



Museum of the City of New York Unveils New Section of *Activist New York*: “Housing Activism: Rent Strikes and Tenant Mobilizations, 1908–1939”

New York, NY (August 8, 2025) — A new section of the Museum of the City of New York’s critically acclaimed exhibition *Activist New York* delves into the powerful history of tenant organizing in the city. [*Housing Activism: Rent Strikes and Tenant Mobilizations, 1908–1939*](#) highlights grassroots efforts that shaped New York City’s housing landscape and explores the lasting impact of these early movements on policy and urban life today.

The installation highlights movements that emerged from neighborhoods across the city—from Washington Heights to Brownsville—during a time of immense housing pressure. Faced with freezing winters, coal shortages, rising rents, and overcrowded tenements, tenants organized strikes and formed tenant unions that laid the groundwork for the city’s first rent control laws in 1920.

Through photographs – including a 1919 image of a Harlem building on rent strike – as well as archival flyers, housing reform legislation, and rare artifacts such as a coal scuttle, an architectural drawing from a renovated tenement, and a sewing kit from a mid-century housing cooperative, the display paints a vivid picture of the struggles and successes of tenant-led mobilizations. The section also traces how housing activism evolved over time, from radical beginnings to more mainstream policy advocacy embraced by city and state lawmakers.

Key moments explored include early rent strikes after the turn of the 20th century, the 1919 rent strike wave, the formation of the City-Wide Tenants Council in the 1930s, and the emergence of cooperative housing and early public housing initiatives. The display also references more recent movements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to new content on housing, the Museum will also unveil a new section in *Activist New York* on recent accessions, featuring photographs, ephemera, and other objects from historical and recent movements that have recently been added to the Museum’s collection of more than 750,000 objects.

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About *Activist New York*

Over a decade ago, Perry Rosenstein approached the Museum of the City of New York with a unique vision for a designated gallery on activism. The child of immigrants, Perry was a former organizer, veteran, and business owner. He had mobilized against racism and fascism, and supported artists, journalists, and the environment as Founder and President of the Puffin Foundation. This lifelong activism and philanthropy planted the seeds for *Activist New York*, which, with the support of the Puffin Foundation, opened in May 2012 as an evolving exhibition with 14 rotating modules exploring a range of activist stories in New York City, past and present. Since its opening, the exhibition has provided invaluable content for the Museum's educational and public programming while serving hundreds of thousands of students, educators, and learners of all ages with material that highlights civic engagement in our city.

Activist New York and its associated programs are made possible by The Puffin Foundation, Ltd.

About the Museum of the City of New York

The Museum of the City of New York fosters understanding of the distinctive nature of urban life in the world's most influential metropolis. Through exhibitions, public programs, and educational initiatives, the Museum explores what gives New York City its singular character and global impact.

Visitor Information

The Museum is located at 1220 Fifth Avenue. Public hours are Monday - Friday, 10:00 am–5:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 10:00 am–6:00 p.m. Learn more at mcny.org.