

About this issue's cover

Umbrella House (1990) is by one of New York's most well-known anarchist illustrators. Seth Tobocman is co-founder of the collectively produced semi-annual publication, *World War Three Illustrated*, which has been coming out since 1979. He is also author-illustrator of the scathingly irreverent *You Don't Have to Fuck People Over to Survive* (1990); an invaluable first-hand analysis of squatting and gentrification in New York entitled *War in the Neighbourhood* (2000); *Portraits of Israelis and Palestinians* (2003), which was produced while teaching art in the Palestinian village of Dir Izbzia; *Disaster and Resistance; Comics and Landscapes for the Twenty-First Century* (2008); and *Len: A Lawyer in History* (2016). *War in the Neighbourhood* is long out of print, but a new edition is pending from the Canadian anarchist press, Ad Astra Comix (<https://adastracomix.com/catalogue/>). The book is a 'must' for anyone interested in the politics of squatting.

I chose *Umbrella House* from *You Don't Have to Fuck People Over to Survive* and asked Seth a few questions about the history of the squat and his poster:

Please tell me about Umbrella House—when it was squatted, its importance for the anarchist milieu in New York at the time and key people who, in your estimation, made constructive contributions to organizing it.

Umbrella House was opened about 1989. It is my impression that Michael Shenker and Raphael Bueno did the original break-in and electrical hook-up but the first residents were Steven Ashmore, Siobhan Neville and Gerta. At this time the squats in New York's Lower East Side were very much under attack, so Mike and Bueno were very keen to push back and take as much territory as possible. It was a large building but much of it was, at first, unliveable so the group grew slowly for the first few years. Carpenter Jeff Dan had an important role in renovating the building as did Sarah Hogarth who did the electrical work and also organized the Tompkins Square Legal Defence Committee¹ with Stanley Cohen and Ron Kuby. There was an offset printing press on the first floor, donated by John Penley, where a few posters were printed. Professional plumber Paul Shay, not a squatter, but active with the Revolutionary Communist Party, had an important role in renovating the drainage system as did George Marko. Barbara Robin Lee and I both became house members even though we held, and did not give up, rent stabilized apartments elsewhere. This was always controversial and we eventually gave up our spaces in Umbrella House.

Members of 'Tent City,' a homeless organization that started in Tompkins Square Park, had a space in the building for a couple years. Because this building was opened in the period following the 1988 police riot,² when conflicts between neighbourhood residents and the cops were at their height, many of the original Umbrella people became pretty good street fighters. We successfully resisted two eviction attempts, one of which involved a siege which went on for several days.³ Early Umbrella House members also had an important role in defending other buildings and we developed a reputation as being tough, pragmatic and business-like. Umbrella had house rules against hard drug use and violence and requiring workdays and rent. I would say these rules were enforced about 85% of the time, which was better than most places.

As years went by, and the place became more fixed up, it was possible for the building to be more particular about who moved in and some emphasis was put on racial diversity so that in later years there were more hispanic members. Many artists and musicians have lived at Umbrella including Lawrence Van Abbema, Mac McGill, Helena Muninghoff, Marta V, Gerta, Siobhan, Aaron Sinefit, Killjoy, David Kelly, Adam Nodelman, Mario Buscamante and DJ Baroxmix. Some of my experiences at Umbrella formed the basis for my graphic novel *War in the Neighborhood*.

What brought about the production of the poster?

This poster was used for the first Umbrella House Benefit in 1990 at Max Fish Bar organized by *World War 3 Illustrated* in co-operation with Squat-Or-Rot, a group that produced punk shows to benefit the squats. It came after a series of street battles in which we had done pretty well, so the image projects a certain triumphalism. It was printed in 2-color silk screen.

When was Umbrella House 'legalised'?

The building was legalised in the late 1990s as a result of a deal worked out between 13 squatted buildings and the administration of New York mayor Giuliani: the deal was signed by Giuliani's successor, Mayor Bloomberg.

How does its endurance as an example of successful squatting continue to contribute to building anarchist values in NYC?

I don't know a lot about what goes on at Umbrella these days. I have moved on to other projects, mostly concerned with climate change. But I do think that the success of the squatters, the community gardeners and the folks at ABC NO RIO,⁴ in getting control of their spaces, proves the viability of direct action as a tactic for achieving tangible benefits. Contrary to the conventional wisdom which says that the pragmatic path to reform is one of 'working within the system' these victories were only possible by stepping outside the system.

Allan Antliff

NOTES

- 1 The title of the legal defense committee refers to Tompkins Square Park, which is in the heart of the Lower East Side. It was then occupied by the homeless and served as a cultural hub (free concerts, etc.) for the local anarchist/squatting community. It was continually besieged by the police, hence the need for a legal committee.
- 2 Police massed and rampaged through the streets beating people in a bid to assert control over Tompkins Square Park.
- 3 The siege is documented in *War in the Neighborhood*.
- 4 ABC NO RIO is an anarchist community arts center founded in 1980. For more on ABC NO RIO see <http://www.abcnorio.org/about/about.htm>.