

Title: Nuestra Casa, via City Life Vida Urbana¹

Location and Dates of Operation: The Nuestra Casa project occurred the spring semester of 2017. City Life Vida Urbana has been organizing in Greater Boston since 1973, but its Post Foreclosure Eviction Defense Campaign and ongoing anti-displacement organizing is most relevant to Nuestra Casa. The former was officially launched in 2007, and anti-displacement and tenant organizing work has been ongoing throughout the 2010's.²

Goal/Mission: The goal of Nuestra Casa was to educate Latinx households about displacement and gentrification, while providing them an invitation to access resources related to eviction.³ City Life Vida Urbana's mission reads as following: "City Life/Vida Urbana is a grassroots community organization committed to fighting for racial, social and economic justice and gender equality by building working class power. We promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders and build collective power to effect systemic change and transform society."⁴ While these individual efforts focus on providing a practical way to get tenants resources in the case of eviction, they also focus on defining the problem as a community issue, and making residents feel as if they have a support structure. For City Life Vida Urbana, leadership development and the development of community capacity are both important components of the organization's mission.

Abstract and Keywords:

Nuestra Casa was a small-scale project conducted by Jorge Caraballo, then a student at Northeastern University. Caraballo regularly attended City Life Vida Urbana meetings, where tenants and homeowners described issues of affordability, gentrification, foreclosure and evictions. Caraballo took twelve photographs that were representative of East Boston, conducted research about Latinx wealth and housing issues, and delivered postcards around the neighborhood. Caraballo hand delivered postcards himself, enlisted the help of individuals attending City Life meetings, and also worked with youth from Zumix, a youth media-making organization. The postcards were invitations to attend City Life Vida Urbana meetings.⁵

City Life Vida Urbana is a community based nonprofit organization that focuses on keeping residents in their homes. City Life hosts weekly meetings where attendees are invited to share stories related to foreclosure, eviction or unscrupulous practices by landlords. They have access to legal services to students through Harvard's Legal Aid, Greater Boston Legal Aid and Massachusetts Legal Aid programs

¹ Note: As the focus of my case is the Nuestra Casa project, I provide a detailed account of this effort. However, because the project relied on City Life Vida Urbana as a community resource, I also include information on the organization's operations and programs as they relate to Nuestra Casa, though I do not cover the entire history/programmatic scope of the whole organization.

² City Life Vida Urbana (n.d.). "Our History." Accessed 2 November 2018 at http://www.clvu.org/our_history

³ Personal Communication with Jorge Caraballo (10/24/18).

⁴ City Life Vida Urbana (n.d.). "Mission and Vision." Accessed 2 November 2018 at http://www.clvu.org/mission_vision

⁵ Nieman Lab (2017). "How One Journalists Utilized Postcards to Report on Gentrification in Boston." Accessed 30 October 2018 at <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/06/how-one-journalist-used-postcards-to-report-on-gentrification-in-boston/>

in these meetings, while organizers provide education and speeches about systemic roots of the housing crisis, addressed specifically to attendees who have received eviction or foreclosure notices.⁶ City Life also holds public demonstrations (the “sword” tactic) as part of its organizing strategy, conducts marches, and vigils to get the attention of the community and to put public pressure on banks and landlords that may be evicting tenants. This coupled with its legal defense and counseling services (the “shield” tactic) makes for a comprehensive strategy to protect tenants and homeowners facing foreclosure.⁷

Size of Community: East Boston has 45,000 residents; Caraballo focused on Latinx households, which constitute 58 percent of the population.⁸ City Life Vida Urbana serves households all throughout the Greater Boston area, but focuses on East Boston and Jamaica Plain, where the organization hosts its weekly meetings.

Origins, Organization, and Operation

In Spring of 2017, Jorge Caraballo was a journalism student of Columbian origin, living in East Boston. He regularly attended City Life Vida Urbana meetings, where he was able to hear the stories and concerns of people living in the community. At MIT, he took a photography class with Lara Baladi, who worked with him to develop an idea about postcard journalism. Caraballo proposed distributing postcards to the community to support City Life, and to provide the community a greater awareness of issues surrounding gentrification as it relates to Latinx identity. Having proposed this idea at a City Life meeting, many individuals attending were in support of the project and volunteered to help distribute them. Caraballo took photographs and data from households that he met through City Life; data collection was informal, and involved simply speaking to individuals. Caraballo had dinner with the families of individuals he met, took portraits and gained a greater sense of the housing crisis. Caraballo received a small grant from Northeastern University to print and distribute 5,000 postcards. Caraballo distributed the postcards around East Boston, stopping to speak with individuals on the street, and also delivering the postcards by mail to apartments and households with Hispanic names printed on mailboxes. He enlisted the help of Zumix, a youth media organization to help with distribution. The students later produced a story on the postcard project. In addition to the physical object, Caraballo also created a Facebook group through the effort (www.facebook.com/EastBostonNuestraCasa). Caraballo found City Life to be integral to his project, explaining “They were crucial for the success of the project. They opened me their doors, accepted me in the community meetings and gave me time during those events to tell neighbors what I wanted to do. If it wasn’t for them, the trust-building stage of the process would have been much longer and harder. Somehow they endorsed me and the project in front of the

⁶ Mehta, Karuna (2011). “A New Dream: Redefining Home Ownership Through the Post Eviction Foreclosure Campaign.” Master’s Thesis submitted to MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Accessed 2 November 2018 at <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/99094>

⁷ Bill Moyers (2009). A Conversation with Steve Meacham of City Life Vida Urbana. Accessed 1 November 2018 at <https://billmoyers.com/content/steve-meacham-and-city-lifevida-urbana/>

⁸ Boston Planning and Development Agency (2017). “East Boston.” Accessed 1 November 2018 at <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/28c2e99c-af11-47e0-b65e-b609fbd44bd>

residents and that made everything smoother. They were the best allies and I hope this work has been valuable for their mission.”⁹

City Life Vida Urbana began organizing in neighborhoods in Boston that were experiencing severe disinvestment in the 1970s. Rather than writing up the origins of the organization, I focus my case on City Life’s Post Foreclosure Eviction Defense campaign and anti-displacement work which occurred beginning in the aughts through today. In the 1990s, City Life had worked to create tenant organizations focused on collective bargaining for rents, similar to labor collective bargaining for wages. Once the foreclosure crisis occurred, a tenant leader from these efforts came to a City Life meeting, noting that he had received notice from a bank that the building that he was renting in had been foreclosed, and he as a tenant was no longer allowed to stay. As a result, City Life launched its Post Foreclosure Eviction Defense Campaign. City Life reinvigorated the idea of tenant bargaining as a principle, focusing on keeping tenants and homeowners in their home. The campaign built on a wide network and strong sense of community. The organizing backgrounds and principles of staff members and community members that were already involved with City Life were also crucial. External partners include Harvard Legal Aid, as well as Greater Boston Legal Aid and Massachusetts Legal Aid. Other organizations that are involved in City Life’s marches, vigils, policy advocacy and solution-creation efforts are Boston’s Right to the City Chapter, Boston Community Capital (through Stabilizing Urban Neighborhoods initiative), the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, the Coalition of Occupied Homes in Foreclosure and the Codman Square CDC. While not all of these organizations contributed directly to the immediate services City Life provided, many provide alternative models and solutions to the housing crisis, for both tenants and homeowners. For example, through negotiation, legal action and City Life support, Boston Community Capital was able to purchase units that had been foreclosed upon and allow tenants and homeowners to stay living in them.¹⁰

City Life has around 15 staff members, and a board of directors, including several veteran organizers, as well as previous community members that had come to City Life for help. City Life also has members that pay dues at a sliding scale. Members regularly attend meetings, marches, vigils and rallies; they also help organizers with City Life canvas neighborhoods, and occasionally also speak at events.^{11,12}

⁹ Personal Communication with Jorge Caraballo (10/24/18).

¹⁰ Mehta, Karuna (2011). “A New Dream: Redefining Home Ownership Through the Post Eviction Foreclosure Campaign.” Master’s Thesis submitted to MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Accessed 2 November 2018 at <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/99094>

¹¹ City Life Vida Urbana (n.d.) “Staff.” Accessed 2 November 2018 at <http://www.clvu.org/staff>

¹² Goldenberg, Alex (2010). “The Structure that Builds the Movement.” Master’s Thesis submitted to MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning Accessed 2 November 2018 at <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/59717>

Programs

Nuestra Casa Program:

Caraballo's postcard project included data on the Boston housing market, and the extent of the gentrification crisis. The handwritten component of the postcard was different for each of the twelve postcards, and was addressed in the language that uses the encompassing "nosotros" or "we." The postcards also featured images of individuals in the community he had photographed, scenes depicting life in East Boston.¹³

¹³ Figures from Caraballo, Jorge (2017). "What is Postcard Journalism?" Accessed 1 November 2018 at <https://medium.com/@jorgecaraballo/what-is-postcard-journalism-50901a649ee3>

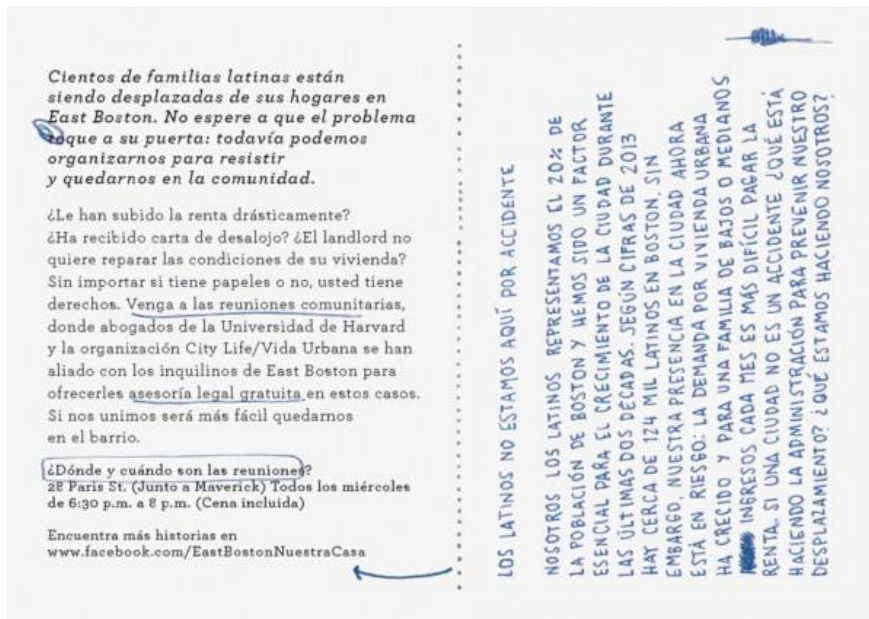
Figure 1: Sample Postcard Face “A City is Not An Accident” & Written Text



East Boston, Nuestra Casa

FOTO: JORGE CARABALLO C.

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Printed Text, Written on Postcard (same for each postcard):

“Hundreds of Latin families are being displaced from their homes in East Boston. Do not wait until problems knock on your door: all of us must organize to resist and stay in the community.”

Saritha Ramakrishna
Ecological Urbanism
2 November 2018

“Have they raised rents drastically? Have you received a letter of eviction? Does the landlord not want to repair living conditions? It’s not important whether you have papers or not, you have rights. Come to community meetings where lawyers from Harvard University and the organization City Life/Vida Urbana have allied with the tenants of East Boston to offer free legal assistance in these cases. If we unite, it will be easier for us to stay in the neighborhood.

Where and when are the meetings?

Find more stories at www.facebook.com/EastBostonNuestraCasa”

Handwritten Text, Written on Postcard (different for each postcard):

“Latinos are not here by accident. We Latinos represent 20% of the population of Boston. We have been essential to the development of the city in the past two decades. Before 2013, there were 124,000 Latinos in Boston. Our presence in the city now at risk: the demand for urban living has created that risk and for a family of low or median means, every month becomes more difficult to pay the rent. If a city is no accident, what should the administration do to prevent our displacement? What should we do?”

Figure 2: Sample Postcard Face “Our Home” & Written Text



Cientos de familias latinas están siendo desplazadas de sus hogares en East Boston. No espere a que el problema toque a su puerta: todavía podemos organizarnos para resistir y quedarnos en la comunidad.

¿Le han subido la renta drásticamente?
¿Ha recibido carta de desalojo? ¿El landlord no quiere reparar las condiciones de su vivienda?
Sin importar si tiene papeles o no, usted tiene derechos. Venga a las reuniones comunitarias, donde abogados de la Universidad de Harvard y la organización City Life/Vida Urbana se han aliado con los inquilinos de East Boston para ofrecerles asesoría legal gratuita en estos casos. Si nos unimos será más fácil quedarnos en el barrio.

¿Dónde y cuándo son las reuniones?
28 Paris St. (Junto a Maverick) Todos los miércoles de 6:30 p.m. a 8 p.m. (Cena incluida)

Encuentra más historias en
www.facebook.com/EastBostonNuestraCasa

East Boston: Nuestra Casa

A comienzos de los noventa miles de inmigrantes latinos empezaron a establecerse en East Boston. De acuerdo con cifras de 2013, más de 44 mil personas habitan el barrio y el 57% son latinas. Maverick Square, el centro de nuestra comunidad, está rodeado de cafés, panaderías y carnicerías colombianas, de tiendas brasileñas, de restaurantes mexicanos y salvadoreños. Sin embargo, todo puede cambiar pronto: las rentas no dejan de subir y, si no hacemos algo, en pocos años la comunidad latina podría ser solo un recuerdo.

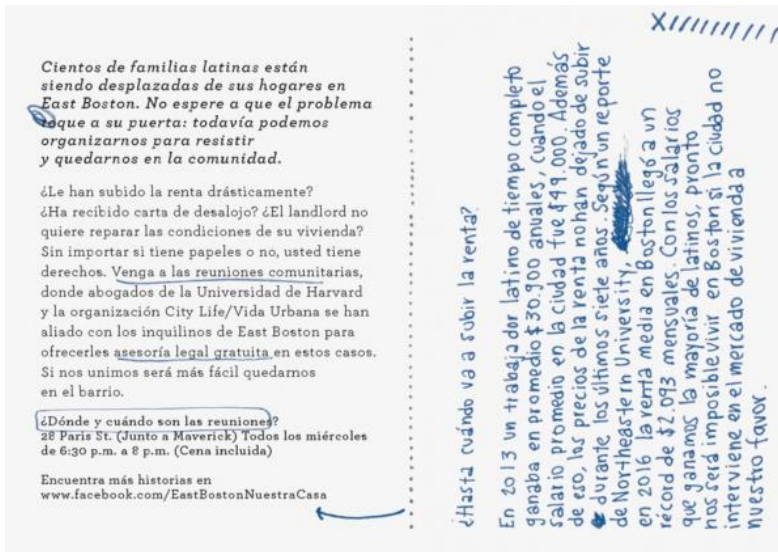
Saritha Ramakrishna
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Handwritten Text, Written on Postcard (different for each postcard):

East Boston: Our Home

“Beginning in the 1990s, thousands of Latino immigrants began to settle in East Boston. According to 2013 figures, more than 44,000 people live in the neighborhood and 57% of them are Latinos. Maverick Square, the center of our community, is surrounded by Columbian cafes, bakers and butcher shops, Brazilian stores, Mexican and Salvadoran restaurants. But nevertheless, all of this can change soon: if the rents do not stop climbing soon, there will be nothing we can do. In a few years, there will be no one that will remember this Latino community.”

Figure 3: Sample Postcard Face “Rising Rents” & Written Text



Handwritten Text on Postcard (different for every postcard)

“Until when will the rents rise?”

In 2013 a working Latino received on average \$30,900 annually when the average salary in the city was \$39,000. With this, the cost of rent has not stopped rising during the last seven years. According to a report by Northeastern University, in 2016 the median rent in Boston reached a record \$2,093 per month. With the salaries that the majority of Latinos receive, it will be impossible to live in Boston if the city does not intervene in the housing market in our favor.”

City Life Vida Urbana Programs

City Life's main program of interest are its anti-displacement organizing efforts, and the Post Foreclosure Eviction Defense Campaign. Open community meetings for these programs became a space where tenants and homeowners could tell their stories. Organizers educate tenants and homeowners on their rights, while also providing new members a background on the systemic causes of displacement or foreclosure. An important theme of the meetings is welcoming new individuals who may be scared or overwhelmed by the possibility of being unable to stay in their apartment unit or home.¹⁴

City Life also partners with organized tenants and homeowners in vigils and protests, in order to shame banks or landlords into letting individuals stay in their units.¹⁵ These vigils are publicized through social media. Marches and community demonstrations are a part of City Life's operations and programs, and establish City Life's presence in neighborhoods. For example, on Halloween night this year, City Life organized a Halloween march, encouraging attendees to dress as real estate speculators, "the scariest costume of them all."¹⁶ The march drew a crowd and gave City Life the opportunity to walk through the neighborhoods they want to serve and create something of a spectacle. City Life members also educated attendees about housing rights, speculation and institutional injustices through speeches at the Halloween march. City Life also holds vigils outside apartment units where tenants are set to be evicted, often on the night or day that they are supposed to leave the unit. Finally, City Life is involved in policy advocacy, currently building a coalition of housing rights organizations to draft a "People's Plan" for housing in the Greater Boston area.

¹⁴ Goldenberg, Alex (2010). "The Structure that Builds the Movement." Master's Thesis submitted to MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning Accessed 2 November 2018 at <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/59717>

¹⁵ For example, City Life Vida Urbana's rally outside of an art space to help prevent displacement. Details at WBUR (2018). "Concern Over Displacement Grows As Artists Are Evicted From Piano Craft Guild Studios." Accessed 30 October 2018 at <http://www.wbur.org/artery/2018/10/26/piano-craft-guild-studios-protest>. Protests are also prolific on City Life's social media pages.

¹⁶ Facebook Event by City Life Vida Urbana.

Figure 4: Photographs from City Life Vida Urbana Marches¹⁷



¹⁷ Images are via clvu.org

Financing and Resources: Caraballo spent \$500 on postcards. He took the photos himself, and had a friend assist him with the design of the postcards. Volunteers assisted him with distribution. No other resources were necessary to complete the project.¹⁸

City Life's entire budget is around \$1,000,000 to support its activities and staff throughout Greater Boston; the majority comes from private foundations and grants, though a significant amount comes from individual donations and in-kind donations. A small percentage comes from member fees. Around half a million directly goes to anti-displacement and foreclosure defense programs.¹⁹

Assessment

Caraballo's project was successful at getting the word out about City Life's meetings while educating people about their options in the case of eviction. Caraballo described that many of the Spanish speaking households that he spoke to did not know about the resources that were available. One man he spoke to noted that had he known about these resources, he would have stayed and fought for the apartment where he was living. In addition. According to Caraballo: "We knew that the housing crisis was affecting many of the neighbors, but we discover[ed] that the scale of the problem was much larger than what we had thought. Every day we went out to distribute postcards, we met Latinas and Latinos who had just been pushed out of their homes or had received an eviction letter. We collected many testimonies of people that were facing this problem by themselves, ignoring their rights as tenants and the possibility to be assisted by professionals."²⁰

Though perhaps not a failure (and better characterized as a limitation) is that Caraballo's efforts did not go beyond the length of a semester project. Once the 5,000 postcards were distributed, Caraballo did not continue his work in East Boston. The Facebook page that he set up is utilized by individuals in East Boston, and is a private group for sharing stories.²¹

City Life has been successful on a variety of fronts. They have been successful at building community leadership through their programs. They have also helped legal aid workers develop a new kind of lawyering, which focuses on the community as a whole as opposed to individual cases. This concept has been scaled and written about in other contexts.²² Policy has been passed as a result of City Life's activism, and coalitions built with the help of other housing rights organizations. In terms of their limitations, while City Life has been successful on a variety of fronts, they are a grassroots organization whose victories are often on a case by case basis, within the current housing market. They are not a community land trust or affordable housing developer, and cannot enact systemic change beyond coalition building and some policy advocacy.

¹⁸ Personal Communication with Jorge Caraballo (10/25/18)

¹⁹ City Life Vida Urbana. "The Giving Common Profile." Accessed 30 October 2018 at <https://givingcommon.org/profile/1076792/city-lifevida-urbana-urban-revival-inc/>

²⁰ Personal Communication with Jorge Caraballo (10/24/18).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mehta, Karuna (2011). "A New Dream: Redefining Home Ownership Through the Post Eviction Foreclosure Campaign." Master's Thesis submitted to MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. Accessed 2 November 2018 at <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/99094>

Lessons for West Philadelphia

- A clear and simple invitation that is based in the imagery of the community may be a helpful first step. Caraballo's project was demonstrative of this, and allowed the population he targeted to relate each other via cultural identity, and the issue of housing insecurity. Homeowners that feel overwhelmed by the problem may be more inclined to act if provided a personalized invitation.
- Caraballo's postcards were produced with community members, and also handed out by community members and young people from the area. Ideally, an invitation to the community should be designed and distributed by people who know the area and have some familiarity with residents.
- It is important to not only provide resources for people at a convening, but also to provide people with an understanding of the systemic and historic processes that produced the housing problem they are facing. This allows tenants or homeowners a sense that the eviction or foreclosure they are facing is not their fault, and motivates people to begin to take action. Messaging that reinforces that the community is all in the fight together, in addition to providing individual help and counsel is also crucial to organizing individual tenants and homeowners. This is reflected in both Caraballo's project, as well as City Life's meetings.
- To the two points above, the leadership development that City Life focuses on and has been successful at achieving seems to be particularly important. Events that convene residents at Monumental or elsewhere should not just focus on residents passively absorbing information about housing rights, but also find ways for them to be involved with educating others, canvassing, or organizing in whatever capacity that they are able. What leadership opportunities can be built into a "clinic" type structure? Answering this question feels integral to programmatic design. This could also be helpful in the drafting of any policy or recommendation going forward.
- City Life canvassers, protesters and marchers have a presence in the streets. The same is true of Caraballo. Having a physical presence in the neighborhood ensures that residents going through foreclosure or eviction are aware of the resources.
- City Life's work during years following the recession helped establish a new framework for legal aid. Prior to City Life's action following the foreclosure crisis, legal aid was administered on an individual basis.
 - In the case of Monumental, it might be important to research legal aid or housing counseling organizations that exist but are not thinking on the scale of the community, and more on the scale of individual cases. Utilizing this "community lawyering" or "community aid" model in West Philadelphia with the Baptist church network as the convening center may be a way that existing resources can be better deployed to tackle a neighborhood-level problem.

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