

TENANTS TALK

SEMI-REGULAR CHICAGO TENANTS NEWSPAPER

Issue 2

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Logan Square



THE

LEECH OF LOGAN



MARK FISHMAN OWNS **64%** OF MILWAUKEE AVE. STOREFRONTS

AND PROBABLY YOUR APARTMENT, TOO!

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AND MORE!



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WAWKEE AVE.

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opers and property owners like Mark Fishman. Their goal for these properties is to maximize profit. Large companies like Target and Jeni's have the capital to pay more in rent, and the history to show that they can continue to pay rent contract after contract, even if rent continues to increase. This lust for profit plays a significant role in the way neighborhoods change.

What if this arrangement was different? What if the residents of a neighborhood collectively decided, in whatever way they saw fit, what was held in the buildings they live near?

Let's imagine it for Logan Square. Fishman owns two major storefronts on Milwaukee that currently sit vacant. One at the corner of Milwaukee/Kimball/Division, and the other located at the former single-room-occupancy Milshire Hotel (if you'd like to read more about the Milshire, check out our member Gregory's substack, schubertsquaresocialtenant.substack.com). If you had a say in what went into those storefronts, what would you propose?

UPDATE:

Just days before this issue is set to go to print, Fishman has claimed his latest victim on the Milwaukee stretch. The local artists and makers of Startwork Studios were just informed by Fishman that they have 30 days to leave the building. Fishman attempted to get the tenants to sign a non-disclosure agreement, but they refused to sign. No explanation was given to the tenants, and Fishman declined to comment when we reached out.

We were able to talk to some of the artists who are being displaced by Fishman. We planned to include quotes from them, but it has since been revealed that Fishman is threatening to sue them for reaching out to the press. Fishman truly knows no limits in his endless pursuit of profit.

These artists surely won't be the last to fall victim to Fishman's vicious empire. Anyone renting from him seems to be at risk. How long can he continue to suck the blood out of Logan Square?

LANDLORD VANDROSS

One of my favorite videos on YouTube depicts Luther Vandross on stage at the 1988 NAACP Image Awards singing to his close friend and collaborator Dionne Warwick on the night she took home her second Entertainer Of The Year Award. It was Vandross as he often was, tuxed and bowtied, alone on stage performing the Burt Bacharach song that Warwick introduced into the R&B lexicon 24 years earlier, but that he had more recently made into a masterpiece called 'A House Is Not A Home.' Using his paradisaic tenor Vandross can be seen as painfully as he is heard pleading with his partner to stay; that he can not bear to come home to an empty house. The cameramen spend nearly as much time surveying Vandross' audience as they do him while he repeatedly turns away from the lover in the song to make his appeal to the crowd, as if they were bystanders to the quarrel.

What he asks them to understand is simple: that without anyone in it, a house is merely a house, but it is not a home. While this is meant as a poignant lesson for romantic partners, tenant unionists can also learn something here. Vandross tells us this: shelter is a relation between a physical space and a person using it for their own reproduction, both day-to-day and generationally. In the US sheltering predominantly takes two forms. The first sheltering relation I call the owner-form, or homeownership; this is the relation just over 60% of Americans experience with their houses. The second form I call the tenant-form, i.e. renting, or non-ownership; the condition for the remaining 40%. This proportion between the two has stood, give-or-take, for beyond half a century.¹

Owners and tenants appear indistinguishable when it is observed that shelter, in both forms, is mediated by money which moves between people in what can be called an act of exchange. Generally, in both cases a quantum of money is paid at monthly intervals, not for access per se, but for a period of access to shelter. In the former case, the owner exchanges their money with a bank in the shape of a mortgage payment. In the latter case, the tenant exchanges their money with the landlord in the shape of a rent payment.

The apparent identity between the two forms is served by the circumstance that monthly mortgage payments and monthly rent payments are oftentimes comparable in quantity, thus you are prone to hear the wailing of disgruntled homeowners such as, "it's cheaper to rent!" Whether statements of this kind are true or not in any given market is beside the point, which is rather that this sentiment inadver-

tently converts two, manifold relations of shelter into one sided abstractions determined only by their respective monetary cost of access. Thus it follows that when these costs are similar, so too must be the two forms of shelter. That assertion, while perhaps innocent, is false. Owners and tenants are differentially-classed social groups with fundamentally different relations to the space which they inhabit. In what follows we will take only the most preliminary steps toward uncovering these differences, paving the way for later investigation. This will be a descriptive account. In the conclusion I will indicate what I view to be some potential next steps in pushing what follows toward a more prescriptive state, should it prove able to lead us there at all.

To first describe the "movement" of the owner-form, we would say that money goes from the hands of the homeowner into the hands of the bank, and in turn a "month's worth" of access, i.e. use of the house swaps from the bank's hands into the hand of the homeowner. To describe that of the tenant-form, money slides from the hands of the tenant into the itching palm of the landlord, and in turn a month's worth of using the house travels from the landlord's hand into the hand of the tenant. When we set our eyes on the money or the house as objects within the act of exchange we can not immediately perceive a distinction between the two movements. What is hidden in this activity are the relations of ownership--implicit in money itself--that are also on the move. This requires a different register of abstraction. If we follow the ownership instead of the money which begets it, what distinguishes these two forms becomes a question of who is being made into an owner in each case. We are now in the midst of an interesting problem. We already know that the tenant is a non-owner in spite of going through all the motions that typically describe ownership. What is going on?

In the owner-form, the person occupying the house is also the person owning it. Or, more accurately, they are in the process of becoming the person who owns it. By and large, the price of the average house in the US is far greater than anyone can afford in one go.² Therefore, to become an owner requires taking out a mortgage, which is the word used to describe the period during which someone becomes an owner. If a mortgage requires, say, a 20% downpayment up front, the owner-to-be can be said to be 20% an owner, still 80% a not-owner. With each subsequent payment, the composition changes in favor of ownership until, at the moment of amortization, the owner finally

¹ It should be said that these numbers don't reflect the real state-of-affairs in housing. There are masses of people who's relation to their shelter is not easily captured by these two categories, for instance prisoners, "squatters", migrant workers or the unhoused, among others.

emerges from the cocoon in all their colors. Their monthly payments have not only made the house into their property, the payments have also transformed our buyer into a property owner.

And what about the tenant? Tenants also make monthly payments but who among them expects to take possession of the property as a result? For tenants there is no end, there is no amortization. In fact, when a tenant pays rent they are perpetually sabotaging their potential to become an owner by limiting their accumulation of money that could otherwise be put toward a downpayment on a mortgage of their own. So, then, if the tenant is paying for a period of access to housing yet is not at the same time becoming its owner, does that mean that the housing has no owner? While they may dream of a world without owners, they must nevertheless wake up again on the first of the month in a world that does, only to find that it is the landlord's world, they're just living in it.

The landlord is an owner, too. But what separates the landlord from the owner described earlier is simply this: the landlord owns more than he needs. He owns what other people need, what many other people need in some cases. Take Mark Fishman for example. He doesn't own thousands of "units" of housing and therefore thousands of toilets just because he is so full of shit. He does not need to use these things, he is a non-user. He simply owns them--and as many bathtubs, sinks, floors, radiators, walls, etc.--because other people need them and being the astute chap he is, he sees clearly that when the masses don't have pots to piss in of their own, they will pay good money to piss in his.

At the beginning I stated that shelter is a relation between a place--i.e. a house--and a person, i.e. a homeowner or tenant. What I mean by that is that without one or the other shelter ceases to exist. This is precisely what Vandross implores his audience to understand. If you take a person out of a house, the house may continue to stand but it ceases to stand as shelter and the person ceases to be sheltered. Shelter is a human necessity. This means that shelter is a requirement of human life. Shelter arose at the dawn of man in the shape of forest canopies and caves. If our ancestors had not yielded to this fundamental demand placed on them by their own nature, the social reproduction of the species would not have been possible and you and I would not be here.

What is necessity, or need? When a quality of a thing is necessary to that thing, it follows that without that quality, the thing ceases to be that thing. To give an example, if we strip off the North Face from the landlord, he does not cease to be a landlord, therefore the vest is not a necessity in the determination of landlords. Contra this, if you remove the landlord's surplus properties from his ownership, he does indeed cease to be a landlord and he would then be free to join us again in the realm of human beings. Landlords need surplus properties. Human beings, on the other hand, need shelter. To be denied shelter is to be denied one's humanity.

Housing is not a "right." Rights are not only historical, they are also purely abstract in the absence of any capacity to defend them in concrete life. A person is not able to defend their "right" to shelter as long as their house belongs to someone else as private property. More than a pulse is required to access shelter in capitalist societies. Nevertheless, shelter is a need, it will never desist from being so and it can never be shown to be otherwise.

Fortunately, alongside lions, tigers and rabbits and all other actual animals, God also placed the landlord beside us in order that they may provide our shelter and thus grant us our humanity.

In order to do this, we saw how he not only has to be an owner in relation to his own house, he also has to become the owner of many others. And because we have seen that owners can typically only become so by way of a mortgage it stands to reason that landlords have mortgage payments to make, too. But because landlords have more housing than they themselves need, it follows that the amount of money they borrow will also be more than the "subsistence" homeowner will borrow. For example, in 2004, Mark Fishman borrowed \$4,240,000 from First Bank of Highland Park to acquire the 100-unit³ apartment building at the corner of W Schubert & N Spaulding. This is a tiger's leap from the \$200,000 price tag on the median house in the midwest at that time.

Let us imagine this median home is occupied by its owner and they go to work every day. Each month they contribute a certain portion of their wages to their mortgage payment. Money, in the form of wages, moves from their boss' hand into theirs and immediately metamorphoses into a mortgage payment as it moves into the hand of the banker. In exchange for this, a period of access to shelter flows back to them but--crucially--ownership flows back with it. Piece by piece, equity is bestowed upon them. The landlord undertakes the same exact process in relation to his own house. And the landlord is just one man, like all the rest of us, isn't he? Surely he only needs one house, yet he has many; triggering

the suspicion that he is actually more than a man! Be that as it may, the question is not only why he has this surplus, but how.

In order to own a single unit of housing, a person must take out a significant mortgage. The landlord, however, is not content with a single unit. Say he purchases a building with 100 such units, taking out a mortgage roughly 100x the size. How does one man, then, generate the volume of money necessary for a mortgage payment of that magnitude? You know the answer to this, reader: he doesn't. He can't! He doesn't have a job! The landlord, a single man, has the stature of 100 by way of one weird trick. He is three-kids-in-a-trenchcoat par excellence, he is in fact a-hundred-tenants-in-a-North Face.

When a tenant pays rent to a landlord, all that appears to occur is this: wages leave the tenant's hand in the form of rent and come to rest in the hand of the landlord while, in exchange, a period of access to shelter passes back to the tenant. But this is only a convenient side-effect of the 'real movement.' This act between tenant and landlord is merely a prelude, it precipitates the landlord's

² I remark in passing that this is more true than ever at present, when the median selling price of a house is approaching half a million dollars; historically as well it has always been the case that buying a house is prohibitively expensive. It was not always so that more Americans owned than rented, this is in part why mortgages were invented. But even mortgages remained the exclusive plaything of the wealthy until the accumulation of money-capital in banks was substantial enough for governments to institute progressively more relaxed financing arrangements and the conditions for borrowing became feasible for the white, middle class; even the lower classes, in some cases.

While the general trend toward affordability can be appreciated for what it is, it is my contention that this development is something of a Janus face. The explosion of homeownership that occurred between the great depression and the 1960's can not be articulated in its full dimensions in graphs or charts. The single family home has a particular spatial presence and therefore has unique requirements. Its arrival en masse came in tandem with massive infrastructural transformation involving urban and suburban planning. Not less importantly the rise of entire industries took shape wholly or in part within processes of urban- and suburbanization, namely the construction, energy and transportation industries--not the least of which being the automobile behemoth. But road-building, utility services, agriculture, too, all of these things have definite shapes according to the way we organize our shelter. Shelter in American society has been organized around ownership.

³ The actual total is 107, I use 100 here to simplify the math.

ability to make his mortgage payments to the bank, and therefore to purchase his own equity, or, his own status as owner! Concomitantly, by eating away at their own wealth in the amount of the rent payment, this same act is the self-abolition of the tenant's own equity! The landlord's wealth improves just like the subsistence homeowner's does, but the landlord is armed with something the homeowner is not: he is armed with tenants. Tenants factor into this logic as nothing but the landlord's appendages. He purchases the needs of people and--needs being inseparable from being human as such--he therefore purchases people. Luther begs us to understand, houses unoccupied are simply that, houses. But in the landlord's rendition, the song goes like this: A house is not a home when there's no one there to rent it. An apartment building, as beautiful as it may appear and sturdy as it may be built, does not sprout money by itself. Bulldoze a 100-unit apartment building and you may find \$10 of quarters among the rubble with the brick and steel, but you will not find \$10 million in "assessed fair market value." In the upside down world of markets and property, houses need people, not the other way around. In this world, an unoccupied house is not a profit bearing asset and what's worse--it is lost money.

The foregoing, I hope, will suffice to demonstrate preliminarily the vital distinction between the owner-form and the tenant-form of shelter. In the first case, the housing owner (or the owner-in-making) and the housing user are one and the same; owning and using form a unity inside the person of the homeowner; the exchange of money consummates this. In the second form, tenancy, this unity of property and utility breaks apart into two distinct personages. On one hand is the tenant, who is the housing user but non-owner, and on the other hand is the landlord who is the housing owner but not its user. In both forms of shelter, what is a universal human need is established as the privately owned property of individuals. But only in the case of the tenant is property ownership out of reach. Through the exchange of money for housing--though on surface it is quite an identical act with that of the homeowner--the tenant consummates the property of another at the same time as that of their own dispossession in one reciprocal movement--paying rent.

I have attempted to show that renting shelter is qualitatively different from owning shelter, the distinction between them is irreducible to differences in their monetary costs. For this reason I have remained at a level of abstraction prior to a comparison of the cost of renting vs. owning, that investigation remains for a subsequent article. What also remains to be addressed is the question of why property ownership matters in more concrete terms; why have I placed such emphasis on property, equity, and the like? If the point here in the end is that housing is an untranslatable human need and landlords, for-better-or-worse, provide that need, why make such a big deal about who owns what? To discuss this will require a lengthy historical discursion into law, something entirely omitted from the present piece. Finally, while the confrontation with the landlord is the inevitable result of the antithetical and hostile relationship between he and the tenant, to further push the present analysis into the territory of a prescriptive strategy, the relationship between the tenant and the homeowner will require just as much attention in writing to come.

It would seem to me that there is a pervasive ideological tendency among tenants to treat the Eden of private homeownership as salvation from the Hell of renting. I view this as fatally antisocial behavior and as such must be rejected as a political commitment of the tenant struggle. The origin of this ideology would have to be looked for through an empirical and historical report about fiscal and monetary policy in the mid- to late 20th century and how this has shaped patterns of urban and suburban development alongside private, highly financialized capital with regard to housing, income, and, as it were, class consciousness if such a thing can be said to exist. From here, I believe the real political dimensions of the tenant struggle--which must be emphatically, unflinchingly social--can be revealed. Earlier in the song Luther told us that it takes a person in it to make a house into a home, later he adds an important qualification when he pleads, "I'm not meant to live alone!" Though it is dimmed by its romantic and pathological shade, if we read him generously here instead, we may find him reaching out for a comradely hand. He knows that he alone cannot make homes out of houses. Only together can we do that.

CHA HOLDING HOUSING HOSTAGE



This summer a coalition of community members and activists in the Humboldt Park area brought attention to chronic neglect and abuse by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and their private property management firm, Hispanic Housing Development Corporation (HHDC). While the formation and growth of homeless encampments signal the desperate need for housing in the community, CHA and HHDC hold hundreds of homes vacant on the Northwest side alone.

Humboldt Park residents occupied four CHA properties that had sat vacant for several years, investing their own time and money to

turn the properties into livable homes. Despite the fact that CHA's entire purpose is to house people, they apparently believe no one should be living in these vacant homes. That was made clear on July 26 when everyone in these four houses were violently and illegally locked out by HHDC in front of and with the full complicity of Chicago police officers.

Under no circumstances can a landlord legally lock out residents without an eviction notice nor can an eviction be legally enforced by anyone but a sheriff. But these facts did not stop HHDC from knocking down the front door of a home in Humboldt Park on Washtenaw Avenue with a sledgehammer, nor did it prevent the police, absent a sheriff or even a sergeant, from letting it happen. HHDC employees threatened the tenants with physical violence, used trans and homophobic slurs, destroyed tenants' property, and illegally removed their belongings. After all that, HHDC changed the locks, and ten people became homeless.

A week later, the press and community members gathered as the residents re-occupied the house to resist the illegal removal of their belongings and insist the police do their jobs. Dozens of police officers were called to the scene to threaten mass arrest by corraling two paddy wagons and issuing three dispersal orders. Still, those present pressured the cops to prevent another extrajudicial lockout, ultimately forcing HHDC and CHA to go through a legal process to remove the residents. Now, the community is demanding that HHDC be held accountable to their actions and that CHA's vacant public housing be turned over to community members who need homes.

HHDC's illegal lockouts are just symptoms of CHA's systematic failure to maintain and deliver housing, breaking their promises while keeping homes vacant year after year. The CHA is the biggest landlord in Chicago and is in charge of providing affordable and public housing to people who need it. CHA owns properties—which range from larger multi-family buildings to single family homes called scattered sites—leases them out to people on their waitlist, and subsidizes their rent. In addition, CHA administers private affordable housing options through vouchers and financial incentives to private entities.

CHA prioritizes these privatized and voucher-based affordable housing over the maintenance, rehabilitation, and delivery of their already-existing public housing stock. This has been enabled by CHA's participation in HUD's federal "Moving to Work" (MTW) program. The MTW program provides unregulated funding with the supposed intention of developing more housing options, increasing efficiencies, and improving self-sufficiency. In reality, MTW has enabled public housing authorities like CHA to privatize their public housing stock, hold vacant units, hoard federal cash, and ultimately break their promises year after year without consequence.

For example, CHA receives federal funding from the MTW program regardless of whether or not the units are occupied. This allows CHA to hold these units vacant for an indeterminate amount of time, incentivizing the neglect and demise of housing that already exists in favor of the promise of private affordable housing development. As a result, CHA currently owns around 2,400 vacant units.

A portion of CHA's vacancies are livable structures ready to be leased and the rest are held "offline" where they are supposedly pending redevelopment, rehabilitation, maintenance, demolition and/or disposition. In their MTW reports, CHA claims "to prioritize reducing the number of offline units and making additional units available for occupancy as soon as possible," but their actions tell a different story.

Take the home on Washtenaw as an example: A 2019 building code violation confirms that the home has been vacant for at least three years. In 2020, MTW reports indicate that CHA planned but did not actually undergo the demolition of 1629 N Washtenaw, allegedly "due to structural deficiencies." In 2022 the house was listed again in CHA's plans, but this time for disposition. When asked in a public comment why they planned to dispose of the property, CHA responded that they were evaluating various real estate transactions for this property, "such as sales, transfers, and land swaps." Given that the current residents only invested a couple hundred dollars to make the home livable, it is unclear why the scattered site on Washtenaw and other properties like it are left empty to deteriorate instead of being rehabilitated and made available, often for years at a time. CHA's housing rehabilitation and delivery lag cannot be attributed to a decrease in need. CHA's waitlists have continued to soar. Currently, there are over 200,000 cases on CHA's waitlists for both public housing and voucher-based options. The waitlist for scattered sites specifically, which constitute 18% of their public housing stock and 5% of all households served, is over an incredible 44,000 cases long. In addition, people on the scattered site

waitlist wait an average of 25 years before they are housed. CHA's 18% vacancy rate is inexcusable in light of the growing need and demand. Every month CHA fails to prioritize a vacancy is a month someone on the waitlist could have been housed.

Despite their high vacancy rates, growing waitlist, and ample funding, CHA consistently underspends and hoards their budget. For example, in 2021 CHA failed to spend \$31,839,785, or 45%, of what they budgeted for capital repairs and maintenance, and did not deliver even a single new unit of public housing. Humboldt Park Housing Project, on the other hand, made available four units of public housing without any of the funds designated for each unit that CHA receives annually. In other words, community members delivered 300% more units of public housing in the first half of 2022 than CHA planned and failed to deliver in the entire year of 2021.

It isn't exactly easy to argue that living in a home you do not own and were not invited to enter is an appropriate thing to do. But the task becomes a lot easier in consideration of the fact that the entities widening the already massive gap between the need for and availability of homes are the same entities charged with closing that gap. That these are public entities funded by taxpayer dollars doesn't hurt the argument either. CHA has never made sufficiently clear how incentivizing the future development of affordable housing over the delivery of housing that already exists is the better way to meet immediate needs for housing.

It would be easy to understand the problem as the result of CHA's corruption and individual failure to adequately administer housing policy, but stopping there doesn't paint the whole picture. CHA's behavior and its consequences are a reminder of how difficult, and I would argue impossible, it is to meet human needs through any profit-driven strategy. Even though public and affordable housing have institutional purposes and mandates distinct from for-profit developers and landlords, their priorities, strategies, and impacts are the same in more ways than not. And for good reason: public and private housing providers operate by the same rules within the same systems and too often consist of the same people. Together they constitute a housing system that privileges owners over renters within an economic system that enables a minority to own increasingly more property by preventing the majority from access and ownership.

That there are more empty homes than there are homeless people in the United States is a side effect of an interconnected housing system that privileges the increasing profits of property owners over the right to housing. Taking in mind the widening gap in the need for and availability of housing in conjunction with a lack of solutions that are not profit-driven, I find it easier to imagine situations in which taking an empty home is the only appropriate thing to do.

To learn more, use this QR code:



INTERVIEW WITH TRINIDAD RUIZ

The challenges faced by tenants in Chicago are not unique. Around the country and the world, other tenants take part in the same struggle to maintain dignity, security, and agency as they rent their homes. Because of this, we believe that there is rich potential to learn from and support other tenants' movements. We hope that by providing interviews with people engaged in these struggles we plant the seeds for both solidarity outside Chicago and an improved response to the challenges we face at home.

This month, we interviewed Trinidad Ruiz, an organizer with the Los Angeles Tenants Union about the recent events surrounding Hillside

Villa, an apartment complex which is pursuing public ownership through eminent domain as a response to drastic rent increases.

To begin, can you tell me a little bit about the LATU?

I am a member of the LA Tenants Union and I've been a member of the LA tenants union since its founding eight, nine years ago now. We started out as a small collection of organizers, about 25 people or so, and now we've broadened into a sizeable movement in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a very sprawling city, you know. LA built out, not

up, and so it was difficult for these communities to organize together collectively. If you're all the way on the West side, for instance, you're meeting about an hour away on the East side. So, Locals began to form. I cofounded a local called Vermont Beverly (VBE), which is the part of the city that encompasses Echo Park, Silver Lake, Oakwood, Korea Town, East Hollywood used to be, and McArthur Park. Two other locals have taken up some of that, East Hollywood local and McArthur Park local.

In the LA Tenants Union, there is no hierarchy, everything is lateral. Each local is autonomous and they organize within their geographic area. We've done a number of campaigns through our local VBE, mostly going after the housing department, going after the landlords, going after the ways that landlords have been evicting tenants; as well as the city that's been complicit in the massive gentrification of Los Angeles. This practice of gentrification is the other citywide movement.

The tenants movement has been dynamic, it's helped found the Autonomous Tenants Union Network (ATUN), an international network of tenants unions across the country, including Canada and New Zealand. What we've been able to glean from these meetings is that gentrification and displacement have not just been happening at our local level, in cities, but across the country and internationally as well. The tenants union, at least in LA, has risen to meet the moment, and we're small players in a big, big movement, not just nationally, but internationally.

Can you describe the Hillside Villa Tenants Association and talk a little bit about the relationship between the two organizations?

Hillside Villa was a building that we started to organize in Chinatown, LA, about four years ago. It was built in about 1988 and it was part of the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), which was a state-run agency that was building housing across the state. In LA they built about 10,000 units. Some of the work was based on covenants that had a 30-year window to keep the rents low-income. The landlords and developers, in return, would get a chunk of money to build a building, and then they would continue to receive tax breaks and other grants and loans--very, very low interest loans from city, state, county, and federal funds.

The covenant on this particular building was expiring, and the rents in that building were about \$700-800 of rent for a one-bedroom, two-bedroom (excluding those who had Section 8 vouchers).

These families were very low-income, making very, very little money and still scratching by, you know, sort of eking out an existence in Los Angeles. When the expiration of the covenants was approaching, tenants became alarmed. They weren't informed of this building becoming market-rate when they moved in, and so people felt robbed a little bit, and cheated. The rents were going up 200%, in some cases 300%. So, \$850 to \$2500, \$850 to like \$3000. That was the market rate in that area.

One of the issues was that the landlord had let the building fall into disrepair over the years, he was very repressive with the tenants, and tenants really didn't know how to fight back. Out of desperation, one of them reached out to the press. An elder tenant who has since passed away from COVID. Luna Louisa. She had reached out and some of the press that knows LATU reached out to us and we started to meet there.

The tenant's union is partnering with an actual organization that's leading it, Chinatown Community for Ethical Development (CCED). It's their community, so our chapter (VBE), a chapter from the West side, and a chapter from the East side have all been supporting them. This means that the building has been pretty well staffed in terms of organizers. It's been four years and we've accomplished some pretty amazing things.

How did you decide on this particular strategy for Hillside Villa?

Was it based on past examples, or did someone in the union realize it was possible?

One of the organizers from West side local, Jacob Woocher, was actually in law school at the time, and he was the one that proposed it. The idea was *we have nothing to lose, what do we have to lose?* And in the city of LA, as far as I can tell, this would have been the first time in the 250 years of LA being incorporated as a city that eminent domain has been used in this way, so there is a lot on the line for



this building.

I think what is special about this building is that it's managed to change the conversation around how a city keeps tenants housed. There needs to be out of the box thinking. That's, I think, the interesting part of it. It required a lot of strategy and thinking about how to get a political apparatus in a city that has been so friendly to developers for decades to change something and really take something back from them.

The tenants have been involved every step of the way. They're the political juice, if you will, or the will to get things across the board. I think organizers have just provided some tools to the tenants, but they have been the ones that have been pushing all this work. Without them, of course, there would be no Hillside Villa. There would be no movement. The credit goes to all of the tenants in that building, at least the ones participating in this struggle and campaign.

So here we are. It's definitely been a lot of pressure and a lot of actions. It's been a lot of hours of meetings and planning for those meetings. We're not just dealing with city council members, we're also dealing with housing departments, we're dealing with county departments. So it's gotten a little complicated in terms of using eminent domain for this building because it's never been done. The first time of anything, the precedent, people sort of lose their mind a little bit, especially in bureaucratic institutions like the housing department of Los Angeles. It's been a bit of a challenge, but we're strategizing to make it happen.

Do you think these successes have been because you've been able to focus on a specific landlord, or do you think organizing on a neighborhood level is more important?

Well the thing about this building is that it wasn't a specific landlord, but it was a specific building. I think this one is unique because it was one of the first buildings to have an expiring covenant of buildings that were built in the 80s and 90s by the CRA. Those covenants are now expiring, so with the CRA alone, you have 10,000 units in LA with expiring covenants. The same process that's happening here at this building will happen 10,000 times to 10,000 units in the city of LA. So what do you do in a situation where you have, at last count, 68,000 unhoused in the county of LA, nearly 70,000 people, and you're adding another 140 families or so onto the street (because essentially that's what would have happened). The story was compelling.

We had pushed, because this building was built with 90 percent public funds and was being subsidized 70 percent with public funds, that this building should be eminent domain. And so it was put forward to the council member and the council member decided, Yeah, it was a good idea. The council member at first thought it was crazy, but when you have an election not too far into the future and you've been helping assist developers in gentrifying a community, you have to do something big to counter the narrative. So that council member came on board kicking and screaming the whole way, dragging out the process.

Now we're in the process where the city council has at least reached

an unanimous vote to offer the landlord a certain amount of money, last it was appraised about \$48 million. There's an appraisal going on now, and then the city council will have to vote to offer the landlord with the new amount. If the landlord then says no, then the process of eminent domain will begin and the city council will have to vote again to use eminent domain on the building.

How do you see the relationship you mentioned, between organizers and tenants, as part of the broader goal that the union is trying to accomplish?

I think at the core of the relationship is trust. I think with the tenants that are organizing with the organizers, there is first and foremost trust. There is also friendship. It's very much "digging down to work", getting into the granular stuff in terms of a campaign, and so the relationship and keeping tenants engaged is not too difficult when their housing is on the line. Ultimately it's not our housing, it's their housing that is at risk. So when you have someone who's coming in from the outside who's not getting paid to be there, who's not getting any stipend or anything, who's just volunteering their time to help the tenants keep their housing, I think it's motivational for the tenants.

Sometimes we do these celebrations as part of the relationship building, not just between tenants and organizers, but between tenants and tenants. In that building [Hillside Villa], you have three different languages being spoken. You have Spanish, you have English, and then two dialects of Chinese, both Mandarin and Cantonese. So in our meetings we have this interpretation equipment. We're interpreting these meetings in like three different languages. The most important part of a meeting, of course, is participation. We cannot prefer one language over another. For 100 percent participation you have to understand what's being said, and so we practice this thing called "Language Justice". Part of that Language Justice

is to ensure that people can understand what's being said, but also be understood when they speak. That's another thing that goes back to trust; it goes back to just fully engaging tenants, and that has helped a lot.

So a way that we built trust, just between us and between tenants, is like I said, we'll do celebrations, and in the beginning when we had to build trust, we would do some barbecues. Food has a way of bringing people together. Breaking bread together, it doesn't matter what language you speak, when you go, "Mmm!", you're understood when something tastes good. That would be a way that we exchange food and recipes. Little gatherings, convivios, barbecues. So slowly, over time, building trust.

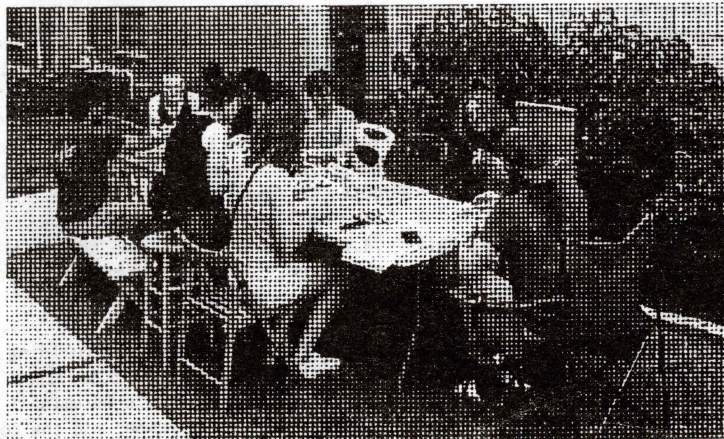
Also being consistent. Another way we were able to maintain that trust is every Thursday for the last four years we've been meeting with the tenants. Every Thursday. And you know, no one is paying us to be there. We're there because we care about the movement, we care about housing, and what happens to one tenant happens to me as a tenant collectively, it happens to all the tenants. I think the Hillside Villa Tenants Association is well aware of that, and so the relationship is really, really healthy. It's really great. Of course there are challenges sometimes that are personal, and that structure that we've built-or that we've helped build-through the tenant's association helps mitigate some of the conflict that tenants would normally have. A community that stands together stays together, despite whatever challenges there are. We've been consistent about it and consistent about being there, present, so the relationship is really healthy and it's been an incredible journey for sure.

This interview is presented in an abridged and edited form for clarity. To read the full, unedited interview, visit our substack, nsra.substack.com

ABOUT N.S.R.A.

We are a group of tenants renting from M. Fishman & Co., one of the wealthiest property management companies in Logan Square, if not the entire city of Chicago. The company owns dozens of residential properties in the Northwest side, most of which have dozens of units. This is in addition to dozens of commercial properties. They have been notorious for raising rents in Logan Square and Humboldt Park since they started buying properties in 1990, sometimes even doubling the previous rent price. A group of us started talking shortly after the lockdown order of March 2020, and over two years later a strong group has formed around that initial nucleus, which we call the North Spaulding Renters Association. Our group currently consists of around a dozen active members with a presence in eight buildings.

Our union acts on the understanding that we, as renters, have very little control over the things that happen in our homes. Decisions about things like rent, renovations, and utilities are all made by the landlord. Because housing exists in a competitive market, those decisions are determined by what can make the landlord the most money, the well-being of us as tenants is almost always at odds with that fact. The most obvious and exploitative representation of this is the landlord's ability to extract limitless rent from us. The way things are now, we have zero say in



this determination, thus why they are able to raise our rents each year as much as they want. But, because we are forced to provide landlords with the money to pay for the mortgage, taxes, and maintenance of our homes, we have significant potential power in this relationship. If properly organized, we as tenants have the ability to affect the decisions made about our homes. This understanding is the basis of our organizing efforts.

We organize by talking to neighbors! Living in a city today can be incredibly lonely, and so few of us have ever talked to the people we live alongside. We see this as compounding the immense levels of depression and anxiety in our society, and as something that makes it easier for landlords to take advantage of us as tenants-dealing with one disgruntled tenant is far easier than dealing with an entire group of tenants. We hope to reverse this trend by reintroducing

community to the alienated apartment environment: making group chats, holding BBQs, helping each other in disputes with the landlord, and whatever else neighbors want to do! Through these actions, we hope to illuminate the reality of the tenant/landlord relationship and show everyone that we have the ability to shape our living situations, if properly organized.