then if you can't replace, repair or reinforce the damaged timbers, you can brace them with four-by-fours or pairs of two-by-fours that have been nailed together. Be sure to brace the damaged timber against something solid or otherwise you're just making the problem worse. The brace must ultimately be supported by a bearing wall or footing. You can brace down to a joist if its near a load-bearing wall.

You can generally assume that brick, block, or stone exterior walls are load-bearing walls and that interior walls (studs with lath and plaster) are probably not. However, just because a wall is not a loadbearing wall doesn't mean you can take it out safely. Even if it is only a partition wall it can't be safely removed if there are walls in the corresponding places on the floors above it. Even if there is no wall above the one you're thinking of removing, you have to make certain that the floor joists above are not being supported by or, as a result of settling, come to rest upon it.

Missing stair steps can be temporarily replaced with wooden ones. If there's no other way to secure them in place, drive nails through the top and then go underneath and bend the nails' tips over so that they will hook on to the steel part of the stairway. Cover holes in the floor with plywood until you can get around to replacing the missing flooring.

Holes in sewage pipes can be patched by a variety of methods, including fibre glass, auto body filler with window screen, and even roofing cement. The waste pipes have already been discussed: they should be tested to see if they will drain but not leak. Until you've got the pipes working, you'll have to dump your piss and other waste waters in the storm sewer in the street. Do not dump your waste waters out the window!

To remove debris, start at the top of your building and work down. Don't throw stuff out of upper story windows, because you may draw justified complaints and hassles from your neighbors. Since you may not be able to get the kind of tube that contractors use to get stuff down from the upper floors to the street, you may have to take up the flooring in the same corner on each floor and throw the unwanted stuff down through the holes. Once at the ground floor, the debris can be chucked out the back of the building or bagged and taken out for bulk refuse collection by the Sanitation Department. (It might take quite a few tries to get a response from Sanitation; it depends on who you talk to. When you find someone who is helpful, get their name and only deal with them in the future.) If you use the through-the-floor method, hang a curtain of plastic that stretches from floor to ceiling on each of the affected floors, so that dust or asbestos particles won't spread all over the place.

Asbestos causes cancer and other serious diseases. There is no safe level of exposure to asbestos fibers. Studies of exposure to asbestos suggest that as little as one day can result in significant damage to the respiratory system and disease. But the health risks of asbestos come into play only if the fibers are released from the material and enter the air. If the material is in excellent condition and not in a living area, left it alone. A greater hazard can be created than originally existed if the asbestos is removed by inexperienced people. Only trained asbestos abatement professionals should remove materials containing asbestos, which is typically found in boiler and pipe insulation. It may also be found in radiator covers, fire-proof doors and certain kinds of light-weight construction blocks.

If you see insulation that is not fibreglass, that is ripped, split, ragged or powdery looking (don't touch it!), you should get the material tested for asbestos. Contact the White Lung Association (at 718 389 5546) and arrange to have a sample tested. The WLA also gives courses in asbestos removal.

If for some reason you must handle asbestos, be sure to wear disposable gloves and a respirator that has been approved for use with asbestos. A half-face respirator equipped with a High Efficiency Particulate Absolute filter will be sufficient. Keep the asbestos wet. The weight of the water will keep the asbestos particles from becoming air-borne.

Note: it's a good idea to take photographs or shoot videotape of the work you have done on the building, even if it seems as if you are documenting crimes you have committed. You're not! Save your receipts for any materials you buy. Keep records of the jobs you did and the hours (or weeks or months) it took you and your group to do them. All of this is documentation that you are a homesteader and not a trespasser, a vagrant or a drifter (common stereotypes for squatters).

5. LIGHT, HEAT AND FIRE SAFETY

Candles are the easiest way to provide light. The best kind are in tall glass containers, the kind that often have pictures of saints or magic charms on them. They last a long time and are not easily blown out. The cold does not easily shatter them. Somewhat better light can be provided by old-fashioned kerosene lamps. If you use them, trim your wicks now and then to make the brightest flame and least smoke. Coleman lanterns generate light as bright as incandescent light. The kerosene type is safer than the gasoline ones, although they take longer to light. Kerosene is generally cheaper and easier to get than white gas.

In New York City, heating is not merely a creature comfort in the winter. Tenants can sue their landlords for not providing enough heat and it is well known that are deaths from hypothermia among people living on the street and in unheated apartments.

We think kerosene heaters -- though they can be messy and fire hazards -- are a practical and economical means of heating. Kerosene heaters aren't legal but can be bought in the outer boroughs and New Jersey. It's worth it to get your kerosene outside of Manhattan since the price will be much higher in this borough of the city. Please! do not store your kerosene in rooms in which heaters will be operated and never go to sleep with the heater on.

Get a wood stove if you can, because it can be a very cheap source of heat. Wood stoves are also safer and healthier than kerosene heaters. If you can't find one, you can make one from a discarded steel drum.

Start by making two holes in the drum: one to put the wood in (this one will need a door to keep smoke from backing out into the air), and another for the smoke to go out and into a flue pipe that you will have to make. The easiest way to cut these two holes is to drill a pilot hole to start each new cut, and then make your cuts using a jig saw with a sheet-metal blade. If there is no way for you to make use of power tools, you could even cut the holes using a cold chisel. The hole for the flue must be measured to fit the flue pipe: four or five inches in diameter seems good to us. The swinging door will have to be attached by hinges that are located along the bottom of the opening. The door will also have to be lockable.

A damper will allow you to control how fast the fire burns without opening and closing the door (which is also a method of controlling the blaze). A damper can be made by cutting a round piece of sheet metal slightly less than the diameter of the flue. Punch two holes on opposite ends from each other in the flue pipe. Stick a piece of heavy wire through the holes and attach the round piece to it. When the round piece is in the up-and-down position it allows the smoke through freely and thus stokes the fire; the more you turn it toward the side-to-side position it restricts the flow of smoke and thus the pace of the blaze.

You will need to set the stove on some kind of support that will keep it well above floor level. You can use anything you can find -- bricks, old bed frames, etc. -- as long as it won't burn or char. Never burn painted, shellacked or treated wood in your stoves: they give off poisonous fumes and gases.

Since complaints can be made to the Fire Department about smoke coming from your squat, it is important that the smoke from your stove runs out of a proper flue or chimney. If your building has a chimney, make sure it is clear of obstructions. To see if the chimney is clear, you can put a flashlight in one of the flue holes, take yourself up to the roof and look down to see if you can see the light. You can locate the chimney stack in your apartment because it sticks out into the room from the wall on either side of it. The hole for the flue in the chimney may be open or bricked up or completely hidden by plaster or sheet rock. If so, just chop it open with a hammer.

If you don't have a chimney or the chimney is blocked and you can't clear it, then you'll have to chop a flue hole in the wall or run the flue pipe out a window. In either case, the flue pipe should go all the way up and past the roof by five feet.

Fire extinguishers and smoke alarms are well worth having for your own safety as well as in case any city officials manage to get inside your building and have a chance to look around for code violations. Place the smoke alarms so that the stoves don't set them off continually. Keep your place well ventilated no matter how you heat it in the winter, and never leave a fire or a heater unattended.

Keep passages, halls, stairs and fire escapes clear of obstructions. Place fire extinguishers or buckets of sand or water on every floor and in locations where they can be easily reached. Form an arson watch. A round-the-clock fire and safety watch may be advisable for your situation. If so, there may be already an arson watch group or community safety patrol of some sort in your neighborhood. These organizations are well worth joining or starting yourself with others squatters and/or with like-minded tenants in the area.

[Note added February 1997: On the afternoon of 9 February 1997, a small, accidental fire broke out on the second floor of the East Fifth Street Squat. The cause of the fire was a faulty electric space heater. The residents evacuated the building and left it in the hands of the Fire Department, which delayed in putting out the blaze, thus making the fire more damaging than it needed to have been. Once the Fire Department was through, the combined forces of the police and the Department of HPD conspired to illegally keep the residents from returning to their squatted building, which was deemed "dangerous" and demolished right in front of its former occupants within a day or two after the fire. The moral of the story seems clear: put your fires out yourself and trust the Fire Department as much as you do the police!]

6. MAKESHIFT TOILETS, WATER AND COOKING

Use buckets or empty bottles for waste waters. Keep the buckets from getting foul by never putting toilet paper in them and by rinsing them with lime or a disinfectant. Construction sites are easy sources of empty five gallon buckets. As far as shitting goes, do it on a few sheets of the New York Times, wrap it up, put it in a plastic bag and throw the bag into a trash can on the street. To avoid unnecessary hassles, do not use the trash cans owned by your neighbors. If you let your place get unsanitary, you can have complaints lodged against you by the Health Department, which will not only get you thrown out in a big hurry, but will also make hassles for other squatters.

Keep your food hanging in a bag or on a shelf hanging by wire so that mice and bugs and cats can't get to it. Do the same for your garbage and dispose of it every day. This way you won't get any mice or bugs and your cats will only eat what they are supposed to.

To make an alcohol stove start with an empty can. Loosely pack it with cloth: gauze bandage is best. You will need something to set the can on so it doesn't rest directly on the burner. You can place a grill (an old refrigerator shelf will do nicely) on top of some bricks. Or you can place the burner can inside a larger one. For example, you could put a beer can inside of a coffee can. (Your pot would then sit on top of the coffee can.) The larger can should have holes punched around the top with a can opener, so that when you put a pot on top the burner won't be sealed off from the air. Punch holes around the bottom rim of the can to help the flow of air. You may find that holes around the top of the burner can are also needed. To fire it up, pour rubbing alcohol on the cloth until it is soaked and then light it. The stove should burn for about 15 minutes. (Never refuel while its still burning, and never use anything stronger than 70% isopropyl alcohol as fuel.) Enclose the whole thing in a metal reflector to keep the heat in and cut down on drafts. Otherwise, it'll take forever to get anything hot. If water accumulates in the gauze, just take it out and squeeze it dry.

You might consider using propane camp stoves with large tanks and hoses attached as your food-cooking device. They are very practical and economical. You might consider using an ordinary gas stove: they are easy to find on the street, and you can put propane jets on them to make them work better. But you should be careful that the one you are using doesn't leak. A backback stove is handy for traveling light and is small enough to hide easily in a building in which there are security problems.

To make your squatted apartment space more comfortable, contact the Red Cross and the local churches. They might well give you blankets or sell them to you for cheap. When the weather gets very cold, a tent of some kind around your bed will really make a difference. Insulation can be made by putting rugs or thick cloth on the floors, walls and ceilings. If no one is living above you, you can fill that room with garbage bags filled with newspapers. Newspapers can also be used for wallpaper (especially The Daily News, "New York's Picture Newspaper"). Such wallpaper -- especially if it is painted over -- will reduce the problem of old paint or plaster that has begun to flake off.

Windows and panes can be scavenged from construction sites at which buildings are being renovated, and from window suppliers that leave unwanted stuff out on the street. Doors can also be obtained in the same ways.

Electricity, water and other services can all be provided by a variety of methods that you will be able to discover by using your imagination and staying in contact with other squatters. Getting hooked up with the public utilities providers can be a way of strengthening your case that you are community members and not trespassers.

7. LEGAL HASSLES

Every effort you can make to show that you have established as normal as possible a residence will be an advantage in dealing with the law. Operate on the assumption that you are a law-abiding citizen and a legal tenant of the building in which you are squatting until it has been decided otherwise in a court of law. Use your address freely, and get library cards, swimming cards and other forms of ID that have your address on it.

Have mail sent to you at your building. This will help you prove that you live there and that you aren't breaking-and-entering or trespassing. Put your address on the front door and make a mail slot in it. Find out when mail is delivered to your street and be there when the mail carrier comes by. Explain that you are living here and that you will be receiving mail at this location. Sometimes the carriers will be uncooperative, but usually they will be friendly if you are friendly. If friendliness doesn't work, it might be that the carrier you've talked to isn't the regular one, or that several carriers take turns delivering mail to your street and thus don't feel any inclination to helping you out. Try a different mail carrier.

If nothing else works, try the postmaster at the office for your route. He or she might tell you that there has to be a mailbox locked and unlocked by keys for the carriers to deliver mail, or that you are not a legal tenant, or that you don't own the building, blah blah blah. Point out as politely as you can that the building isn't a multiple dwelling unit, that it is undergoing renovation at the moment, and that the addresses on the letters that will be sent to the people who are living there will not have separate apartment numbers on them. Tell the postmaster that you are living there and (more to the point) have not been evicted yet, so your legal status as a tenant simply has not been decided in court as of yet. Tell that bureaucrat that your tenancy is a civil matter between you and the City of New York, and not a criminal matter involving the federal government and your right to receive your mail.

If nothing works, it may actually enable you to get an eviction case thrown out of court. If you cannot get any of your mail because of the Post Office's refusals to deliver it, you literally can't be served with an eviction notice, which typically arrives by mail and is not served in person!

If it is not delivered to your building, your mail will be held for you at the local post office. Once picked up, such mail can still serve as proof of residence.

Never sign for or accept any registered or certified mail until you are absolutely sure it is not from the city government. It could be a summons or an eviction notice!

There is something to be said for putting wild shapes, slogans and colors on the front of your squat: it underlines the changes that the building is going through and shows that you are proud of them and of your role in bringing about these changes. There is also something to be said for making the front of your building look as much like an ordinary building as possible. In either case, working diligently and productively on the front will give your neighbors a chance to size you up, to come out and talk to you. They will respect you when they see you working on your place.

Go to block association meetings and seek their support. Although the members of the block association may be merchants and professionals, they may want to help you if they see that you are making good use of the building and that you are not housing or attracting drug dealers, users, pimps or prostitutes. If there is no block association, you may want to start one. You can rally your neighbors by pointing out that both squatters (or homesteaders) and rent-paying tenants want to stop the twin-headed monster of benign neglect and gentrification. Once you've got your block association together you can go to your local Community Board to seek their support as well. It's also worthwhile to check out whatever housing and tenants' organizations are active in your neighborhood.

If you are confronted by the police or officials from the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, you have a right to all the protections inherent in the eviction process. You can ask for a postponement of your case because you haven't been able to get a lawyer, or because your lawyer has had insufficient time to prepare your case or cannot appear in court the day your case is to be heard. And so on. In the meantime, you're still living in your building. Since HPD is often bogged down in lengthy eviction proceedings -- some of which it loses -- this bureaucracy may very well try to get other city departments to throw you out.

You cannot be denied welfare benefits because you are a squatter. It is illegal for the Bureau of Child Welfare to take your children from you on the grounds that you are a squatter. Besides, plenty of people pay rent to live in apartments that are in terrible condition; these people's children are not taken from them because of these conditions! Persistence and good legal advice will be your best weapons as you try to make sure your rights are being respected and are not being arbitrarily violated.

Don't let anyone from the city government or the police department into your building, even if they claim they have a warrant. If they do, they can slip it through the mail slot or under the door so you can read it first. Don't identify yourself or answer any questions through the door.

If you do receive a legal notice with your name on it, don't miss the court date unless you've cleared it with your lawyer or an informed housing activist in advance. If the notice doesn't have your name on it or says "Resident" or "John Doe" or something, definitely do not answer it. It most likely shows that the HPD has not yet made a really serious attempt to find out who each and every one of your group is, and that they are trying to get an easy score with the "Anyone living at this address" bullshit. But you should take the notice to a tenants' rights organizer or housing lawyer for advice, and then take it to the clerk of the court's office so that you can put it on record that nobody with those names live at your building.

If the people in your building start getting eviction notices, be sure that there is always someone living with you (who has proof of residence) who hasn't been named in a notice. In this way, if it comes down to an eviction, HPD won't be able to seal the building since there will still be someone living there that they can't evict yet. Once the "eviction-minus-one" is over and the cops are gone, you can move back in without problem.

If the authorities have served you with notice that the building is going to be evacuated for reasons of public safety, you'll have to come up with a detailed plan that shows how you you are going to repair the problem. You will no doubt need the help of professionals to do this, and you'll their help right away, for you've got only a few days to get a judge to issue a stay of execution order. Call the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) at 718 292-0070 to start.

At the first sign of trouble, someone should be using your "Eviction-Watch List" to contact all your friends and supporters, so that as many witnesses are on the scene as possible. This will keep the cops on their toes and "best behavior," that is, slightly less likely to start beating people up. If the cops get through your front door, write down their badge numbers and names, demand to see their identification, etc. etc. Have witnesses to absolutely everything. Videotape, audiotape and photograph whenever possible. You have a legal right to make a record of all that takes place. If the cops ask to speak to your leaders, tell them you don't have any. If they ask "Who is in charge?" or if they ask if you are in charge, tell them "Nobody is in charge." Never admit to having leaders, even if you do, and you will (like it or not). At all times, be firm and reasonable with the cops unless you are ready for a fight. Be forewarned that the police in NYC are always ready for a fight.

ORGANIZATIONS

These are some of the organizations that can be helpful:

ACORN: Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now 718 292 0070

Center for Constitutional Rights 212 614 6464

Church of Saint John the Divine 212 316 7400

Legal Aid 212 577 3300

Metropolitan Council on Housing 212 693 0550

Stanley Cohen, Attorney 212 979 7572

Jackie Bukowski, Attorney beech@ix.netcom

Sanitation Department 212 534 5493

White Lung Association 718 389 5546

Riverside Church 212 870 6700

People's Firehouse: Housing and Community Development 718 388 4696

All numbers verified in February 1997