

The Young Lords in Gentrifying East Harlem: A Radical Walking Tour



1. 111th and 3rd Avenue: Garbage Offensive, August 1969

Cleaning up the neighborhood's garbage was the first organizing campaign the New York Young Lords took up in the summer of 1969. Facing neglect by the city's sanitation services, the Young Lords Organization (YLO) began sweeping up garbage every weekend. When the Department of Sanitation refused to give the YLO brooms and equipment to do the work, members blocked the intersections of 110th to 112th and 2nd and 3rd Avenues with garbage. This series of actions brought attention to the Young Lords and to the issues in *El Barrio*.

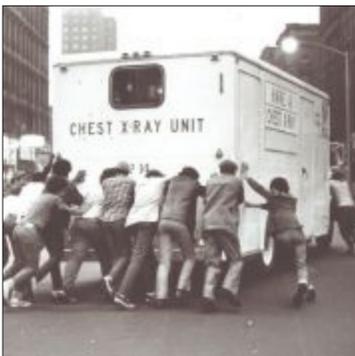
2. First Spanish United Methodist Church Takeover, 111th and Lexington Ave, January 1970

Following the success of the Garbage Offensive, the Young Lords sought space to convene community programs. When the First Spanish Baptist Methodist Church refused to give them space, the Young Lords occupied the building for 11 days. The YLO offered a free breakfast program, childcare, clothing donations, and a Liberation School. The street in front of the church was named "Young Lords Way" in 2014.



3. Public Health Campaigns, 111th Street and Madison Avenue, Summer 1970

Organizing around public health became central to the YLO's work, including testing for lead poisoning and tuberculosis, and access to heroin detoxification programs. One of the most famous of these actions was the Young Lords' seizure of a Department of Health Tuberculosis X-Ray truck in June of 1970. The YLO confiscated the truck and parked it in front of their office and quadrupled the number of patients seen in a typical day.



4. Museo del Barrio, 1230 5th Avenue

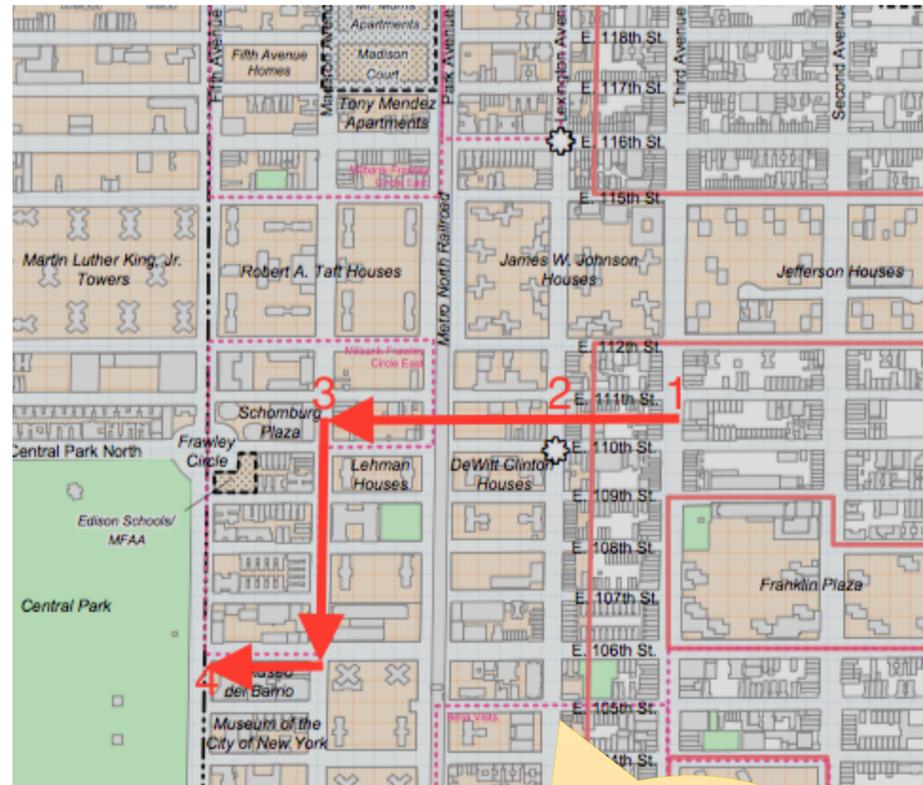
While not directly linked to Young Lords, El Museo del Barrio was championed and organized by Puerto Rican activists for racial and economic justice.

- Mickey Melendez, a founding member of the YLO stated "If we did anything, we changed everything about ourselves. We defined how we wanted to be looked at, and we defined to the rest of the world how we wanted to be looked at as Puerto Ricans" (Morales 1997).
- In 2015, we can identify the legacy of social movements in the infrastructure of the city



Social Movements and Urban Change

Inspired by the organizing of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, particularly the Black Panthers, The Young Lords Organization (YLO) of East Harlem fought for racial and economic justice for Puerto Ricans in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Many members of the Young Lords Organization, and later Young Lords Party, were the first generation of their family born in the United States after the massive migration from Puerto Rico to the U.S. in the 1940's. Puerto Rican migration and the social movements of Puerto Ricans in New York City and across the U.S. have had a major impact on the politics, history, culture, and built environment of New York (see Enck-Wanzer, et al 2010).



Gentrification and Displacement:

Neil Smith described gentrification as the "process by which working class residential neighborhoods are rehabilitated by middle class homebuyers, landlords, and professional developers" (1982: 133). According to his theory of gentrification, cities in capitalist society are shifting through the influx of capital and the desire to expand profit in the real estate market. As the demand for high end real estate grows in some parts of the city, middle and high income buyers are looking for housing and investment in poor and working class neighborhoods, causing rents to soar. Poor and working class renters are displaced in the process. Public housing residents remain somewhat shielded from displacement.

Why teach with a walking tour?

Connecting students with the physical space of the city invites critical thinking about the uses of public space. In addition, teaching social movements and movement tactics outside of the classroom fosters a geographical sense of the city as a racially segregated and contested place.

All images of YLO belong to Hiram Maristany

References

Enck-Wanzer Darrel. 2010. *The Young Lords: A Reader*. New York: NYU Press.

Morales, Iris. Ana Celia Zentella; Patria Rodriguez; Young Lords (Organization). 1996. Latino Education Network Service, New York, NY : Third World Newsreel.

Smith, Neil. 1982. "Gentrification and Uneven Development," *Economic Geography* 58: 2, 138-155.

Questions for students: East Harlem is still very much a working-class neighborhood. Do you see any signs of a neighborhood in transition? How might neighborhood change influence our public memory of the East Harlem of the past? Will it be remembered as a place of resistance? A poor place?