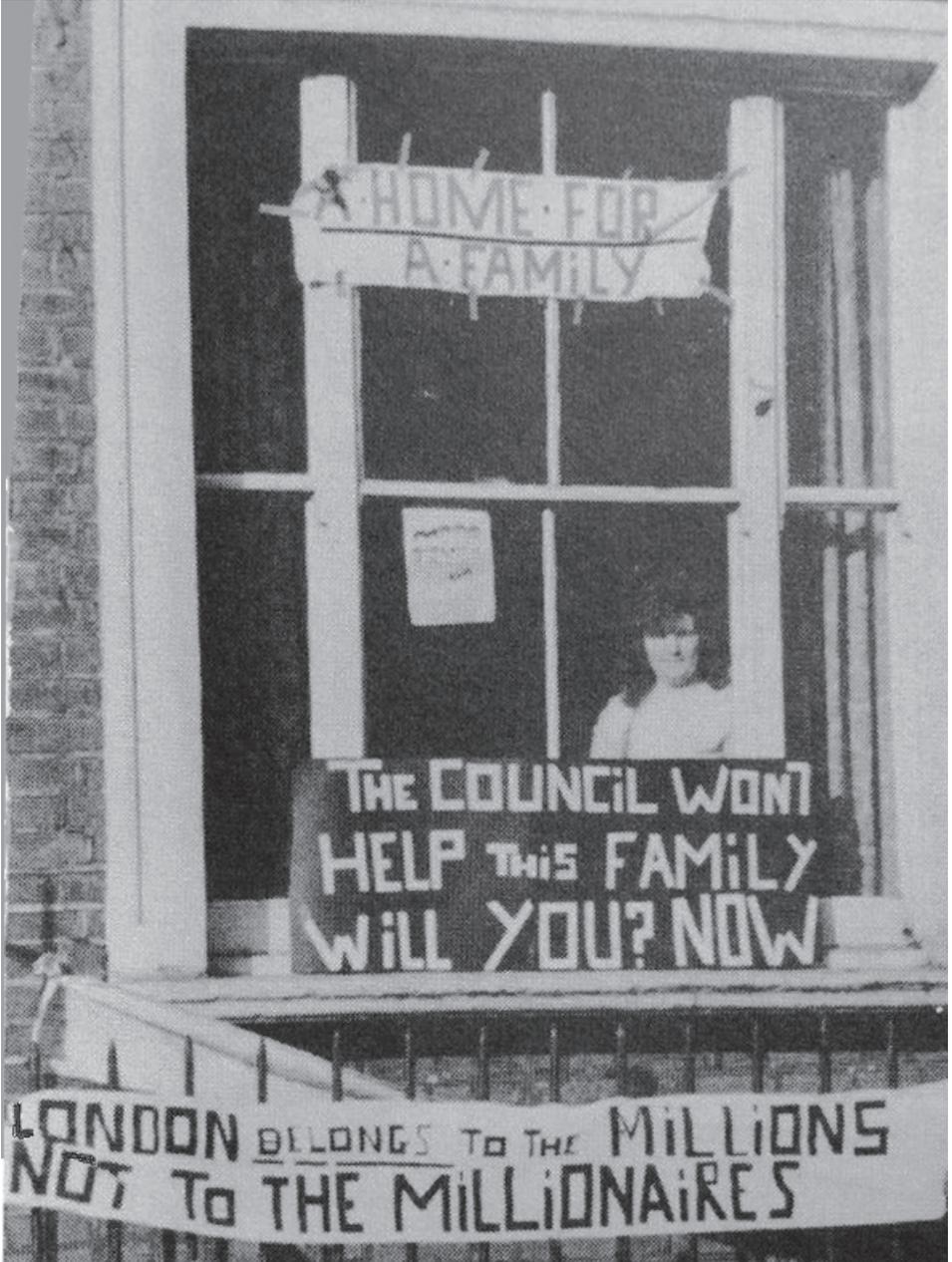


# 'SQUATTING IS A PART OF THE HOUSING MOVEMENT'



**PRACTICAL SQUATTING HISTORIES 1969 - 2019**

# 'SQUATTING IS PART OF



Sidey Palenyendi and her daughters  
outside their new squatted home in  
Finsbury Park, housed through the  
actions of Haringey Family Squat-  
ting Association, 1973

'...I learned how to crack window panes with a hammer muffled in a sock and then to undo the catch inside. Most houses were uninhabitable, for they had already been disembowelled by the Council. The gas and electricity were disconnected, the toilets smashed...Finally we found a house near King's Cross. It was a disused laundry, rather cramped and with a shopfront window...That night we changed the lock. Next day, we moved in. In the weeks that followed, the other derelict houses came to life as squatting spread. All the way up Caledonian Road corrugated iron was stripped from doors and windows; fresh paint appeared, and cats, flowerpots, and bicycles; roughly printed posters offered housing advice and free pregnancy testing...'

**June Guthrie, a character in the novel  
'Every Move You Make',  
Alison Fell, 1984**

**Front Cover:** 18th January 1969, Maggie O'Shannon & her two children squatted 7 Camelford Rd, Notting Hill. After 6 weeks she received a rent book! Maggie said '*They might call me a troublemaker. Ok, if they do, I'm a trouble maker by fighting FOR the rights of the people...*'

# THE HOUSING MOVEMENT'



Squatter in New York's Lower East Side, 1994.

**'Some want to continue living 'normal lives,' others to live 'alternative' lives, others to use squatting as a base for political action. Any squatting organisation needs to recognise this diversity or it will fall into the trap of saying there are good squatters and bad squatters. We must reject any attempts to create an internal class structure within the squatting movement ...**

**Everyone has a right to a home'**

**Advisory Service for Squatters  
Statement, 1975**



Residents of slums and squatter settlements take part in a protest, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, September 2014

# SQUATTING:

## AN INTRODUCTION

### • WHAT THIS BOOK IS:

This small booklet wants to put forward some ideas, some histories and some possibilities from experiences and involvement in squatting and housing struggles from the mid-80's onwards and from research. It wants those small histories it tells to be practically useful for anyone struggling to control their own housing as individuals and as communities: What can we learn from how other people thought about and consciously enacted squatting as a part of the housing movement? But from history we can only ever end up right now, and so it seeks to provide some material and ideas of how the housing movement can think again about squatting and its part-criminalisation after 2012.

### • WHAT THIS BOOK ISN'T:

It is in no way definitive nor academic. It's in no way impartial either. Sadly, it's too small a publication to be able to write about these histories in detail they deserve. But am hoping that these short tales can inspire readers to do their own reading, reflecting and acting. There is tons online, in books and in open-access archives (see Resources).

What does it mean that squatting is part of the housing movement? We can say that there is a constant contest for people to find ways to live by themselves or with others in affordable and decent homes. As people don't usually build their own homes, they are reliant on complicated political terrain of available land, finance and investment, the construction industry and the ideological preferences set in motion by successive governments. So living cheaply and securely places you squarely in the middle of whole load of processes you have very little say in or control of. The housing movement is then anywhere and anything where people have to either fight to maintain decent homes or where people try to create alternative housing less subject to the whims of the high rent and high profits of the usual housing market.

We can say that the housing movement is a single private renter fighting a 'no-fault' eviction or tenants of a council estate fighting against demolition and social cleansing regeneration schemes. It is also when people set up housing co-ops to control their own housing or when people occupy empty buildings because they have nowhere they can afford to live. Or what about when tenants of the New Era housing estate in Hoxton who fought off the global private equity fund Westbrook who had bought their homes in March 2014. Or when students at UCL London held a five month rent strike in 2017 that won major concessions on student rents and conditions!



MANY BUILDINGS LIKE THIS ARE **EMPTY**  
THOUSANDS ARE **HOMELESS**  
THE LONDON SQUATTERS SAY **OCCUPY**

London Squatters Campaign sticker for empty buildings, 1969

**'The Mob who never pay rent...Squatting is highly organised, nationwide, spreading rapidly...and DANGEROUS...it is not only a social problem but a sinister political threat'**

Article in the Sunday People, June 1975

# ALL SQUATTING IS POLITICAL!



Although the housing movement might share a common sense of 'decent homes for all', the actual movement is more often than not a collection of fights and struggles happening in different locations with different degrees of energy and success. In the last 40 years of the prevailing political spin of the magical property ladder that you can ascend bit by bit and the accompanying delegitimisation of public housing as a decent, cheap and secure home, the housing movement comes and goes in its intensity. Sometimes there are national campaigns such as those against the recent Housing and Planning Act 2016 but sometimes there are simply single sites of conflict like Clays Lane Housing Co-op in Stratford demolished, in 2007 to make way for the London Olympics.

In England, if you own a building, there are a few rules by which you have to abide, but in reality if you want to leave it empty, you can. Right now in London there are an estimated 20,000 homes empty for more than six months. Being able to keep your building empty has been described as exercising the 'fundamental human right of property'. It's a bit like abstracting yourself from the society around you and all its ever-pressing needs. All of this is presented as normal, neutral and not what it actually is - a political conflict between owners and users. In some other parts of the world, a less brutal and different concept exists, that a building always has a 'social function'. What this means is that property owners have an obligations to serve the community through a productive use of what they happen to own.

In February 2013, not long after the introduction of new laws banning squatting from residential properties, homeless guy Daniel Gauntlett froze to death in Aylesford, Kent on the porch of an empty bungalow he had previously been arrested trying to open up to shelter from the cold in. It's clear that the social function of the bungalow would be to let Daniel shelter from the cold inside rather than for it be left empty. The idea of a building's 'social function' raises the question of what the priorities of the society we live in are?

Squatting, the occupation and use of empty buildings for shelter, housing or other uses, is about putting life back into buildings. There are very long and particular histories in the UK of squatting and there are also many tensions within what could loosely be called the squatting movement. Not only that, but there are sometimes other tensions between squatting and other housing struggles. Nonetheless, what follows attempts to show that historically the squatting has been an accepted part of the housing movement, and that especially after it's partial criminalisation in 2012, the housing movement needs to embrace squatting once more as a part of resisting what is becoming the increasing impossibility of actually housing ourselves.



Opening up the Palm Court Hotel in Richmond as a womens refuge in 1975



Sisters Uncut squatting an empty council flat in Hackney, July 2015

**'I have had nowhere to go in the past. I was advised to come here and haven't regretted it. I have been able to talk to all the members of the womens group and feel much clearer than i have for a long time '**

Woman with two small children living at the squatted Grimsby womens refuge,  
from article in Spare Rib, No.46, May 1976

## WOMEN TAKE THE SPACE THEY NEED

Women were at the forefront of opening up empty buildings for housing and other community uses, and as crucial protagonists of legal challenges and subsequent eviction resistance. This history has only really started to be written now by women who were involved at the time or by women who are researching women's role in the squatting movement. One of the few older references can be found in Pat Moan's account of her squatting days in 'Learning to learn' in 'Squatting: The Real Story' where she writes, 'Since 1975 I have been amazed over and over by the dynamic women of the squatting movement: intimidating bailiffs, shaming police and embarrassing politicians in a direct and forceful way which most men are incapable of because they are so emotionally contained'.

In the 1970s women came together to organise the first women's refuges to enable any woman to escape domestic violence. Chiswick Women's Aid set up the first open-door refuge in 1972 eventually squatting 20 or so buildings to deal with the large number of women and children needing a safe home. Other refuges were squatted by women in Grimsby, Stoke, Nottingham, Guildford, Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. In 1975 Anne Ashby from Chiswick Women's Aid organised the squatting of the empty Palm Court Hotel in Richmond which lasted four years as safe refuge. Making public the scale of male violence inflicted upon women, by the 80s many refuges were finally government-funded and a National Women's Aid Federation had been formed.

Throughout the 70s and 80s women organised women-only squats to explore living together fusing housing need with feminist personal and political action. An entire women-only community came together with 50 houses in the Broadway Market area of Hackney, and in Lambeth the Brixton Women's Centre squat in Railton Rd gave advice and assistance resulting 100s of squats in Lambeth. There were lesbian squats and dyke squats, squatted children nurseries run by mums such as the Brailsford Rd creche in Brixton violently evicted twice by Lambeth Council in 1985/86 as well as the amazing one-year occupation of the South London Women's Hospital by women to try to keep it from closing.

40 years later and the feminist group Sisters Uncut reclaimed a council home in Hackney, a shop in Peckham and empty flats of Holloway Prison against the dismantling and de-funding of women's refuges asking a similar question that Chiswick Women's Aid had asked in 1972: *How can she leave if she has nowhere to go?*

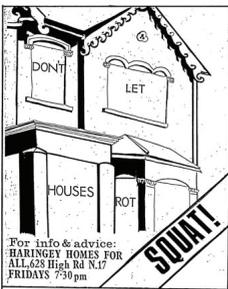


# SQUATTING AS A HOUSING MOVEMENT

Although the squatting of land and housing in the UK goes back centuries, it was only in the 20th century that a modern squatters movement came into its own. After WW2 a wave of squatting began, first in empty army camps and then in empty expensive properties such as Duchess of Bedford House in Kensington or The Ivanhoe Hotel in Bloomsbury. A demonstration on September 14th 1946 saw 12,000 people march behind the banner 'Ex-Servicemen Demand Requisition Of All Empty Mansions and Luxury Flats!'. This squatting campaign was not only in response to the number of homes damaged in the war but to the widespread slum conditions of privately rented homes.

By 1973 there were still an estimated 100,000 empty public and private homes in London alone and 30,000 people in temporary hostels or B&B accommodation and 2000 street homeless. From 1968 onwards a new squatting movement had begun. Different squatter campaigns first symbolically squatted empty luxury flats at The Hollies in Wanstead and Arundel Court in Notting Hill. Then they moved to occupying empty homes in Redbridge, moving homeless families in and defending the houses physically from violent bailiffs but also legally from eviction. The London Squatters Campaign was thus born with loads of press and TV publicity.

In late 1969 the media went ballistic when the counter-cultural London Street Commune initiated three large empty Central London squats, the most famous being at 144 Piccadilly. Press hysteria about drug-taking layabouts tried to turn what was a rough mix of hippies and young homeless people seeking alternative ways of living into Public Enemy No.1. It was not a surprise that the media would sympathise with homeless families but stir up mob violence towards the Piccadilly squatters. Although there were also criticisms made of the hippy squats at the time by those squatting homes for families, at the end of the day what was happening was that people with different needs and ideas took direct action to use empty buildings for living in. From these two campaigns, the 1970s saw a mass wave of squatting, mostly concentrated in the inner cities but also rurally as some people sought a way out of the daily grind. This was undoubtedly a housing movement responding to a housing crisis by squatting empty homes for housing, campaigning and making demands.



**'This glaring contradiction between widespread homelessness and abundant empty property is the basis of squatting. But the link is not direct, and other factors intervene to determine the scale and nature of the squatting movement. On the one hand, it will depend upon the extent to which property owners and the state are prepared to use the police, the courts, and straight-forward harassment, to defend established property rights. On the other hand, the success of squatting depends upon the ability of squatters and other homeless people to organise effectively and to obtain support from other sections of the community'.**

From the Introduction in 'Squatting: The Real Story', probably the most useful and well written history of U.K squatting up to the end of the 70's.

## **WHAT DOES THE MOVEMENT MOVE?**

Throughout the 70s and 80s squatting continued on it's merry way with an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 people squatting in the UK at any one time. Squatters were made up of both those who were organised and promoted squatting via local groups, publications and practical help and those who were occupying empty buildings on their own outside of what could be described as the squatters movement. Part and parcel of this movement was the energy and solidarity that squatters brought to different areas of London and also the political crossover that occurred when squatters involved themselves in struggles such as claimant unions, women's refuges, lesbian and gay rights, fighting the selling off of council houses and general community activism. The squatting movement consistently provided meeting spaces, cultural activities, food co-ops, cheap cafes and the attempt to create alternatives away from the daily 9-5 routine. Not only this but squatters pioneered the turning of squats into housing co-ops, mostly on a 'short life' basis but some are still in existence today such as Abeona Housing Co-op established in 1975 in Hampstead.

By the mid-1980s many squatters had turned to occupying the 1000s of empty local council flats that were the result of long-term disrepair due to cuts in funding and council's mismanagement of its housing stock. With such chaos in allocations, the notion that squatters were jumping the housing waiting list was a nonsense. As Elgin Avenue squatters had well argued in 1975: 'We said the 'Waiting List' was a political device to divide and weaken the real housing movement; homeless people are not responsible for homelessness and no-one should have to wait for a home. Empty houses should be used'.

A vibrant squatting movement continued until the late 2010s despite the tougher conditions - quicker evictions, less and less empty buildings due to the massive gentrification of London, the clamp down on the availability of welfare benefits, the rising cost of living and stagnating wage levels. Despite media panics around travellers, rave parties, 'foreign' squatters and some changes in the law and rules affecting squatting in 1977, 1994 and 2001, it was only in 2012 that Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act created a new offence of squatting in a residential building. Since then, although the squatting movement has shrunk as a result of the new law, it continues still in empty commercial properties and in challenges to the law via protest squats that sprang up in connection to the sudden revitalisation of the housing movement in 2013, working with local housing groups to highlight gentrification.



Pressuring Southwark Council to use empty homes for short life occupation, 1970



Southwark's first squatter family, the O'Connors move into an empty home, 1969

# LONDON SQUATTERS CAMPAIGN & FAMILY SQUATTING ADVISORY SERVICE, 1970S

The story of the London Squatters Campaign (LSC) in 1969 is variously told as the start of the widespread 70s squatting movement although there were many criticisms at the time of the short life licensed squats the campaign gave birth too.

People who had been active in campaigns highlighting the appalling conditions in homeless hostels got together in late 1968 to try and kickstart a new mass squatting movement, the idea of squatting first being brought up by the families they met at the hostels. With a background in direct action, LSC started off with two symbolic and short actions at The Hollies in Wanstead, luxury flats empty for over 4 years, and a Vicarage in Leyton, empty for three years. After this they were ready to house homeless families and on February 8th 1969 four houses were occupied in Redbridge. Despite all the homes being in a redevelopment area and possibly being left empty for up to another 10 years, the Council refused to let the houses in the short-term. Instead they subjected the squatters to a protracted legal battle, used violent bailiffs to illegally evict and smashed up empty homes to prevent further squatting. Publicity for the reclamation of empty homes was secured when squatters fought off bailiffs on June 23rd. By July an agreement was sorted with the Council for partial rehousing for some, a review of empty homes letting policy and no more trashing empty homes but all the squatters would have to move out first. This was voted on with 2/3rds in favour and amidst some bitterness, people moved out. Despite this, much had been learnt from the experience that would go forward in some way to building a mass of licensed short-life squats.

At the same time in Lewisham, squatter activists, some from the LSC, had secured a deal with the Council for use of numerous empty properties in a redevelopment zone. For the council it was pragmatic, as the homes would have been squatted anyhow and they got to house families from their waiting list and give licenses that they hoped people would honour when the time came to give the houses back. A new part of the squatting movement was born - the licensed short-life occupation - where by 1970 the Lewisham Family Squatting Association had over 80 licensed houses. Such a model was replicated in other boroughs, usually after squatters had first occupied to get negotiations going or in some cases actions and protests had to be taken to force councils to see sense on their empty homes. In Southwark, squatters occupied the Town Hall, the homeless families department and the Labour Party HQ in Central London declaring 'Southwark Labour Fights The Homeless'. It took 14 months of action to get the council to agree to hand over 30 houses. In September 1970, Family Squatting Advisory Service (FSAS) was set up with a grant from the charity Shelter and by 1973 FSAS said there were around 2500 people in licensed short-lives across 16 London boroughs. In the same years, the number of unlicensed squatters also increased dramatically as single people needed homes too. The stage had been set and the battles of both family squatters and unlicensed squatters both intersected and departed, none the least with the question whether co-operation or conflict would produce victories for homeless squatters. Amidst some tensions FSAS ended around 1975 when the new Advisory Service for Squatters was set up in the wake of its passing.

# DO ALL ROADS LEAD TO EVICTION?

There is probably one truism in squatting and that is that you'll 99% be evicted from your squat and need to find a new one. How that happens (or doesn't happen!) is down to both what you do and what they do. But it's also entirely contextual to the times and so whereas in the 1980s you might have got one year in an empty Lambeth council flat, you may now only get two weeks in your squatted ex-pub in Deptford before you're evicted. You might go to court with a good defence and support from Advisory Service for Squatters and win an adjournment. Or you get hit with a Interim Possession Order, correctly served by the owner, you have 24 hours to get out. In the worst case, you might have the owner send round some heavies or private security to hassle you out. In some ways it's also the luck of the draw. Some property owners are happy to make a deal with you to stay until they need the building and some will just go ballistic with rage. It's the same with the police. Usually they turn up, listen to you lay down the laws to them on squatting, make a note in their notebook and leave. Rarely but it happens, they turn up, bash the door down and illegally evict you. Squatting is an adventure but one that needs people to take care and look after each other too.

In England and Wales there is mostly a predictability to the process of squatting. People find a building they think will make a good squat and they do what they can to find out about the owner and why the building is empty. Next, the building is occupied, locks are changed and the place is secured. Life goes on and then one day the owner or someone shows up with a piece of paper that says she is going to court for ordinary possession of where you are living. You prepare a defence and present this at the court and the judge makes a decision. If you get an adjournment because, for example, the legal paperwork is shonky then you win more time before the case comes up in court again. If a standard possession order is granted against you then you can expect bailiffs at some point. Often, people would ask the bailiffs when they are coming. Some people then chose to get their mates round on the day of eviction so that the bailiffs, on the advice of police who may not want to get involved in an unknown public order situation, would go away to come back another day. If that happens then you won't know the new time of eviction and it's likely to be a surprise visit early in the mooring and backed up with a bunch of police. For



# 'We won, you should fight them too. It's not what they say but what we do that counts!'

Graffiti at Elgin Avenue, West London when squatting community fought and won rehousing, 1975

now, squatting in non-residential properties remains a civil matter, that is, something to be resolved in a court between you and the owner mediated by the whim of a judge. 'Section 6' of the 1977 Criminal Law Act still protects squatters from owners and the police just dragging you out because they don't like your face. However the Interim Possession Order, introduced in 1994, is now more common after years of it being a bit of a rare bird. A proper IPO means you won't even get to stay in your squat before you get to fight it in court. So it's swings and roundabouts learnt along the way.

## AND HERE ARE SOME WE WON EARLIER...

Without going into too much ancient history, people have won amazing victories through negotiation or physically resisting eviction or through both. Squatters who organise themselves, seek support from local people and groups, and campaign on many fronts (against council, property owners, in the press, in the streets etc) can win. In the 70s and 80s there were many long-term squatting communities battling eviction and homelessness who succeeded in many and varied ways. From 1972 to 1975, Elgin Avenue squatters in Maida Hill organised an extensive campaign alongside the support of local trade unions and tenants and residents organisations. Having the will to fight on the barricades meant that they could secure rehousing for families and short life homes for the rest. In 1977, 120 squatters in derelict GLC houses in Freston Rd declared the area to be Frestonia - the Free And Independent State Of Frestonia, before winning rehousing as Bramley Housing Co-op on the same site. Seymour Buildings in Marylebone, squatted in 1975, was eventually turned into Seymour Housing Co-op when the squatters chose to make alternative plans for the buildings and take part in long negotiations with Westminster Council. The success of Seymour, itself inspired by the earlier attempt to turn the squatted Sumner House in Bow into a co-op in 1974, was a victory as the new homes were for single people, something squatting campaigns were continually pointing out - that unlike squatting families, single people had no chance to get housed by councils. From these successes, it was common for squatters to try and turn their communities or homes into official housing co-ops.



Eviction of occupied Tidemill Gardens, Deptford, October 2018

Many of these are still in operation today. But for as many victories there were more mass evictions of squatting communities that took place.

In 2019, we could ask the question - now that there are no longer streets of empty housing up for redevelopment nor loads of empties on council estates - where would new victories by squatting take place? When places are squatted now by they council estates undergoing regeneration or empty commercial buildings what kind of movement is being created?



# STAMFORD HILL ESTATE SQUATTERS SAY 'THANKS' TO ALL TENANTS ...

.....for putting up with all the inconvenience caused by the attempted evictions.

.....to those tenants who helped us build the barricades on Monday morning.

.....to all the tenants who have donated food, drink and messages of support in the last few days.

.....to those tenants who have helped us to patrol the estate to ensure no anti-social elements took advantage of the current police no-go area.

Yet again, Hackney Council have shown the true face of their housing policy: uncaring and incompetent. They are trying to evict 250 people while thousands of homes rot empty. Already, the council has spent over £500,000 on these evictions. How many repairs could they have done with all this money? Instead, it has been totally wasted by our 'leading' council. We decided to resist these evictions, to refuse to leave our homes because we were sick of the Council's lies. So far this has been successful through barricading the estate. We know that this has inconvenienced many people, but we are trying to reduce this inconvenience as much as possible. We are very sorry for any inconvenience and any fear that this resistance may lead to. But how much inconvenience has Hackney Council caused us, squatters and tenants alike? It is the council who are the specialists in disruption, not us.

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

On Monday, police arrested and beat up 3 people who had been watching for the bailiffs. It seems to this brutal and unprovoked attack, barricades were put up to defend our homes.

7am. Bailiffs did not come to evict us from our homes were refused by a shower of paint.

All day, assistance was given to tenants who wanted to leave the estate by car. The police did not want carrying a car over a small fence, an operation that required 20 people!

After the barricades were set up, the bailiffs have made themselves scarce.

11.30pm. Monday. Squatters followed up by the police.

12.30pm. All the anti-barricade were taken down and cleaned up to leave the street clear for the police.

Sgt. Swann House gate was cleared to allow master vehicle access for tenants.

Tuesday. Increased police provocation has been ignored as we do not want a fight with the police, only to defend our homes. And at last Hackney Council has noticed that we do exist and started talking to us for a change. Until now we have been treated as invisible. We have been told that we should leave the estate if we want anything from the council or anyone else, then we have to make sure that we are noticed. What we are demanding from the council is decent homes for all tenants.

If anyone needs any help whatsoever, then please come to 33 Portland House.

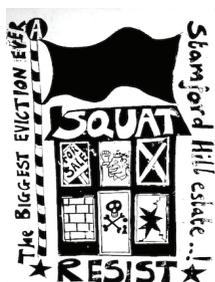
Stamford Hill Estate Squatters Group.

.....  
 : March 1988: A group of squatters hassle police and bailiffs during Stamford Hill Estate evictions. A leaflet from the squatters thanking  
 : tenants for their support during the eviction - 'thanks to all those tenants who helped us build the barricades on Monday morning'.  
 : .....

# RESISTING MASS EVICTION IN STAMFORD HILL, 1988

In early 1988, Hackney Council agreed to evict 250 squatters across 97 flats who had been living for up to 4 years on Stamford Hill Estate. Like many other squatted estates in London, friendly relations existed between tenants and squatters on Stamford Hill. The Tenant's Association supported the squatters as 'having a right to decent housing' and pointed out the cost of the eviction (est. £300,000) could be used to do the essential repairs they'd been 'waiting in vain' for years to happen. Several councillors and Labour branches broke ranks saying that these were the 'policies of despair not socialism' but the eviction was set to go ahead with a tip off to the squatters to expect 500 police and 60 bailiffs at 5am on March 7th 1988.

Squatters and supporters had repeatedly disrupted council meetings to protest evictions and what they saw as a possible police riot. They were also well organised with lots of practical info sharing, block meetings, a really good 'Open Letter to All Tenants' distributed and a call out for support against the evictions. On the Sunday before the eviction, a mass meeting was held in one of the squats to prepare for resistance. Although the squatters did not want violence, they would defend their homes and so barricades were built from large refuse bins and skips. When the police came early next morning, some kids nicked a car and spectacularly burnt it at the estate's entrance. With resistance in full swing, 300 people saw off the eviction and the estate was police-free for two days, the squatters making sure that people on the estate could come and go or be helped with shopping and so on. Hackney council then agreed a meeting for the squatters to discuss rehousing on Wednesday morning. Predictably at the same time as the meeting, the police came en masse and evicted the squats as bailiffs dumped peoples belongings over the balconies. Police made sure that no-one could come back onto the estate to re-squat the flats, something that had been successfully pulled off by squatters after the mass evictions on Pullens Estate in Southwark in 1986. All of this to enable Hackney Council to 'house the homeless' as they put it despite having less than a quarter of the budgets they needed to do up the empties and squats on Pembury and Kingsmead estates still laying empty a year after eviction.



History later repeated itself as farce when Hackney agreed a new policy to reduce the number of empty properties by targeting squatters again even though of 3180 vacant homes, only 1300 were squatted. In March 1991 despite saying that it was 'immoral and utterly futile to allocate squatted units when others on the same estate are empty', they again evicted 30 squats on Stamford Hill Estate to house the homeless who they had still not housed in all those new empties from the evictions three years earlier in 1988.

# ORGANISING

## SOLIDARITY...

In June 1974 Camden Fire Brigades Union refused to help the Council evict 220 Camden High St, a long term squat that was an active part of community struggles against office development and speculation in the borough. Squatters at 220 also wrote that *'building workers on McAlpine's Strand Estate have shown the way - the shop stewards committee promised to press for official trade union action in defence of 220 and the High St'*. During the attempted eviction of St Agnes Place terrace in 1977 unionised Lambeth council workers refused to carry out any demolition. Interestingly in 1972 Camden Council attempted to requisition the 36 empty apartments at Centre Point but failed in the High Courts.



Corrugation Street squatters paper, 1970s

To squat a place to live and play in, you need to find empties. Pretty much that means walking the streets looking. Once you've found a likely looking empty, then the rest is up to you. Luckily, throughout the long history of squatting, there have been people who recognise a need to organise a basic infrastructure to act in solidarity with those looking to squat or currently in squats. Once the concept of private property is challenged, then pretty soon all the other challenges may come along at the same time: choosing to practice mutual aid between squatters so that knowledge and experience can be shared against the society at large that pushes a dog-eat-dog individualism; queer squatters looking for each other to run a festival like Queeruption in Brixton in 1998 or the queer House of Brag social centre in various South London empties 2013 - 2014; living rent-free for a bit means you are no longer working three precarious jobs to see yourself through college; Elgin Avenue squatters issued work tokens for building work and campaigning that could be redeemed in the squatter-run cafe for food. Squatting enables experiments and alternatives and this is as much a part of the history as being a part of the housing movement.

The last 50 years has seen numerous practical attempts to co-ordinate squatting at a neighbourhood basis. Think of the story of the politically complicated squatter co-ordinating bodies in the 70s such as All London Squatters, Squatting Action Council, London Squatters Union and divisions within those. The start of the minutes from the All London Squatters Meeting in November 73 are a joy of the usual squatting tensions of the time: 'Immediate interruptions - complaints being made about the conduct of the meeting - We don't want to be organised'. Or Brixton Squatters Aid, Camden Squatters Group, Squatters Network of Walworth all active in the 1980s with drop-in advice meetings and their own newsletters. Although the organised squatting movement goes up and down, fresh energies seem to emerge all the time. From 2010 onwards the regular Squattastic meetings brought together different local squatters groups, people and campaigns especially before squatting's part-criminalisation in 2012. In the run up to 2012, Squatters Action for Secure Homes (SQUASH) did amazing work fighting the new law as others had earlier in 1994 in a different SQUASH flavour against changes to the criminal

## **‘Activists learnt that one’s power as a squatter persists only as long as one occupies space’**

Amy Starecheski, Quoting Muzio in ‘Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City, 2016

trespass laws. For years until 2019, the Practical Squatting nights ran every Tuesday night for one hour (alternating weekly in South and North London) as a meeting place for new squatters to get together, ask questions about things and then form squat mates to go off and open up empty buildings. Each decade things change - before there was the clumsy eviction phone tree, now there are various eviction text or whatsapp groups. Before advice was shared with how to remove steel security front doors on empty flats. Nowadays people are more likely to need advice on dealing with an internal motion sensor alarm linked directly to a security company but can also access Google Earth to see how it might be possible to get into empty buildings.

At the bottom of this political organisation of squatting is how what has been learned along the way is joined with how things are today (new laws, new court rules etc) to maintain and help squatters do their thing. Stalwart throughout this has been Advisory Service for Squatters (A.S.S.) set up in 1975 and still going strong. Reading the current 14th edition of their ‘Squatters Handbook’ is a treasure trove of squat lore, squat histories and a deep encyclopaedic primer of all you need to know to get squatting. Written in an unapologetic style and rooted in the experiences of both the A.S.S collective and the thousands of squatters they have helped, the Handbook wants you to help yourself and others: ‘Finding a place’, ‘Proving it’s not residential’, ‘Dealing with security guards’, ‘Dealing with the police’ etc.

### **ARSE & ELBOW LAW: DO YOU KNOW YOUR P.I.O FROM YOUR D.R.O?**

A.S.S.’s wise description in the legal section of the Handbook that the ‘Court is a lottery’ is a practical reminder that going to court even with a tip-top defence to present can still be a pretty random affair. As it says well in *Squatting: The Real Story* (1980) ‘The law is not an independent arbiter enforcing fairness and morality...there is a myth fostered by the state and by judges that the law is in some sense abstracted from the society in which it operates; the myth of impartiality and of doing ‘justice’’. To further highlight this, the part-criminalisation of squatting was enshrined in a random new law despite an estimated 96% of responses to the Ministry of Justice consultation saying, as did the police even, that enough laws existed to deal with squatters. Despite this it was passed and all those landlord MP’s in Parliament (1 in 5) must have loved it! For squatters however, the law has always been something at time relied upon and at time resisted. A mixture of breaking, bending or using the law is common sense when the system is so rigged. Since the passing of the law against residential squatting, people are still innovative in finding ways to challenge it or just squatting empty residential homes and keeping quiet. As always, alongside the good work of those who organise the squatting movement, there are 1000’s of people who have squatted with little or no connections to squatting scenes and whose stories remain invisible. Those histories are just as urgent and represent a class and ethnic composition of a much more marginalised group of squatters.



# SQUATTERS NETWORK OF WALWORTH: HOW TO DO EFFECTIVE LOCAL ORGANISING, 1983 - 2012

The Squatters Network of Walworth, SNOW, formed in March 1983 in the Walworth area of Southwark where there are many council estates. They squatted a prefab hut for an office and began the production of the long running local squat freesheet *The Wire* (named after the wire coathanger squatters were using to open front doors on empty council flats). *The Wire* was hand delivered to about 200 local squats every fortnight. At this time the Labour council did not have a very heavy eviction policy against squatters. By November 1983, SNOW had moved to the squatted Ambulance Station centre and opened an office there. Within SNOW there was always a tension between 'socialists' and 'anarchists' and a battle was fought within the group for where and how best to resist a new hardline eviction policy Southwark Council introduced in March 1984. Soon the internal differences reached a head: 'In October 1984 came a split between 'socialist' and 'anarchist' policies for SNOW. The former trying to negotiate with the council and use the media for dubious political promotions. The latter resorted to building up the network and preparing to resist eviction. The 'Socialists' (all of them tenants) set up a peace camp outside the Town Hall...returning waving a piece of paper (the council truce) - the first eviction orders arrived shortly afterwards'. At this time, there were 3932 empty council homes, 1531 empty over a year, 10,000 on the waiting list and 20% of squats were people in 'priority need'.

In January 1985, SNOW moved to squatted offices at 362 Old Kent Rd and began to be open 5 days a week giving advice to homeless people about squatting. By 1987 SNOW was getting copies of *The Wire* to 700+ squats locally. Not only this but they were telling or reminding squats of their upcoming court cases and defeating the Council in court left, right and centre. Council statistics of the time show about 2000 squatted council flats across Southwark with another 2000 council homes classed as empty.

The Council continued its heavy and public attack on SNOW and in response the network morphed into a charity called Southwark Homeless Information Project in July 1988. SHIP then rented an office further down Old Kent Rd at 612 and continued as before focusing on squatting advice, court cases and 'monitoring' empty council flats - essentially pointing squatters to possible new homes listed on a large wall map of the borough! By developing legal resistance strategies and by knowing the law better in some cases than local housing officers by March 1989 they were getting an average 1 adjournment in squatting court cases out of every 9. The SHIP office also ran a weekly hot meal and meeting combo to encourage squatters to be involved. They continued to produce the bi-weekly squat paper now named 'SHIP NEWS'. By the 2000's and with few council empties on offer, SHIP concentrated on how locals could access Hard-To Let tenancies. At some point the Charity Commission came knocking, called in by Southwark Council and SHIP NEWS morphed into the less wild Homeless Occupiers Project News. Despite the downturn in squatting SHIP continued doing housing advice until 2012 and that, my friends, is not even half the story! Some other time.

# CRISIS AGAIN!!

It's common that we hear about 'the housing crisis'. That this term is so widespread at least punctures the idea that housing and homelessness is something that just gets better or worse, abstracted from what government or global capital does. We can at least examine the idea of 'crisis' to start to see that any crisis is something manufactured - by government when they act or legislate for the continued privatisation of public housing or by more global interests such as investment funds, private equity companies or real estate investment trusts buying up the same public housing or 'regenerating' it. In a housing crisis knocking down 1000s of council homes to replace them with luxury flats bought primarily by overseas investors shows that the crisis is purely driven by market interests and profits and not just because not enough homes are being built. The crisis is not a lack of homes to live in but vested interests manufacturing a scarcity of truly affordable homes. But for those always at the hard edge of what governments and capitalists do, this has always been a crisis whether it's 1969, 1985 or 2019 - high rents, low wages, gentrification of communities, no rent control, land speculation, stigmatisation and demolition of council housing and so on.

In the early 70s there was a property boom where house prices were going up and many homes were left empty for purposes of speculation (that at some future point the house would be worth even more). Such speculation especially alongside government grants for refurbishing properties saw an increase in eviction of tenants. This process of eviction, speculation and refurbishment had its early beginnings in Islington where this removal of working class tenants and replacement by middle class home owners was dubbed 'gentrification' in 1964 by Ruth Glass. Homelessness needless to say went skyrocketing. The same era saw many working class communities overtaken by massive investment in new office buildings. There were bitter campaigns against developers Harry Hyams who was behind the Centre Point building, Joe Levy's Stock Conversion who wanted to demolish Tolmers Square in Euston and against the GLC plans for high rises in Covent Garden. Squatters were crucial adversaries in all these community battles. If we consider squatters as the hidden homeless, we can see the truth of the point made by Elgin Ave squatters in 1975 about waiting lists (see page 8). Although a system is in place to house people, when local council lists are 10,000 people long but council homes are empty (as they were then) or council homes are demolished (as they are today), the idea of the list is pointless for anyone considered 'non-priority'. Of course, priority is always given to developers plans no matter how destructive of affordable homes they might be.

By the 80s, there were tons of empty houses, both council and private. It was Hard Times with mass unemployment, major local government funding and spending cuts but at least, for some, there were student grants and the relatively easy life of dole autonomy. Put both of these together with rent-free squatting and life was for once less crisis-prone. In some circumstances it was even still possible to gain council tenancies via Hard to Let schemes, taking homes no-one on the waiting list wanted. But it was also the beginning of 1.5m council homes lost through the Right To Buy your council home. Disinvestment and deindustrialisation in the inner city eventually saw new



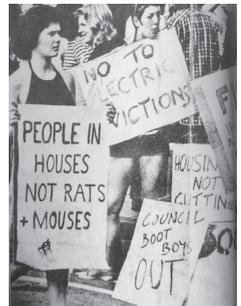
## **‘There are ten empty commercial buildings for every person registered as sleeping on the streets’**

Statement from one of Streets Kitchen crew occupying the empty Sofia House to use a homeless community centre, March 2018

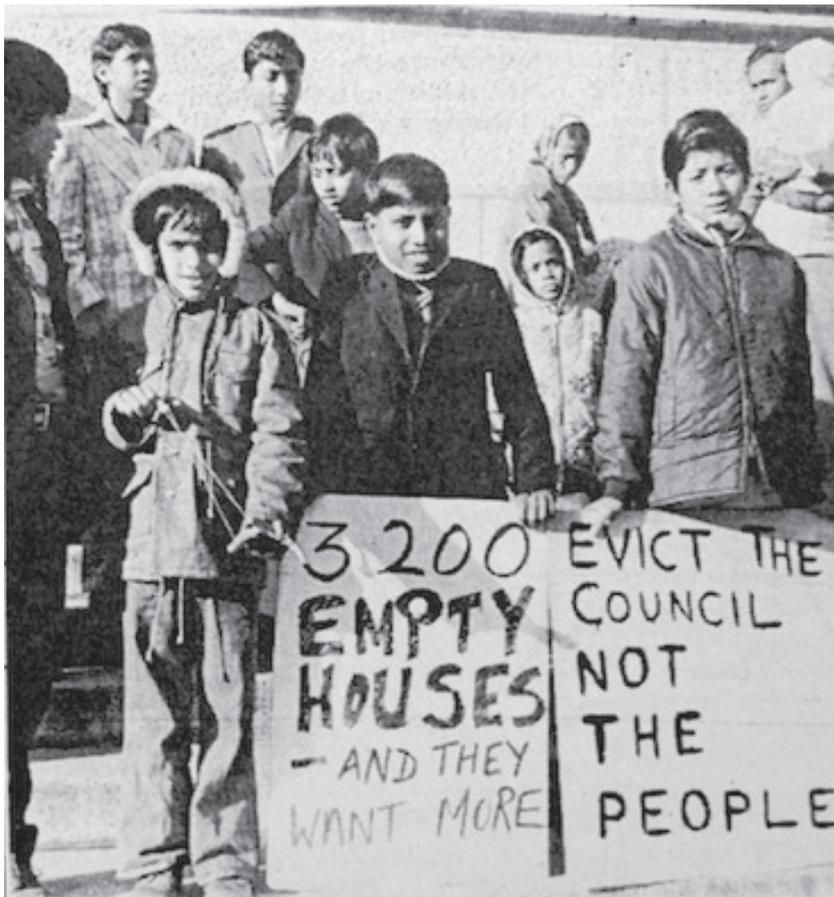
rounds of speculation and investment pointing slowly to the onslaught of future gentrification. Docklands, North and South of the Thames, was for a time an unregulated space with empty-ish houses and estates that enabled some kind of escape from the ravages of capitalist daily life (the 9-5 grind, ill health and anxiety, no money, nowhere to live). But these empty spaces were a strange and often invisible part and parcel of the gentrification to come, satisfying speculative development where land is bought up later for development or resale as land values rose from other urban speculation and building. Dockside Rotherhithe was called Squatters Paradise by local squatters as the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) planning regime led to 100s of empty council flats. Rotherhithe Action Group Squatters (RAGS) built a ragged community there in 1983 although not without tons of hassle from some members of the Downtown Tenants Association who despite the LDDC’s gentrifying plans for the estates fell for a media and Council-led witch hunt against the squatters. At the time there were over 4500 Council homes laying empty across the borough. Ironically, squatting in Bermondsey after both WW1 and 2, was a factor in uniting local people to fight for and win cheap local housing including some of the Downtown Estates.

## **NEW DECADE - NEW CRISIS**

In the 2010s, the crisis looks like this: few empties, endless government cuts, austerity and disciplining the working class, student fees, precarious work and increasing zero-hour contracts and freelance gig economy labour. The gains of earlier squatting campaigns such as short-life co-ops have mostly been evicted by hypocritical local councils such as Lambeth. But there have been some great squats and occupations to resist the cuts and social cleansing. In September 2014, Focus E15 group of former hostel-dwelling mums and supporters opened up 4 flats on the Carpenters Estate in Stratford where tenants had been ‘decanted’ for a failed Newham Council land sell-off on the back of the Olympics. Sweets Way Estate in Barnet was occupied by housing campaigners and squatters for months in 2015 against its dubious regeneration. In Barnet and New Cross public libraries closed by councils were occupied and taken over and run by the community from 2011 to this day. Squatters from the Autonomous Nation of Anarchist Libertarians successfully occupied a few residential luxury mansions in the West End in 2017 inviting in homeless people for shelter and support. Streets Kitchen folks squatted the long empty Sofia House on Great Portland St in March 2018 as a communal place for homeless people to get out of the freezing cold. Of course, private property trumps death on the streets and Sofia House stands empty once more. Lets not fool ourselves about the ‘housing crisis’ - the crisis is permanent and we must ask - who does the crisis hit the most? That’s where we can put some of our energies.



Squatters at Islington Town Hall, 1970s



Bengali Housing Action Group picket of the Greater London Council, November 1976



The Old Court House on Stoke Newington Rd had been empty since 1992. When squatters took the building in February 1996 for use as an Autonomous Refugee Centre, the owners tried twice to illegally evict the centre. Rather than see refugees and asylum seekers sleep on the streets due to benefit cuts, Hackney squatters decided to take 'effective action' and opened up ARCH.

# BLACK SQUATTERS GET ORGANISED, 1970S

Black activists have written how by the mid-70s political action taken by black communities had seen a building-up of confidence to resist both racist police violence and discrimination in schooling, work and housing. Although much has been written about black community resistance to racist education policies and labour hiring, very little has been produced highlighting the squatting community organised by black people in the 70s. Remembering Olive Morris Collective have done an amazing job of foregrounding the life of the fearless black activist Olive Morris and her and Liz Obi's early opening of squats in Brixton in 1972. During the 70s black families and single people were occupying 100s of council properties in the back streets of Brixton and there were many squatted houses close to the Frontline of Brixton, Railton Rd, some hosting shebeens. Black artist Pearl Alcocks shebeen was popular with parts of the local gay community, both black and white. After the Brixton uprising against police oppression in July 1981, centred mostly on Railton Rd, the police had their revenge in November 1982 when 400 of them assisted the council to evict nine homes, demolishing three houses that had been squatted social places where black youth would socialise. In other long histories, there are connections between the 1970s Black Liberation Front and their opening up of many short-life squats that by 1977 had turned into Ujima Housing Association. Numerous supplementary schools were also opened in squats for young black people to learn more than the straight standard English curriculum as well as nurseries such as still existing Market Nursery first opened by black activists in the mid-70s in a squat in London Fields.

The story of the amazing Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) in mid-70s East London is becoming more well known via online oral histories and some recent academic books. Facing both shocking housing conditions and racist attacks, many local Bengalis squatted houses first on their own, then with the aid of the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London in 1974 and then with help from the older Tower Hamlets Squatters Union. By February 1976 and with the new involvement of the militant Race Today collective, BHAG was launched. By April BHAG has squatted the 60 flat Pelham Buildings with an eventual 40 Bengali families living there. Other streets like Varden St and Nelson St were heavily squatted by BHAG. BHAG was not without its internal tensions and in 2001 Mala Sen, who was heavily involved from the Race Today collective wrote: 'I think we achieved a lot but I think we had a limited agenda. I mean you can't create a world revolution with ghetto politics and it was ghetto politics'. Housing or revolution aside, with the GLC amnesty for squatters of 1977, BHAG was able to get 100 families tenancies in E1, an area they had drawn up on a map and in which they felt less vulnerable to the attacks of the National Front. 10 years later these struggles were the basis of a BBC 2 TV series called 'King of The Ghetto'.



Varden St empties  
Whitechapel, 1974

# TENSIONS...

Pullens Estate evictions, June 1986



## POEM

'Eloquent, Wealthy,  
Intelligent too,  
Playing around with me  
And with you.  
Living with the other half,  
But just for a while,  
They are given away by  
their insincere smile.

They're here for our  
benefit,  
Improving our homes,  
But our cause is only a  
stepping stone,  
Tomorrow, Town Plan-  
ning and back to the  
wealth,  
And Madame Andre will  
be left by herself.

It's trendy to squat,  
To save beautiful houses,  
To be seen helping others,  
And doing their bit.  
Like self-righteous mis-  
sionaries, they can afford  
Self-denial for a while, it's  
good for the record.'

Part of anonymous poem  
in Tolmers News,  
May 1974

'...Much of your poem is  
an accurate, though cyni-  
cal analysis. But you fail  
to provide any clues as to  
what us wealthy, eloquent  
and intelligent members  
of the bourgeoisie should  
be doing instead'.

Part of reply to the poem  
by one of the Tolmers  
Square squatters

If 'all squatting is political' then the history of squatting in the U.K is also going to contain a whole lot of tensions and problems. Not the least from the internal stresses and challenges within squatters communities but because the outside is a solid political regime of different oppressive structures that manifest time and time again deliberately against the more or the most vulnerable. These tensions are at their starkest when played out within a squatting scene that does not want to deal with who has more privileges than others. An arrogant man, for example, who knows it all when it comes to squatting a building is not an exception within a squatting culture but a general rule in the wider world. A white middle class feminist who through body language silences a black working class feminist in a meeting is similarly part of the everyday reality of living in a brutally racialised and stratified class society. Putting both that inside and that outside together, it's a way rougher ride for those who have to survive at the intersection of these multiple humiliations and oppressions. When the famous Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera is impossible to find amongst the various histories of squatting in Tolmers Square in the 1970s, you wonder who else has been made invisible in the eloquent histories of squatting that have so far been written? Who has for the most part written these histories? Was the success of the actions of the London Squatters Campaign in Redbridge in 1969 because of the skills and determination of the 'leaders', as it is commonly described, or was it because working class families actually lived in the squatted homes that they had opened with the LSC? None of the Beresfords, the McNallys, the Flemings or the Kings family members ever wrote a book about their experiences nor got jobs out of it.

The poem on this page from the Tolmers News shows how when a criticism was made of the well-meaning middle class squatter adventurer, they responded in the same condescending manner that is the cause of the poets original ill-ease. Rather than reflect on the conditions that may make up a middle class person's way in the world (security of background, well-off parents, confidence etc), the reply foregoes actually taking the time to reflect on the criticism and asks instead what the working class person can do to change them. It's a sad but true cliché but it is not the job of the oppressed to teach their oppressors not to oppress and not only because these things are not entirely personal (e.g one person's racism or sexism) but are structurally built into society (racist policing or immigration policies, unequal pay for women or sexist degradation, stigmatisation of working class people etc). Of course, people can learn and change from thinking things through if they want to or from the generosity of those who have the patience to engage with them. But such

**'Around 1974-1975, white middle class squatters took the political initiative away from the coloured working class squatters and had set themselves up as leaders, creating isolation among the black and the white. This group had the knowledge, skills, and access to information and facilities. I learned a bit in this period, useful skills in painful situations'**

From an anonymous piece of writing 'Lonely Among The Feminists', Spare Rib, Issue 132 (1983)

politeness comes with a terrific price tag. Personally, by the 2000s I was happy to do less squatting advice because I was tired of helping mostly middle class bohemians who made me feel so claustrophobic and stuck with my lot.

## **MATERIAL TENSIONS**

There is no tension-free process for any squat to follow to make its existence easier and longer lasting. Some people have negotiated deals with owners or councils and some people have stuck out as a kind of island of radicality in a boring world. Neither of these strategies guarantee anything. Criticisms of licensed short-life squatting were made by many unlicensed squatters of the time - why should squatters pay to be caretakers of run-down houses on behalf of councils and why privilege only families when single people were equally impacted by the housing crisis? Criticism of more radical squatters is that they were unrealistic or 'idealistic'. What a mess! Yet squatting as a political strategy and as a means of survival was still a part of a wider housing struggle around council homes, fair rents, decent housing and also questions of co-operative and communal living.

Certainly by 1980 the Left had dumped squatting as both a political project and as a practical solution to aspects of the housing crisis. Many ex-squatters who had been involved in extensive grassroots community work in the 1970s gave up and joined the Labour Party in the early 80s. Maybe the ever-narrowing political outlook in the UK especially in the realm of housing fed the disinterest in squatting as a radical strategy. Political struggles became more defensive, more pragmatic and much less radical or utopian. Or maybe The Left just abandoned some actual core ideas in the rush to win elections. During the 80s when many Left-wing Labour councils took local power, formerly pro-squatting council leaders began systematic eviction programmes against squatters in their boroughs. The famous battles of tenants and squatters together to save the Pullens Estate in Walworth in 1986 from demolition and for tenancies was a good one. Despite an attempt at mass eviction, the squatters re-squatted their homes when the police left. Southwark Council sensing that such large-scale evictions would not work gave tenancies to some but not all squatters. Divide and rule socialism! How many of those new tenant, ex-squatters on Pullens later bought their home through Right To Buy? How many then got a second home and rent out their flats as landlords? 30 years later during the Aylesbury Estate occupations, local Southwark Labour councillors were lying that the squatters were middle class trust fund kids and tried to play them off against working class tenants, the same tenants who the Council is actively displacing by demolishing and 'regenerating' the estate for more middle class homeowners.

On a positive and practically critical note that helps us think where we are going amongst all these tensions, the feminist group Sisters Uncut, having squatted many places for protest and as community gathering places, set out a good criticism of the use of the word 'occupation' to describe squatting. Noting that 'occupation' has strong colonial roots and thus horrific connotations of imperialist violence and theft, they also spoke of 'how we haven't stolen space that isn't ours. It is just the opposite; we are the community and we're taking back space that belongs to us'. Sisters Uncut insist that squatting is about 'reclaiming' what is already ours but also why this is so important when women and especially black and brown women face the physical and mental violence of the housing crisis the most.



"Squatters Will Die": Graffiti on Redriff Estate in Rotherhithe, 1983

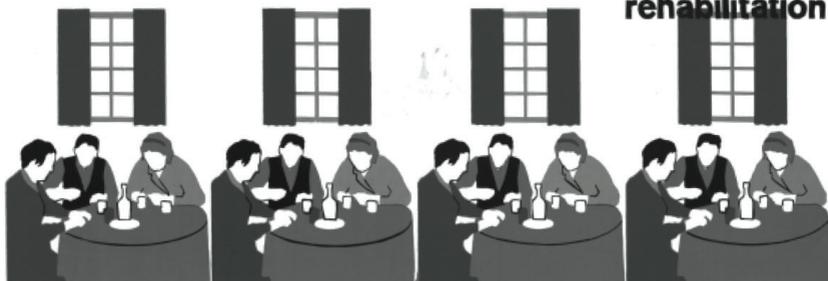
# the case for squatters

**1**  
no  
fire  
risk

**2**  
no  
health  
risk

**3**  
no  
vandalism

**4**  
occupied  
houses  
cut costs of  
eventual  
council  
rehabilitation



## the alternative



**protest against council's harrassment of squatters**  
**picket islington town hall tues. 29 july 6.00.p.m.**

Islington Squatters poster, 1975

# OUR HOUSE

A POP UP COMMUNITY CENTRE  
IN KENSINGTON

7TH  
-13TH  
MARCH  
2016



221  
BROMPTON  
ROAD,  
SW3-2EJ



Radical Housing Network occupied a building in Knightsbridge, one the most expensive parts of London to host 'a community-led occupation in protest at the Tories Housing Bill, the housing crisis and to highlight the insanity of empty properties when thousands are homeless', March 2016

# SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

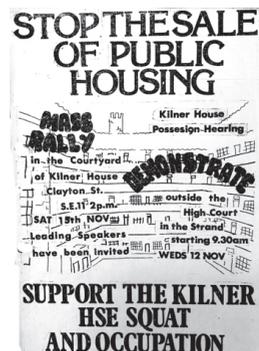


Squatted buildings used as bases for local struggles have also been active against the continual gentrification of the UK's inner cities in ways that are antagonistic to and not accommodating to gentrification processes. Squatters are not only housing themselves by self-help direct action but they are often connected to and involved in supporting the housing movement and other fights such as for better wages, to offer support for striking workers or to linking precarious wages and labour to the role of the housing market in continual disciplining of the poor and worst-off.

In March 1974, two months after the short protest squatting of the empty Centre Point offices in central London, folks acting with support of All London Squatters and Family Squatting Advisory Service decided to push the housing struggle connection between empty homes and homeless people and occupied an empty luxury block at 5-7 Dover St in Mayfair for permanent housing for people and families. They said that 'unlike Centre Point, we are a squat for keeps. We intend to stay for as long as possible and campaign for support from the labour movement'. Despite regular pickets of the owners and other connected bodies and the demand that Westminster Council to Compulsorily Purchase the block, the grand experiment in 'showing a practical way of actually housing the homeless' was evicted after six weeks.

## PRIVATISATION EVERYWHERE...

By the start of the 1980s, public housing was under attack with the Greater London Council (GLC) selling off some of its properties. Various squatter and housing campaigns got active and a sustained campaign of squats were set in motion in part to highlight the how GLC homes were being left empty and ripe for speculation but also to encourage links between the militant squatters of the day and the current more traditional tenants organisation and the labour movement. Housing Action made a fantastic protest squat of the GLC show home at the Ideal Homes Exhibition in 1979 and also luxury flats in Thurlow Park Rd, West Dulwich but also upped the ante by occupying a block of GLC homes at Ferry Lane Estate in Tottenham. The GLC had left the homes empty for two years while they prepared them for sale. Calling the squats an 'instant lettings scheme' they appealed for homeless people to turn up at any time and promised to fight for rehousing for any squatter as well as campaigning for the sale of the Ferry Lane homes to be stopped and let out as council homes



**'The Dover St squatters - like all squatters - object strongly to large buildings that are suitable for accomodating the homeless being kept vacant by speculators...for profit. to those who ask 'why should squatters live in their property?', we ask 'why should their property be empty?'**

Mayfair Squatters News, March 1974, when 50 people took over empty luxury flats in Central London.

again. Another high profile occupation was put into place by Stop The Blitz who squatted 50 empty houses in Redbridge in late 1978 to highlight wasteful demolitions, close to the very same streets where London Squatters Campaign had begun in 1969. Although both sites were evicted, the message was clear that squatters and others could resist the every widening attack on public housing. In October 1980, the Squat Against Sales campaign took over the GLC's Kilner House in Oval to try and stop its sell off. For three months 200 people from all walks of life lived together and not always easily, but forming some kind of community. Despite support from local tenants and other campaign groups, Kilner House was evicted on the morning on 9th January 1981 by over 600 tooled up police. Another local version of the campaign was in August 1981 when Ealing Occupation Against The Sales with the help of three Asian families squatted homes that had been built by Ealing Council specifiially to sell to private buyers.

## **GENTRIFICATION EVERYWHERE...HOUSING JUSTICE NOWHERE**

In the last 20 years squatters have been active against the relentless gentrification and social cleansing of many London neighbourhoods. Back in 2002 Hackney Not 4 Sale, an action group fighting against the privatisation of community resources like libraries, youth clubs and nurseries, set up a spoof estate agents in a squatted shop in Stoke Newington. Four years later and not so far away, community activists twice squatted the long-term Francesca Cafe on Broadway Market after it's sale to a local developer. The popular Cafe had been run by Tony Platia for 30 years before his dubious eviction in 2005 and so the occupation was to protest the social cleansing of the London Fields area and to show support for Tony. Despite eviction in late December, the cafe was valiantly re-occupied and rebuilt to hold on for a few more weeks. In this time two angry local meetings were held where Hackney council were seriously grilled. By 2006, Hackney Council had sold off £225 million worth of properties for just £70 million, the majority to unaccountable developers who then gentrified the area.

The same story of social cleansing was happening via Southwark Council where their large 1000 home Heygate Estate was demolished from 2011. In November 2013 activists occupied 21 Park St, a council-owned empty up for sale for £2.96 million, defying S144 of the new anti-squatting law and highlighting council sell-offs. Two local anti-gentrification squats were also taken, the first Eileen House office block in Feburary 2013 lasting six weeks and then the Elephant & Castle pub in June 2015 for a month, both sites providing meeting space, a protest base and also a chance for people to develop teach-ins and learn together what was happening and how to try and work with older local campaigns against 'regeneration'.



..... Barricades to prevent the eviction of squats in Lesly St, Islington, 1972 .....



AYLESBURY TENANTS & LEASEHOLDERS FIRST

# Occupation of empty flats in Chartridge

Come and find out more!

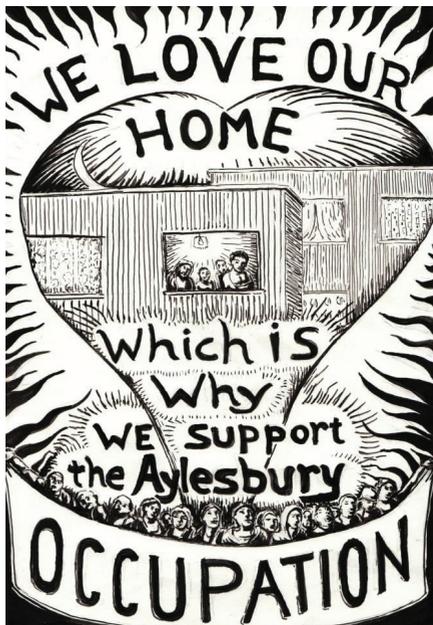
It's not just Aylesbury residents who are affected by demolition: schemes like this are depleting the stock of genuinely affordable Council homes all over London.

The "March for Homes", attended in the wet and cold by thousands of people on Saturday January 31st, highlighted the London-wide housing crisis. >>>

**Saturday 7th February, 3pm**

Alvey T&RA Hall, ground floor of Thompson House, Beckway Street (off East Street), SE17 1TS  
All Aylesbury tenants and residents and their supporters welcome

website: <https://aylesburytenantsfirst.wordpress.com>  
email: [aylesburytenant@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:aylesburytenant@yahoo.co.uk)  
phone: 07476 532 632  
Supported by Southwark Defend Council Housing



..... Aylesbury Estate - three occupations for housing and in support of the residents campaign against demolition and regeneration, 2015. ....

# 'POWER TO THE STREETS' FROM 70S ISLINGTON TO AYLESBURY OCCUPATION, 2015

With demolitions set for 1973, squatters moved into several empty houses in Bride St and Lesly St, Islington in May 1972. Some were homeless families on the council waiting list for years and others were the Living Theatre commune. Despite the homes fate and offers of rent by the squatters, the Council took proceedings for possession arguing that the squatters were keeping homeless families from being housed. The occupiers sprang into action forming the Islington Squatters Group, they picketed and disrupted council meetings, held a hunger strike outside the Town Hall, produced news bulletins and began a petition. On 27th June, Lesly St was barricaded against eviction including a helpful donation by a passing lorry driver of a truckload of bricks. During the 36 hour 'No Go Area' for police and bailiffs, many neighbours were in support and 60 local social workers came to hold a public meeting on Lesly St. The next day possession orders were confirmed in court and 100 police dismantled the barricades but with no evictions. By the end of the year, the families were rehoused, the McGowan family successfully demanding of the Council that the Living Theatre squatters could remain until their Bride St house was knocked down. Not only was this a victory for the squatters but some of the houses became short-life licensed homes through Student Community Housing. Some neighbours in Lesly St also won rehousing from their slum conditions earlier than the Council had intended. Islington Squatters Group went on to produce the first Squatters Handbook.

Forty years later on the Aylesbury Estate in Walworth, 2700 council homes are set to be knocked down to socially cleanse the area as part of 'regeneration'. On 31st January 2015, after a big March For Homes, squatters and allies from across London occupied a block of empty flats called Chartridge House. This direct action was taken to house squatters who'd been evicted from other places, in deliberate defiance of Section 144 of the new squatting laws, as these were 'residential' properties. The police decided that the 'decommissioned' status of the block gave them an excuse not to make any arrests under S144, but they did turn up in huge numbers to support Southwark's eviction of Chartridge and arrest a few people on other charges amidst the barricades and wild scenes. The squatters held open meetings and discussions in one of the flats, did a lot of outreach at the estate, and called for the repopulation and refurbishment (as Focus E15 Mums had done in September 2014 when they occupied empty homes on the Carpenters Estate in Stratford). When the police came for the first eviction, the squatters moved to a second block and by March had moved a third time into Chiltern House, ironically into the non-residential floor that formerly housed the Council's notorious regeneration department. The Council's response was to spend £100,000s building a defensive fence around leaseholders, still fighting a Compulsory Purchase Order, and the Aylesbury occupation. On 2nd April campaigners and squatters mobilised 300 people to march to the estate and the fences were pulled down in three places.

Coming at a time when council estate struggles and squats were connecting the dots between each other, the Aylesbury occupation was a great boost for the tenants and leaseholders defying the 'regeneration' plans.



Fences come down on Aylesbury April 2015

# WHAT NEXT?



## SQUATTING IS STILL LEGAL

2019 and what the \*\*\*\* is going on? We live in interesting times, no? Did you know that the higher the market value of a home, the more likely it is to be empty: In London, 39% of homes worth £1m to £5m are underused rising to 64% of homes worth more than £5m. Of homes owned by foreign investors, 42% are empty. Whilst politicians in Parliament legislate more cuts to services, more breaks to landlords and more tax-sponsored packages to boost overpriced homes built by the house building sector, here is what happens on the street: In December 2018, Gyula Remes, a homeless Hungarian died after he was found outside the entrance to the Houses of Parliament. Previously in February, Marcos Amaral Gourgel, a Brazilian rough sleeper died at the entrance to Parliament. In the UK in 2017, 600 rough sleepers died on the streets. Meanwhile, councils in the UK spent £300 million in three years (2015-18) on placing homeless people in hotels and B&Bs. Yet everywhere there are cranes on the horizon as more and more expensive or luxury homes are being built.

If we can say that the squatting movement in the 1970s was, at minimum, a direct response to housing need among younger people and families - what can we say now? There should be nothing normal about empty homes, food banks, child poverty, overcrowding, unregulated private rented homes, low wages, zero hour contracts, benefit sanctions etc. but this is the manufactured political terrain we live in. As Peter Marcuse has said on homelessness but it applies just as aptly to the housing crisis: *'Homelessness exists not because the system is not working but because this is the way it works'*. The housing crisis is working well as a secure avenue for increased private profits. But despite the vast number of empty buildings, we cannot say that only squatting can solve the housing 'crisis' - not the least because we always need to think who is really is able



Squatter, Rasta Temple  
St Agnes Place, 70's

to squat - or who is more likely to squat? We still need to fight harder for decent cheap secure housing, be that public housing, housing co-ops, community land trusts, self-build. Anything that attempts to bring housing out of the sanctity of the housing market and the profits of global investors. But how would it be to bring back a common political culture of squatting and one that is in tune with the times? It always felt like there was widespread support for empties to be used as homes and not left empty and such sympathies for squatters remain despite the media barrage that wants to destroy that common sense. But to face the housing 'crisis' head on could those who can squat and those who can be helped and supported in squatting organise together to open up wasted houses and other buildings and to create from this housing and new cultures of resistance?

All the histories in this publication show that squatting is both a response to what is there (recession and empties or a city of speculation and lack of housing) and that it *can* be a dynamic that pushes the political terrain, often to places it doesn't want to go. In 1946, as in 1969 and as in 1983, things had to be tried, an experiment had to be made or nothing would change - let's begin today!

**Section 144 of Legal Aid and Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012:**  
**Offence of squatting in a residential building (1) A person commits an offence if—(a) the person is in a residential building as a trespasser having entered it as a trespasser, (b) the person knows or ought to know that he or she is a trespasser, and (c) the person is living in the building or intends to live there for any period.**

## **SQUATTING IS PART OF THE HOUSING MOVEMENT: NAMING THE MOMENT**

It's difficult to think where the squatting movement goes:

- Does it continue to fracture as each new precarious tenure comes up and each new law changes housing options - property guardians, conversions of offices to flats, empty housing estates sealed shut and protected 24 hours by guard?
- Should it make a widespread campaign for the removal of Section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 which makes squatting in residential properties illegal? Should it work more on a 'Squatting is still legal' campaign?
- Should it once again set up infrastructures of organised squatting that connect to a wide range of people who need housing and communities of support? This is not an argument for making squatting respectable to the authorities as more being an argument for making squatting relevant and possible for many more people.
- Should it open up more squatted social centres again to act as advice places, social places and as antagonistic bases?
- Does it try and start a movement that is not worried about the law but from a moral economy of housing and homelessness occupies empty new build homes? Can a movement of the poor actually expropriate empty luxury homes and for what length of time? Can it withstand the media hysteria, seek allies and support and up its game. Has to be said that such a new squatting movement without campaigning and public support is doomed.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO?**

If we look at what is going on elsewhere we can see militant responses to the current political terrain. Grassroots unions like United Voices of the World, Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain, Cleaners & Allied Independent Workers Union have all been doing dogged case work and direct action to fight big employers with loads of success. Groups like Housing Action Southwark and Lambeth and the London Renters Union, based on solid member-led organising and direct action are amazingly inspiring. There are also dozens of great local anti-gentrification and regeneration campaigns fighting hard and not afraid of reclaiming buildings in that struggle. It's possible to open up places to live as well as reclaiming nurseries, libraries, health centres, community centres for continued use by communities. All of these strands could come together to plot and plan in solidarity with each other linking squatting for housing with low wages, the hostile environment for migrants, against the Right and fascism, to support benefit claimants. All of the above would seek to bring a strong but decentralised housing movement to fruition that includes initiating, supporting and defending squatting. Could be good!



Squatted Creche demo  
Brixton Town Hall 1985

## ABOUT THIS BOOKLET:

This booklet comes out of the research residency 'The Politics of Organised Squatting' hosted by Mayday Rooms in London during 2018. The intention of the research was to look at how people have organised themselves as squatters creating basic infrastructures of use to the wider squatting movement. The full results of this research is in 3 full boxes in Mayday Rooms and some of it in this booklet produced in March 2019 for free distribution to the housing movement and to other readers.

It's very London-centric and with much from Southwark in South London probably because the writer was a squatter in Walworth for 10 years before getting a council home via the Hard To Let scheme. These days more involved in social centres, political education work and trying to resist gentrification.

x-chris c/o 56a Infoshop, 56a Crampton St, London SE17 3AE

# RESOURCES

## USEFUL WRITINGS ON SQUATTING

- *Squatting: The Real Story* (1980). PDF online
- *No.1 Clapham Road - The Diary of A Squat*, Jean Delarue, 1990
- *The UK Squatters Movement (1968 – 1980)*, Kesia Reeves, 2009 Online
- *'Gay Times': Identity, Locality, Memory, and the Brixton Squats in 1970s London*, Matt Cook, 2011 Online
- *South London Women's Hospital Occupation (1984-85)*, Roseanne Rabinowitz, 2013
- *Partisan Notes Towards a History of Squatting In The UK (1980 – Present Day)* x-Chris, 2014 Online
- *The Politics of The Crowbar: Squatting In London (1968 – 1977)* Rowan Tallis Milligan, 2016 Online
- *Sisterhood and Squatting in 1970's: Feminism and Urban Change in Hackney*, Christine Wall, 2017 Online
- *"We don't have leaders! We're doing it ourselves!": squatting, feminism and built environment activism in 1970s London*, Christine Wall, 2017 Online

## SQUATTING IN THE ARCHIVES

- **56a Infoshop**  
56 Crampton St, Walworth SE17 3AE  
*Large open-access radical archive, bookshop and place to meet people*
- **Mayday Rooms**  
88 Fleet St, London EC4Y 1DH  
*Large accessible radical archive, meeting place and offices for cool groups*
- **Bishopsgate Institute**  
230 Bishopsgate, London EC2M 4QH  
*Large accessible library that hosts the excellent Advisory Service for Squatters archive*

## SQUATTING HELP

**Advisory Service for Squatters**  
Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High St, London E1 7QX  
Open: Mon to Fri 2-6pm  
Phone: 0203 216 0099  
squatting.org.uk



# EMPTY HOMES? SQUAT THE LOT!!



September 1946: During the first big wave of squatting in the U.K post-World War Two, 12,000 people take to the streets in support of squatters occupations of empty mansion blocks and in solidarity with five Communist Party members active in the London squatting of the Duchess of Bedford House in Kensington who had been arrested.

August 2017: Tenants from the structurally unsafe Ledbury Estate march to the newly built Bermondsey Works luxury flats. The Council had said there are not enough homes to rehouse residents locally. Tenants said these were empty flats sitting on their doorstep and tried to get inside to see for themselves!



## THANKS SO MUCH:

Final word to say a big thanks to: Fani, Rosemary & Jacob at Mayday Rooms for all the support and fun; to Mara for her help; to Carolyn for some wise edits; to the good crew at 56a Infoshop and to all those along the way in all the squats and occupations. Better must come one day!!

As a part of the preparation of the Politics of Organised Squatting archive, two great events were hosted at Mayday Rooms: *The Left and Squatting – What Happened?* in February 2018 & *From Squats to Housing Co-ops: Reflections on Commoning Housing* with Mara Ferreri in March 2018.

*This booklet dedicated with love to my lovely daughter Hannah, a small child so full of wonder and spirit.*



**Back Cover:** Centre Point in Central London squatted in 1974. On completion the high rise tower stood empty for ten years. It changed owners many times, each owner seeking to speculate on the high value of the block. In 2019 it is empty again as newly converted luxury flats have failed to sell. The cycle of speculation and being empty continues ever onwards...

# 'REQUISITION ALL EMPTY MANSIONS AND LUXURY FLATS'



**EMPTY PROPERTY IS THEFT**