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GLASS HOUSE

PHOTOGRAPHS AND ORAL HISTORIES IN MARGARET MORTON'S NEW BOOK
DOCUMENT THE STORY OF YOUNG SQUATTERS WHO REBUILD BOTH THEIR LIVES
AND AN ABANDONED FACTORY ON NEW YORK CITY'S LOWER EAST SIDE

"Glass House is an important, richly evocative, and very moving book."
—Luc Sante, author, *Low Life*

"A triumph of art and compassion." —Phillip Lopate, author, *Waterfront*

"An extraordinary experiment in down-and-out utopia. The personal narratives add tremendous power to the sequence of pictures. I couldn't put the book down." —Alan Trachtenberg, Yale Professor; author of *Reading American Photographs*

University Park, PA— The photographs and oral histories in Margaret Morton's new book, *Glass House*, document the resilience of thirty-five squatters, many still in their teens, who defied the law to occupy a derelict glass factory on New York City's Lower East Side. Homeless, unable or unwilling to return to their families, they formed a community and, with determination and ingenuity, reshaped their lives as well as the building. "It's a bond I never had with my own family," said Scott, who was homeless and living in his car before he left Ohio for New York and joined Glass House.

United by a need for community, a strong work ethic, and ironclad rules, they turned the cavernous ruin into the home they called "Glass House." The group repaired stairs and roof joists with wood scavenged from construction sites and police barricades, tapped electricity from a street lamp, and siphoned water from a nearby fire hydrant. Eventually they equipped the building with a communal kitchen, a library, and a living area for each member of the House. Morton has been compiling photographs and oral histories of New York City's homeless since 1989. "I learned about Glass House in 1993 from a former squatter," she explains, "then we met with the entire community. They invited me to attend Sunday night house meetings and Thursday workdays and meet with individual members to photograph them and audiotape their

stories. I witnessed firsthand their ingenuity and extraordinary ability to collaborate with one another.”

Yale Professor Alan Trachtenberg notes, “[This] ‘underside’ of American life is not as remote from the mainstream as it may seem. The [squatters of Glass House] represent a panorama of social origins, of education and personal skills. . . . [They] know what they have “dropped out” from, and are quite articulate about their choices and their commitment to Glass House, the place itself and the principle it stands for.”

Calli had been a runaway since she was thirteen. She hid in garden sheds on Long Island, then made her way to California, where she slept under bridges. Back in New York, at Glass House, she found a home and friends to help her gain the strength to fight drug addiction. “I see the walls not being held together by brick and cement,” Calli said, “but being held together by everybody’s hands and by everybody’s hearts.” Chad, a native of Indiana, told Morton, “Violence was constant at home, screwed-up stuff. Finally I made it to New York.” Donny, a veteran squatter who taught survival skills to less-experienced members of the Glass House community, remarked, “We were always working on the building, but we were always working on the community too.”

On February 1, 1994, New York City police evicted the community from their home in the factory building on Avenue D. It is now a residence for low-income individuals living with HIV/AIDS. Writer Luc Sante observes, “Even if we’ve known all along that the story will end with a violent eviction, by the time the end comes it is still shocking.”

In 1999, five years after the eviction, Morton received a haunting letter from Angela, one of the young women who had lived at Glass House. Morton resolved to complete the book on Glass House and trace everyone who had been in the group. The news was mixed. Donny and three other members of Glass House had died. “Maus” was preparing for law school; Jesse had enlisted in the Army Reserves. Except for two still squatting in Manhattan, the others were scattered from the Oregon coast to Hawaii and South America. Calli was living in the Costa Rican jungle, Toby in a eucalyptus forest on Maui, Chad in Brazil.

Radical changes in the Glass House neighborhood of New York City were also important in

leading Morton to publish the photographs and oral histories of the now-dispersed group. “As the East Village continues to be gentrified at a pace that threatens to erase all memory of its history as a home for ethnic groups and the radical fringe,” Morton comments, “the time seems right to present this chronicle of a group of young people who crafted a community at the margins of New York City.”

Morton, renowned for “looking at what most people want to forget” (*Los Angeles Times*), has devoted her career to presenting a public record of the resourcefulness and resolve of the homeless in New York City. Her previous books, all widely reviewed, include *The Tunnel*, her documentation of a homeless community living in an abandoned railroad tunnel; *Transitory Gardens*, *Uprooted Lives*, co-authored with landscape designer Diana Balmori; and *Fragile Dwelling*, which is based on her eleven years of involvement with New York’s homeless encampments.

Morton’s work has been exhibited internationally and published in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Washington Post*, as well as the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*, and *Asahi*, among others. Her work is featured in *The Other Half Revisited: The Legacy of Jacob Riis*, a documentary film chosen for screening at The Museum of Modern Art.

Margaret Morton received an M.F.A. from Yale University School of Art and currently is professor of art at The Cooper Union in New York City. Morton’s projects have been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation of the Arts, and the Graham Foundation.

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