Defensive and expansionist struggles for housing justice:
120 years of community rights in New York City

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Abstract

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In struggles for dignified housing and greater agency, housing justice organizers often rely on an alternative valuation of urban space, based in community rights, which elevates the shared social value generated by residents over the market determined value of real estate. To parse the complexity of New York City's contemporary housing landscape, this piece outlines a typology for categorizing housing justice struggles as defensive or expansionist. The contemporary use of community rights as an ideological and ethical framework for these struggles is historically informed by successive housing justice campaigns throughout the twentieth century. And the concept of community rights may evolve yet again, as housing justice organizers expand their fight across geographies and build bridges with broader economic and racial justice movements.

Keywords

community rights, community control, tenants' rights, displacement, gentrification

Introduction

New York City's housing justice organizing faces a difficult political and economic consensus, which privileges development and private property rights. In a hyper-commodified real estate market 'the right to the city…[is] restricted in most cases to a small political and economic elite who are in a position to shape cities more and more after their own desires' (Harvey, 2008, p. 38). Homeless people and the vast majority of tenants have minimal control over their immediate living arrangements and the fate of their changing neighborhoods. In struggles for dignified housing and greater agency, organizers often rely