

No Rent, No Government

Stories of Squatting

From [Do or Die](#) Issue 8. (1999) In the paper edition, this article appears on page(s) 133-136.

Ever since property was established, vast numbers of people have ended up without a fair share and often, without a home. And ever since, vast numbers of people have discovered empty properties, be it land, huts, houses or castles, and decided to settle there, even if obviously not invited to. That's what squatting basically is - using a disused space. Most visibly in this century, squatting has been the basis of social movements. Individuals and groups have turned squatting into a political statement, engaged collectively in struggles against landlords, councils and the state, and have consciously created autonomous zones and defended them.

Imagine England after the Second World War - total devastation, food shortages and lots of weary disillusioned foot soldiers returning to this after years of bombings and blackouts. Many were trying to start families but there was a massive housing shortage. Seeing landlords keeping properties unoccupied, many decided to squat, often with the help of 'Vigilante' self-help groups on the south coast and in the large cities - the idea of direct action for homes began to spread.

In 1946, when homelessness was at unprecedented heights in the UK, a family moved into the officers' mess of an unoccupied army camp near Scunthorpe. The news got round quickly and other families joined, and more and more camps were taken over - in the course of a few months, 45,000 people were thought to be living at 1,000 sites. The camps were large and makeshift but the spirit of DIY took hold. The News Chronicle (20/8/46) quoted a squatter as saying: "Only a few days passed before the chaos started to sort itself out. Subcommittees were established for health, social activities, construction work and camp amenities. A communal kitchen is operating and there is a clinic where the services of a local health visitor are available. Plans are now being considered for a co-op shop. There is an almost palpable feeling of freedom, of having emerged into wider life than had ever been thought possible."

Obviously, the camps were harassed by local authorities, but there was often huge local support, flocking to defend the squats, and the government didn't really know how to handle the situation. They finally opted to leave the families, passing management over to the local councils who would collect rent and rates.

The squatting continued though, with high profile mass takeovers of luxury flats and empty hotels in London to protest against housing policies. Organised workers went on strike in support of the occupations. But this movement quickly lost its basis, through a vicious media campaign and the alienation and various fuckups caused by Communist Party involvement, so the squatters retreated.

Squatting remained popular in the UK - in 1975, for example, 200-300 houses were squatted in Bristol, 150 in Brighton, 130 in Manchester and 100 in Leicester, to name but a few towns. A 1977 survey revealed 1,850 squats in London (according to *Squatting: the Real Story*, p.231).

[IMAGE] Squatted army huts at Stratford, 1946

Amsterdam and Berlin seem to have been very cool places to be, too. In 1980, authorities estimated that there were 6,000-7,000 squats in Amsterdam alone. There was also a time in Kreuzberg, a poor Berlin district, when houses were squatted at a rate of one a day.

You'd find squat bars, workshops, women-only squats, co-op stores, a city farm, DIY healthcentres, creches and alternative schools, infocentres, printshops, pirate radio stations, cafes, advice drop-ins, even a cinema (in Berlin) - a functioning infrastructure for the various neighbourhoods that developed. This proved useful for summoning the crowds to defend the autonomous zones. If word got round that a large squat was threatened with eviction, everyone would come. The crowd unleashed its uncontrollable dynamic and you can feel, reading the accounts, the exhilaration of being able to fight off scores of riot police or the victory of re-squatting a building. Tactics were focused around these large numbers. Barricades were erected in the streets (strategically placed or spontaneous), houses were fortified with everything from welded steel sheets and barbed wire to anti-tear gas curtains, ammunition was stockpiled, and weak points in the police presence attacked, e.g. their vehicles.

[IMAGE] Converted skips full of armed cops are lowered on to the roofs in Amsterdam, 1980.

Christiania was the name given to a 54-acre squat near the centre of Copenhagen, Denmark. It used to be a naval barracks until abandoned in 1970, and was soon taken over by squatters. The area includes large barrack blocks and halls, small huts, a beautiful lake, and trees and grass were planted. A long term autonomous zone, it obviously faced internal disappointments and difficulties. In his autobiography *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, the anarchist Albert Meltzer dismissed it as "...a dropout's utopia. They made and sold handicrafts, lived and worked communally and so long as they stayed within bounds could smoke pot freely. Big deal." (p.346). But the defence plan the squatters devised when facing eviction in 1976 was even described by a former chief of the NATO Defence College in Rome as sound, extraordinarily intelligent and strategically well-thought through. It involved sirens and a sophisticated telephone network alarming people, physically blockading Copenhagen's bridges, railtracks and airport runways, bonfires in the streets, traffic disruption, pirate radio interference with local stations, and taxis being asked to converge on Christiania. Considering that a demonstration in support of the squatters had drawn 30,000 people, it certainly seemed feasible at least in numbers. The government backed down before this was tried, though, and allowed Christiania to remain.

[IMAGE] No. 144 Piccadilly is evicted after much 'anti dirty squatters' media hype in London, 1969

As to tactics in Holland, the book *Cracking the Movement* by Adilkno points out, "The squatters discovered the three central principles of fortification formulated by Marshal Vauban at the end of the 17th century and put them into practice. Vauban proposed that defence should take place on a number of lines placed behind the other; that the particular characteristics of the place should be employed in entrenchment and the eventuality of sorties (counterattacks); and that an imbalance should be created between entrance and exit - it must be difficult to get in and easy to get out." (p.49) The strategies of offensive resistance were also carried into campaigns against various unwanted neighbourhood developments. Buildings were squatted and often successfully defended on the route of proposed roads, hotels and offices which would demolish low-cost housing. In both Holland and Germany, actions were carried out constantly, often in retaliation, e.g. after most of the frequent raids on Berlin squats, some bank window or the council buildings would be trashed.

The squatters were organising themselves, for example in the SOK, the Amsterdam squatters council, or through the Berlin weekly newsletter BesetzerPost which had a print-run of 5,000.

Squatting wasn't just about housing, it was about making your life part of a wider political struggle. Solidarity was strong within what could be called an anticapitalist movement. On the announcement of the death of an ex-Red Army Faction member Sigmund Depus in 1980, the Berlin squat bars emptied into the streets. This ended with 80% of the windows on the two mile long consumer shrine, the Kudamm, being smashed. And during the British miners strike in 1984, the Amsterdam support committee raised money and organised holidays for miners' children from Derbyshire. "Some of them are sailing, others are at the anarchist camp in Appelscha, and others live at squats with Dutch families for a week." (Black Flag, Autumn 1984, p.5) But then again, squatting wasn't confined to anarchists - a large tower block was squatted by a few hundred fascists in the early '90s in Berlin!

Movements tend to reach a peak and then ebb. The reasons for this are always varied and difficult to pinpoint. The activities of the squatters obviously threatened the power of property speculators, developers and local councils. Repression and brute force discouraged a few squatters, but strengthened the determination of others. Many squats were offered negotiations for legalisation by the respective town councils. This managed to divide the movement into those willing to negotiate and those who weren't. It provoked discussions about radicalness and quashed joint action. An analysis in Squatting in West Berlin points out that, to a certain extent, both points of view have been verified by events. Only the legalised houses were able to hold on to their free space, but the confrontational movement was killed. The media did its best to influence the course of things - misrepresenting and dividing the squatters into violent thugs and peaceful young people.

[IMAGE] Barricades cleared after Dutch eviction, 1980

Especially in the Netherlands, what had once been a broad-based spontaneous movement grew into an increasingly fragmented scene. People knew each other well, hung out together, which is nice but as so often happens this turned into an inward-looking subculture - not welcoming to the inexperienced newcomer. Jargon and shared views or petty arguments developed which excluded outsiders.

These are only a few examples. The various squatting movements involved tens of thousands of people over the years. They inspired self-organisation and diverse uses of space, the occupation of empty houses as protest against housing shortages or as resistance to unwanted urban developments, and the employment of different tactics to defend the space, from barricading and sitting on roofs, stocking up on ammunition and streetfighting, to drumming up local support. It was the networking and solidarity between the squatters as well as their determination that made all this possible.

(BOX) Practical Squatting

In England and Wales, squatting is not a crime. Basically, if you can get into a building without causing any obvious criminal damage and secure it, it's legally your home. You have the right to postal delivery, services like electricity and gas, rubbish collection and privacy. It's up to the owners to obtain a possession order and only then can you be evicted. Even the infamous Criminal Justice Act of 1994

did not render squatting illegal. The only difference is that now fast track evictions are possible under specific circumstances - if there's someone unable to move in because you're there, an Interim Possession Order (IPO) is issued.

1) Finding a place and getting in:

Have a stroll round the area you'd like to live in and find an empty house (there are always loads). Make sure it's empty! Avoid the obviously totally trashed places unless you like living without water or electricity. Check out possible entrances - is that a wooden door that would be easy to crowbar round the back, or are there only huge fuckoff firedoors? Is that door only locked with a Yale you could slip? What about the windows - could you slip the latches with a blunt flat knife? Even if the windows are boarded up, they usually don't bother with first floor windows so they're do-able with a ladder. When you're going out to crack a squat, go with a couple of mates. It doesn't have to be in the dark of night when neighbours are actually more easily alerted. Go only with the necessary equipment, well concealed, and try not to look too dodgy as the police could stop you. You could get done on suspicion of going equipped for breaking and entering.

2) Securing:

Once you're in, it's best to change the locks as soon as possible - chisel the old ones out and replace with a new one of similar size. The important thing is to make sure the owner can't just walk in and thus repossess the building, so a few bolts could do the job at first, or even just latching the Yale lock if there's one. You can put up a Legal Warning based on Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act 1977, which can be helpful for dealing with the police or owners.

3) Dealing with the police/owners:

The police have no legal right to enter a squat unless they have a warrant. They can't really do much to you unless they randomly decide you're very bad which is when they'll point out some spurious or possibly blatant criminal damage or whatever and try to arrest you. However, this doesn't happen often. Be firm but polite and explain through the letter box or window that you're squatting, hand them a legal warning and point out that the owner must go through the legal proceedings to evict you. The latter also applies to dealing with the owner.

4) Making it home:

Move your stuff in. Don't leave the building unattended especially if haven't had a police/owner visit yet. Register gas and/or electricity (important if you don't want to be arrested on grounds of 'stealing electricity'). Turn on the water. Clean up. Try to get the neighbours on your side by going round, being generally pleasant and explaining your situation.

5) Legal proceedings:

If the owner's on the case s/he will take you to Court, i.e. a Court Order will be delivered to your door. Get in touch with the ASS (see 'Further Advice') who can help you decide if you have a case in Court or if there's no use going. If the Court grants the owner a possession order, the bailiffs will put it on their waiting list. You will get a notice for when they're coming, or you can ring up the Sheriff's Office and find out. Unless you desire the confrontation, move out and find another squat. All this should take anything upwards of 3-4 weeks.

[IMAGE] ammunition

Further Advice:

These are just the basics - everything you need to know can be found in the indispensable Squatters Handbook, available for £1 (*now £2 inc P&P*) from the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS). The ASS have gained experience over the last 20 years. (*now 30!-ed.*) They're the ones who'll decipher the legal terms on the Court papers for you and guide you through Court and squatting in general.

Advisory Service for Squatters

2 St Paul's Road

London

N1 2QN

Tel: 01207 359 8814

Do or Die DTP/web team: doordtp@yahoo.co.uk