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BAAS Travel Grant Report 2015

My project offers the first in-depth urban cultural analysis of the network of community activism in Loisaida (part of the Lower East Side). This community organized itself to fight against postwar urban deindustrialization, housing disinvestment, and gentrification, which negatively affected low-income areas. By recreating the urban history of sustainable activism in Loisaida and focusing on the initiatives and projects of key community organizations, I demonstrate how they sought ultimately to reclaim urban space, educational space, and cultural space. I argue that analyzing the interplay of sustainable activism, community organizations, and space in a small urban neighborhood such as Loisaida, provides three crucial insights: (1) the necessity for community organizations to adapt their activism to changing needs of the community, (2) the importance of neighborhood control over both physical and non-physical (spiritual, cultural, educational) space, and (3) Puerto Ricans' ideas about and practices of their 'right to the city.'

Thanks to both the Postgraduate Transatlantic Travel Grant (European Association for American Studies) and the Elizabeth and Elisha Atkins Postgraduate Travel Award (British Association for American Studies), I was fortunate enough to travel to New York City for two months from 20 June to 20 August 2015. I found a small but cozy room in Brooklyn's iconic Bed-Stuy neighborhood (itself a new gentrification frontier at the moment) in a well-preserved brownstone, from which it only took me between 20 to 40 minutes to my research sites. Mainly I visited New York University's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, the Centro Archives and Library, the New York Public Library, and the Columbia Center for Oral History as well as some community organizations in Loisaida.

I spent two weeks in the impressive Elmer Bobst Library, which houses Tamiment, to examine the Ronald Lawson Research Files for the Tenant Movement in New York City. This collection includes vital organizational and personal documents about the community organization Interfaith Adopt-a-Building (AAB), to which I devote an entire chapter in my thesis. This organization was at the forefront of turning abandoned and decaying buildings on the Lower East Side into newly renovated and affordable homes for lower income earners. The documents in this collection includes interviews with key leaders of the organization as well as details on specific projects and their overall working ethic: sweat equity as a means to home ownership.



Elmer Bobst Library near the famous Washington Square Park

Besides these documents on AAB, I also found oral histories of the squatter's movement in New York City, which provides a backdrop to the work of AAB and their activity during the 1980s in particular. The remnants of this activity are still visible via the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, housed at the famous squatting building C-Squat on Avenue C on the Lower East Side. The oral histories help me fill in gaps where documentary evidence is sparse. In addition, I also went to several events on the squatter's movement, proving that the movement occupies both historical as well as contemporary presence in the city and especially on the Lower East Side.

At the New York Public Library's Schwarzman building, a beautiful yet tourist-heavy landmark in midtown, I examined the holdings of the Vincent Astor Foundation's archives, which holds letters and forms pertaining to AAB and another primary organization in my thesis, The Real Great Society or RGS (the foundation funded AAB and RGS for several years). This helped me to get a picture of the financial requirements for the largely self-help initiatives of AAB and RGS. While there, I also took a few weeks to read through newspapers and magazines such as *City Limits* and *The Village Voice* to see how the activities of AAB and other organizations I'm looking at were recorded in media outlets. Absorbing New York City and Lower East Side history through these regular periodicals detailing events both big and small, helped me get a much better picture of the history of housing policies and the shift from the proneighborhood efforts of the Great Society programs to the abandonment during the New York City financial crisis of 1976 and on to the neoliberalization of the housing market—gentrification in particular. I also took a one-day detour to the gorgeous Lincoln Center location of the New York Public Library, which houses the rare 16mm documentary *El Corazón de Loisaida* on the struggles of the Loisaida community to organize tenant co-ops and reclaim abandoned buildings through sweat equity.



New York Public Library Main Reading Room

I also spent two days examining oral histories at Columbia University—specifically items of the Mayor Ed Koch administration and key personnel involved in changing or implementing housing policies such as Nathan Leventhal and Herman Badillo. Coincidentally, I stumbled upon the reminiscences of mural artist Antonio 'Chico' Garcia, who painted numerous murals in Loisaida and played a big role in painting Puerto Rican and Loisaida history on the walls and buildings of the neighborhood. I will use this for a chapter on murals and street art in Loisaida as both Chico and the street art organization CityArts Workshop (now CITYarts) were instrumental in the creation of community murals in the 70s and 80s.

Finally, I went to the biggest, yet significantly underfunded, Puerto Rican archive in the US: the Center for Puerto Rican Studies in East Harlem. They hold massive collections on several

organizations I'm looking at such as Charas, Seven Loaves, El Puerto Rican Embassy, AAB, and RGS. While there is not enough space in this report to detail all the findings in all the collections at Centro, I can say that I was one of the first scholars to fully examine the still unprocessed 17 boxes of material from the organization Charas, which operated for almost 40 years in Loisaida and kept records dating back to their beginnings in the mid 1960s. The only reason Charas is not active anymore is because their community center was auctioned off to a private developer and the battle to reclaim this building is ongoing despite the fact that the building has been standing empty for the last 15. As such I was quite amazed to find the key to the building in this unprocessed collection. I would have loved to smuggle those out, break into the now closed-off building, and just have a look around the space that provided its community with cultural, educational, and other programs.

I would also like to mention that I made sure to get in touch with current organizations such as the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative, CITYarts, and the newly reopened community space Loisaida Center, which follows in Charas' footsteps as a leading space for cultural and educational programs. I hope to return to New York City in 2016 to conduct additional interviews with people active in the organizations of my project as well as curate an exhibit on Charas at the Loisaida Center—a project that I'm working on with the director of that center. This key research trip would not have been possible without the support of EAAS and BAAS and it will result in many conference papers (for example at the prestigious American Historical Association Annual Meeting 2016 in Atlanta) and chapter drafts.