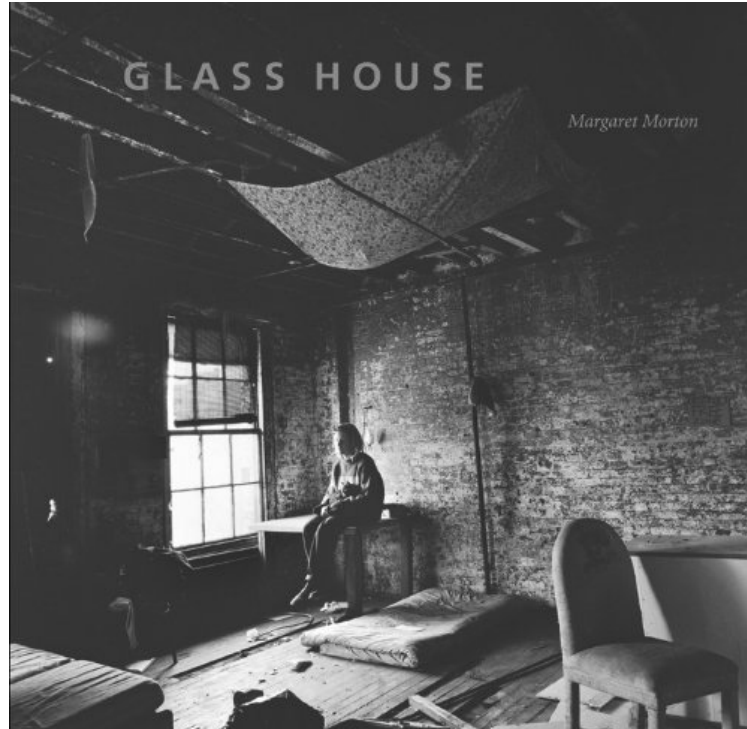


Glass House

Margaret Morton

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Margaret Morton : Glass House before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Glass House:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great ReadingBy Toni BernsExcellent reading and great insight to what goes on in everyday life with people who are homeless. I strongly recommend this book1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Excellent insight into homeless youthBy Karen T. RiehlA pictorial essay of the lives of a group of homeless young people who find a way to build a community among the castoffs of society.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. building a homeBy KathleenFor several years, I lived in cooperative housing where all the residents participated in organized chores, ate together, relaxed and bonded together in common areas, and established house rules such as guest policies by democratic vote at weekly Sunday meetings. All this features of communal life were also present at the "Glass House," where young adults formed a community living in an abandoned factory in New York City. I found Morton's account of their experiences very moving. The pictures and narratives are beautiful, stark, evocative; they tell how these different people ended up at the Glass House, how they built themselves a home and community there, how they lived, and where most of them ended up ten years later.I think people with a variety of interests, from photography to homelessness to urban life, would find much to reflect on in this book. For me, how the various inhabitants organized themselves, formed a family of sorts, and became emotionally invested in their shared living space was especially fascinating. I read the book as a story of people coming together in situations of deprivation or duress to try to survive, such as the 2010 Chilean miners who managed to survive while trapped underground for months. The Glass House residents were not necessarily physically trapped,

but they often faced barriers and hardships such as poverty, mental health problems, and addictions. How can people endure and even build lives while trapped in a mine, or in an abandoned factory on the lower East Side? But I think there are many other approaches to this account, and I am sure that when I read it again I will form another interpretation. One resident, Donny, said of Glass House: "I watched people change and grow up there. It was a transforming experience for a lot of people. I saw people come here with no skills, who learned carpentry, who learned plumbing, learned electricity, and learned installing locks, right here. And some of them beat ten-year, five-year drug habits while they did it. Basically, the family mattered more than the building. I mean, we were always working on the building, but we were always working on the community too."

Penn State Press interview with Margaret Morton, March 2004. Your books *The Tunnel*; *Fragile Dwelling*; *Transitory Gardens*, *Uprooted Lives*; and now *Glass House* always use a place in their titles and often present photographs of sites throughout New York City. Why these titles? Why so many photographs of the places where the homeless gather to find shelter? From the beginning, my work was devoted not to despair but rather to the courage and imagination with which people face adversity, the ways they manage to build makeshift structures and find warmth and community. I try to show that the term "homeless" is a misnomer that blinds us from seeing how people preserve their sense of home and identity while struggling for survival at the margins of society. How does *Glass House* fit into your earlier work? Unlike my other books, which are about adults, *Glass House* focuses upon a group of young people some were runaways who in 1993 established a communal home in an abandoned glass factory on Manhattan's Lower East Side. How did you find out about Glass House and get access to the community? I learned about Glass House from a homeless man whom I had photographed. He introduced me to Gentle Spike, one of the members of the community, who told me to meet him at Avenue D and East 10th Street on a Sunday night at 9 pm. "If no one is there," he said, "just yell 'Glass House.'" When I arrived at the seven-story building that next Sunday, it was completely dark and looked deserted. I waited a few minutes, then yelled "Glass House." Silence. I yelled again. Suddenly, a thick chain came hurtling down. I had the keys. I found my way to the second floor and a dimly lit, unheated room where about thirty-five people between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two were conducting what they called a "house meeting." "A stranger, a documentarian," was on the agenda. I showed them a copy of my first book, *Transitory Gardens*, *Uprooted Lives*. Discussion, a show of hands, then a woman slammed a sledgehammer on a table: I had been given permission to take photographs and conduct interviews as they continued their lives in this derelict brick building. After that night and for the next four months, I attended Thursday workdays, Sunday night house meetings, and met with individual residents. Why do you think they accepted you? These young men and women in Glass House had had many adult teachers, parents, police to impose codes of behavior on them that they considered cruel or irrational or just too restrictive. I think that from the first they understood I would not judge them by society's norms of conduct. I accepted them as they were. Then, too, I believe the people in Glass House wanted to tell their stories, to present their experiences to a society they thought had been unwilling or unable to understand them. They decided they could trust me to record their way of life. *Glass House* seems to have been a tightly regulated community, indeed, seems to have been better organized than most communities and institutions on "the outside." How did they go about keeping order? They took turns doing essential duties, built what was needed with what they could find, and took care of one another. Each and every one was required to respect house rules, which were strict and detailed, covering almost every eventuality from overnight guests to police raids. Here, for instance, is the guest policy: "You can't stay at Glass House unless you are the guest of a member. If you are the guest of a member, you can only sleep in his or her room. Glass House is not a crash pad. You can't sleep in the community room or in any other part of the house. All guests must attend Sunday night meetings, so we know your face. Any strangers will be escorted to the door. You photographed Glass House from 1993 to 1994. Why did you wait so long to publish the material as a book? Four months after I began my work, the police stormed the building and evicted everyone. I put aside my photographs, transcripts, and notes and turned to other projects. Then, a few years ago, a letter from one of the Glass House survivors prompted me to trace all the other former residents. I was saddened to learn that five of them had died, and impressed that many others had dramatically changed their lives. One now lives in a eucalyptus forest on Maui; another is an organic gardener in Costa Rica; yet another is preparing for law school. But all I contacted told me that their months in Glass House had been a turning point in their lives. Also it seems right to present this chronicle of young squatters at a time when gentrification is erasing virtually all traces of the ethnic groups and radical fringe that once gave Alphabet City such great diversity and vitality.

Margaret Morton's *Glass House* is an important, richly evocative, and very moving book. It may be an illustrated work of oral history, but it has the momentum of narrative. The characters come fully alive and most become quite attaching. 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. Luc Sante, author of *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* Margaret Morton's *Glass House* is a remarkable work, the best of her books on the demi-monde of homelessness and squatting in New York City. Alan Trachtenberg, Yale University Margaret Morton has been doing remarkable, indeed invaluable work at the juncture of

photography and social documentation. She is our modern-day Jacob Riis. *Glass House*, her latest project, is a triumph of art and compassion. Phillip Lopate, author of *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan* *Glass House*, which documents a squatters community on New Yorks Lower East Side, is Margaret Mortons fourth book about the makeshift homes built by the citys homeless population. Since 1989, Morton has honed her skills photographing, interviewing, and presenting the compelling stories of people living on the margins of society. Her commitment and passionate advocacy justifies comparison with Jacob Riis, the great nineteenth-century photographer and social reformer. Bonnie Yochelson, author of *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* Ms. Mortons pictures depict a cozy communal home with more graffiti and less Ikea furniture than the Alphabet City of 2005. Choire Sicha, *New York Times* Margaret Mortons *Glass House* is a remarkable, lavish oral and visual history of the titular radical-occupied derelict building (squat) on New Yorks Lower East Side from 1992 to 1994. The occupants, a crew of dirty punk rockers and hardened street people, proved startlingly disciplined and ingenious in building their communal squat, engaging in elaborate ruses to hide their occupancy from Giulianis gentrification-minded police. Although their ignominious ending seems foreordained, the story proves a disturbing alternative narrative in the face of commodity-based urban hipsterism. *Bridge Magazine* When I suspended judgment, through Morton's sensitive words and images, I could share in the rich humanity of their lives. *Glass House* the book is a success as engaged journalism, as photography, and as a tribute to a fascinating social experiment. R.K. Dickson, *Bloomsbury* Morton's black-and-white images are crisp and unblinking. R.K. Dickson, *Bloomsbury* About the Author Margaret Morton is a photographer well known for her work with the homeless of New York City. Her photographs have been exhibited in numerous one-person and group shows in America and abroad. She has published several books of photographs and oral histories, including *Fragile Dwelling* (2000); *The Tunnel* (1995); and, with Diana Balmori, *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives* (1993). Morton is Professor of Art at The Cooper Union.