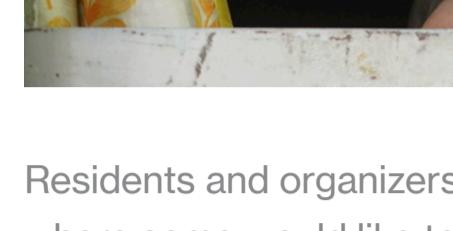


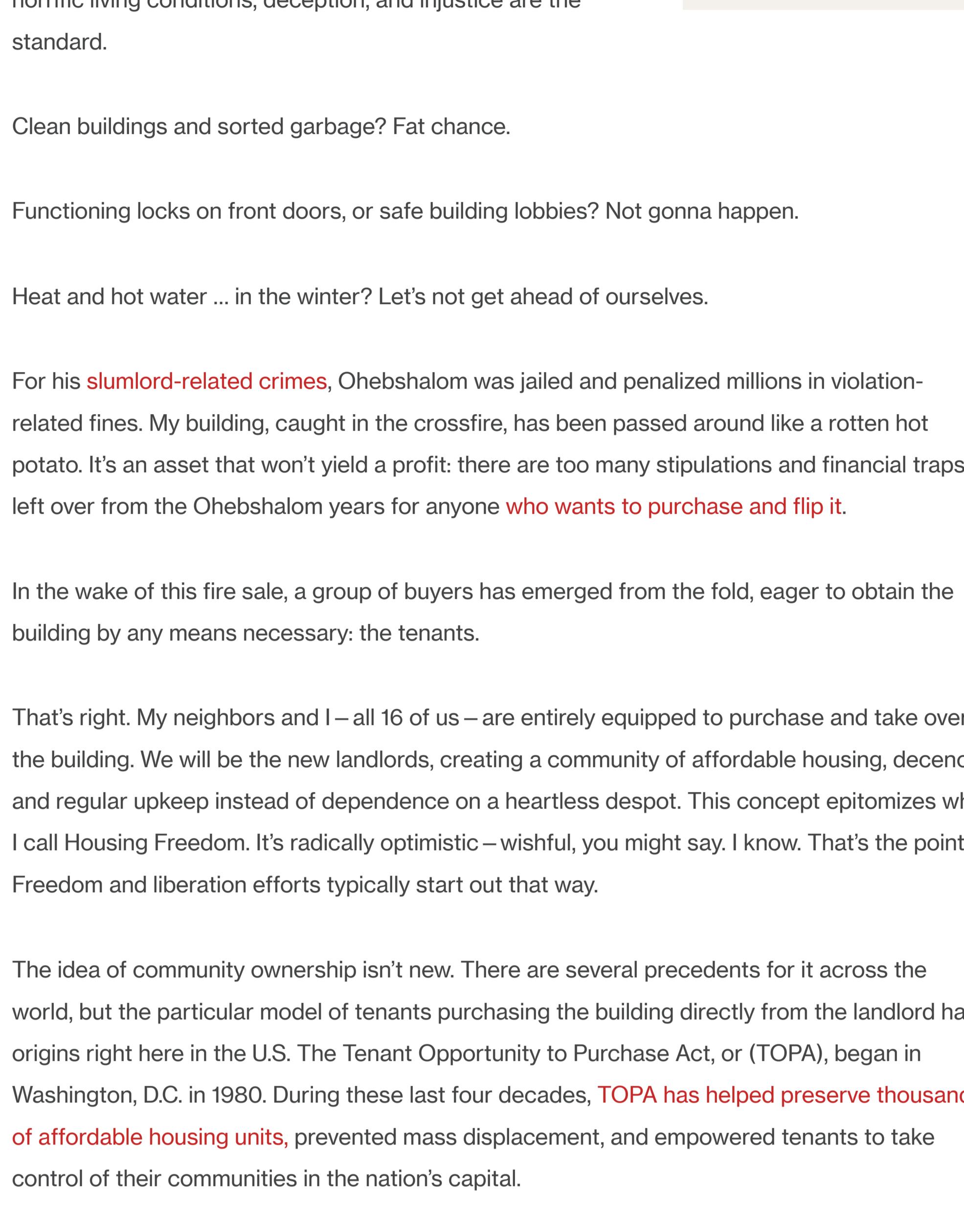
## Opinion: Helping NYC Tenants Take Over Their Buildings



BY RED YOUNG MARCH 19, 2025 12 MIN



*"What if, instead of living under the boot of absentee landlords and corporate ownership, tenants had the right to control their own buildings and destinies? What if our rent went directly toward maintaining our homes instead of lining pockets?"*



Residents and organizers at a building on West 170th Street owned by "worst landlord" Daniel Ohebshalom in June, where some would like to see ownership of the building transferred to its tenants. (Gerardo Romo/NYC Council)

I was born and raised in a red-brick tenement in Hell's Kitchen. My building, 438, is my heart and soul. My mother has been living in it for over 30 years.

During the same time, our living has been dominated by an abusive and neglectful landlord, Daniel Ohebshalom. Ask any tenants under his ownership: suffering is constant, and horrific living conditions, deception, and injustice are the standard.

Clean buildings and sorted garbage? Fat chance.

Functioning locks on front doors, or safe building lobbies? Not gonna happen.

Heat and hot water ... in the winter? Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

For his **slumlord-related crimes**, Ohebshalom was jailed and penalized millions in violation-related fines. My building, caught in the crossfire, has been passed around like a rotten hot potato. It's an asset that won't yield a profit: there are too many stipulations and financial traps left over from the Ohebshalom years for anyone **who wants to purchase and flip it**.

In the wake of this fire sale, a group of buyers has emerged from the fold, eager to obtain the building by any means necessary: the tenants.

That's right. My neighbors and I – all 16 of us – are entirely equipped to purchase and take over the building. We will be the new landlords, creating a community of affordable housing, decency, and regular upkeep instead of dependence on a heartless despot. This concept epitomizes what I call Housing Freedom. It's radically optimistic – wishful, you might say. I know. That's the point. Freedom and liberation efforts typically start out that way.

The idea of community ownership isn't new. There are several precedents for it across the world, but the particular model of tenants purchasing the building directly from the landlord has origins right here in the U.S. The Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act, or (TOPA), began in Washington, D.C. in 1980. During these last four decades, **TOPA has helped preserve thousands of affordable housing units**, prevented mass displacement, and empowered tenants to take control of their communities in the nation's capital.

How TOPA Works in D.C.:

1. Landlords must notify tenants before selling a rental building.
2. Tenants can either buy the property directly or assign their purchase rights to a nonprofit or developer committed to affordability.
3. Many tenants form cooperatives or partner with Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to maintain long-term affordability.
4. The city provides funding and support to help tenants secure financing.

In New York, we aim to adopt a **similar version of TOPA**, which could empower tenants to fight back against landlord abuse, speculation, and displacement. It's a solution to a housing crisis that could use any help it can get, with private equity and The Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) dominating housing and inflating prices across the state.

TOPA's success in D.C. poses a model of how to shift power away from these forces to the hands of tenants, granting them control over their housing conditions. A New York where New Yorkers have the final say as to how they live – I'm sure we all like the sound of that.

A recent poll by the Community Service Society found that **82 percent of New Yorkers support the TOPA**. On both sides of the aisle, New Yorkers value home ownership and prefer to live by their own rules. You can't tell us what to do elsewhere – why should that be any different in our homes?

The grave reality is that New York City's character and integrity have become victim to an unstoppable force: excess and greed. But just as you've heard in every tale of perseverance across time, the power of community resilience is just as immovable. TOPA could serve as a powerful intervention to this brutal occupation.

For us tenants at 438, many of whom have lived here for decades, homeownership translates to happiness and well-being. They tell us that's the American Dream, after all. But as New Yorkers, our vision of home looks a little different than white picket fences and two cars in the driveway. For us, home is a five-story walk-up with laundry waving about the fire escapes.

Nearly half of New York City's rentals – about 1 million apartments – **are rent-stabilized**, but too many are controlled by landlords like ours who let them rot, a strategy known as warehousing, which means there is an abundance of affordable housing waiting to be unlocked by TOPA.

**Why spend billions on new developments** when we have vacant apartments next door? Much like hunger and homelessness, housing has clear solutions that already exist in current infrastructure. We must simply make a compelling appeal for the funding.

In late February, I stated my case. In the gloomy state capital of Albany, I testified my story, and shared dreams of Housing Freedom for New York. I asked that the state grant \$250 million to TOPA, funds that would empower tenants like us to purchase and own our homes, and create thousands of affordable housing units in the process. Several of the lawmakers listened with support and encouragement. Others questioned whether tenants like myself were truly ready to tackle the responsibility of ownership.

"How would you source funds and expertise to manage the building?" One asked me off the bat. "Is your building organized enough to take this on?" Was another common question.

Since 2020, I told them, our building has largely been abandoned by ownership. It's been years of managing the building ourselves, including boiler maintenance, upkeep and several issues our landlord evades. The responsibilities of ownership are already ours. We've had no choice but to take care of ourselves. In slightly more formal terms, I told the Senate Housing Committee chair that we've been ready for the takeover.

Under TOPA, a building like ours wouldn't have to operate entirely alone. We could partner with a Community Land Trust, a kind of nonprofit that empowers tenants to buy homes, and receive funding to manage and upkeep them.

This is a vision I have for the future of housing in New York. Imagine a city where people come first, and profits serve the community.

What if, instead of living under the boot of absentee landlords and corporate ownership, tenants had the right to control their own buildings and destinies? What if our rent went directly toward maintaining our homes instead of lining pockets? TOPA makes this vision a reality. It gives tenants a fighting chance to reclaim our homes, protect our neighbors, and build communities that are self-sustaining and just. Really, it just makes sense. Really, it just makes sense.

The stakes have never been higher for us to take action. **Over 300,000 New Yorkers** are estimated to be homeless and countless more teeter on the edge of displacement. There is no time to wait for a hero. We cannot afford the continued erosion of our communities by real estate bodies and private equity firms who see our homes as investments rather than lifelines. They don't care about cherished New York buildings – we do. They are our homes, and with bold, arrogant, New Yorker attitudes, we are ready to take over right now. Who can stop us?

The stark realities of housing insecurity, corporate negligence, and tenant disenfranchisement defined my childhood. It is a brutal cycle, one that will repeat if left unchecked – yet we stand here on the edge of a new frontier. In spite of division and disparity across the land, against the odds of uncertainty and desperation, we have a chance to build a better future. The frontier ahead lies with opportunities and perils – it can forge us together – the strength of indomitable human spirit and New York grit between us.

By passing TOPA, we take the leap toward a New York where tenants have real power and real security. A leap toward Housing Freedom.

So I invite you to stand with us and take action toward making community ownership a reality. Join us on March 29 at 8:30 AM at 438 West 45th St. at noon to rally for TOPA and fight for a future of Housing Freedom.

Our building can't wait. New Yorkers can't wait, and our freedom can't wait.

**Red Young** is a Hell's Kitchen native, journalist, and founder of Down to Earth, leading the charge for community-owned housing.

\*A previous version of this post included the wrong date for the TOPA support rally, it is March 29, 2025.

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WRITTEN BY

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