

No Rent, No Government

Stories of Squatting

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.

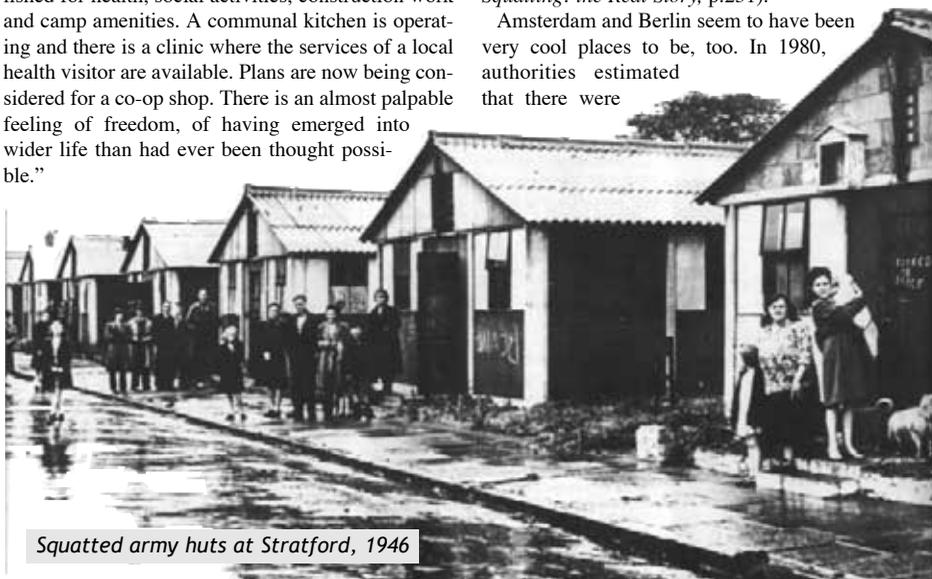
In 1946, when homelessness was at unprecedented heights in the UK, a family moved into the officers' mess of an unoccupied army camp near Scunthorpe. The news got round quickly and other families joined, and more and more camps were taken over—in the course of a few months, 45,000 people were thought 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).

Amsterdam and Berlin seem to have been very cool places to be, too. In 1980, authorities estimated that there were



Squatted army huts at Stratford, 1946



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.

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 evic-



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

tion 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.

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



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



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



Barricades cleared after Dutch eviction, 1980

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.

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.





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.

Further Advice:

These are just the basics—everything you need to know can be found in the indispensable *Squatters Handbook*, available for £1 from the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS). The ASS have gained experience over the last 20 years. 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.

ASS—2 St Paul's Road, London N1 2QN,
Tel.: 0171-359 8814

Desire is Speaking

Utopian Rhizomes



'The similarity of squatters' cultures in various Western European countries is remarkable', I wrote in a report of a tour of my band in May 1995 through four or five different West European countries. The buildings, music, clothes, codes, and of course, the inevitable dogs, are practically the same everywhere. Can it be that the dominant West European mass culture produces its own subculture? Isn't it time for something new?' This observation points to the existence of a West (and increasingly East) European network of people who do not necessarily know each other, but share ideals, practices and preferences that are different and opposed to the dominant culture. A network of bands, squats, zines, labels, mail orders, newsgroups, and people.

The '70s are generally considered to be the last 'utopian period'¹. After the failure of the near-revolution of 1968 it became clear that the spectacle transforms each of our desires into something it can cope with. The spontaneous explosion of desires was absorbed through student councils, democratic reforms, wage increases, employee participation and freedom of the press. In the Netherlands, the actions of the Provos and Kabouters were overruled by Marxist student leaders and the politicians of the New Left. The desires became harmless, the utopian moment passed by.

After the utopian period of Love and Peace, the '80s with all its 'No Future' attitude can be considered to be an atopia. With their dark clothes and nihilistic attitude, punks were not exactly flower children. They had no poetic vision of the future. Only the here and now existed, and the notion that you have to make the best out of that. If the system

sucks, create something yourself, something different, something better or at least something more fun.

When mainstream punk died a few years after it appeared on stage, the punk movement could start. Bands sprouted like weeds because according to the DIY ethos of punk anyone can play: you're a musician if you want to, not because a producer of a record company or journalist says so. With the bands came the venues, labels, rehearsal rooms, mail orders, zines. An inspiring underground culture appeared, while the media had lost their interest.

The same can be said for the squatters' movement. In Holland, and also abroad, the punk and the squatters' movements of the '80s were very much interwoven. Especially in the beginning, punk bands depended on squats for their gigs. If a huge house was occupied, the first thing you did was open a bar and try to create a gig space where (punk) bands could play. Famous in Amsterdam were the Emma—



a huge warehouse, and the music studio—Jokes Koeienvverhuurbedrijf. Not just Amsterdam, but many other towns had their own squats with gig spaces as well. Some of these have been legalized, others still exist as squats, or have disappeared. Nowadays they don't only feature punk bands, because in the end, even squatters learned to dance to techno and jungle.

The squatters' movement did not only offer space for bands but for a lot of other things as well. It was supposed to have died in 1984, after the eviction of a huge squat called the Wyers². I always considered this notion funny, because I arrived in Amsterdam in 1984 and since then the main part of my life has taken place in squats or legalized squats. Most of my friends used to live in squatted houses, and we frequented squatted bars, discos, gig venues and restaurants. Almost everything you needed or wanted could be found in squatted buildings, from grocery stores to saunas. Some of these facilities were especially directed at squatters, but a lot were also accessible to the general public. Back then it was no problem at all to live in what might be called a squatted zone for almost 24 hours a day; you could even travel to squats in other European countries in your holidays. You only dropped in at the dole office for this month's cash, or sometimes you got yourself a job (although this was not done back then).

Some people just squatted out of necessity, and for some it fitted into a broader ideology. But no matter how many squatters flirted with revolutionary ideas—for example, there were many support committees for the guerrillas in Central America, and some people went to Nicaragua to support the Sandinista revolution—most of them dissociated themselves from the theoretical discussions of young anarchists and communists in the '60s and '70s. Most squatters didn't want to change the world, but live their life here and now the way they chose to. If we can speak of any ideology, it was the ideology that there was none. As a female squatter said to a journalist of the newspaper *de Volkskrant*³: "Not an abstract ideal, nor the adherence to an ideology, or even a better society, but the improvement of a lousy personal situation. That is why I am involved."

Just as in the women's movement, the slogan 'the personal is political' was in vogue. Squatting and direct action became an attitude to life. Politics starts in your daily life, where power relations take hold, where you can start changing things and create room for different ways of living, working and relating to each other. In the squatters' magazine *Bluf*⁴, some-

one said in an article called 'Utopia': "I feel at home in the squatters' movement because I can live and work there and be politically active, together with people who generally have no illusions, without getting stuck in a 'no-future' attitude. People who have no illusions about the welfare state regarding housing, work, culture, love and whatever else is for sale. No illusions about parliamentary politics. People who resist nonetheless, not against the establishment, nor randomly, but because they have their own ideas about how they want to live and who want to fight for a space to realise that. In short: people who do not want the patterns and perspectives of their lives being dominated by what society has to 'offer', but by their own insights and desires."

There are altogether less squats now than in the '80s, due to hassle through new laws which have resulted in quicker and easier evictions. A lot of squats only exist for a few months. The problem with this is that it's harder to create gig venues, cafes, shops and other facilities. At the end of the '80s and the beginning of this decade a lot of the projects and infrastructure of the squatters' movement disappeared or chose some legalized form to continue their activities. Some of the initiatives now make use of state-subsidized jobs, employing each other on workfare schemes. Squatters are idealistic, but also pragmatic, or perhaps 'strategic' is a better word here. In order to survive you have to use the various possibilities the system unintentionally offers you. But in Amsterdam it's still 'squatday' (squats are being opened) almost every Sunday, and many young people opt for the uncertain but exciting life in a squat.

According to social scientists and journalists⁵, social movements are considered important when they play a role in the political arena, the media or both. The squatters' movement did so between 1976 and 1984, at least in Amsterdam. Squatters were large in number and well organised into neighbourhood groups; they had political impact and staged spectacular riots, and because of that, gained a lot of media attention. The squatters' movement disappeared as a political factor and as a media event after 1984, but the (new or legalized) squats and networks survived, and they turned out to be fertile soil for other initiatives and experimental ways of life.⁶

Out of the squatters' movement came a network of squats, communally owned houses, food co-ops, LET-systems, soundsystems, bands, mailorders, festivals, direct-action groups, research groups, no-paper (immigration) groups, publishers, magazines,



internet providers and newsgroups, infoshops, people's kitchens, mobile kitchens etc. Within this movement, a few thousand people are on the move. A lot of people are disappointed that there isn't a shared utopia anymore, no expectation of a better future. According to some of them, the shared utopian vision has always been 'the core of left politics, and that has to stay that way.'⁷ Well, if this is true, then perhaps the movement isn't 'left' anymore. But the dischord with the existing order and the desire to create something different here and now still remains. The shared utopia disappeared, but the utopian practices didn't.

At the moment, when 'neo-liberalism' is the only ideology and the market economy has colonized everything—even our genes—these practices show us possibilities for other ways of living, other economies, or even the end of economy. There is an ongoing discussion about the necessity of creating an alternative economy that is less dependent on the mainstream market and the state. The Dutch VAK-group, for example—a federation of houses, studios, work places, companies, a farm and financial institutions—strives towards an alternative infrastructure based on anarchist ideas, such as local democracy and federation. By supplying financial means, skills, experiences and other services, new projects can be supported and existing projects can network. Another example of an alternative economic system is the flourishing LET-schemes, local exchange systems without money, based on trading skills.



Desire, however, doesn't know exchange, but only theft and gift. The market economy expands by appropriating things which were freely available before. It is only after claiming exclusive ownership that things can be bought and sold. In this context, de-economizing is the breaking down of exclusive ownership: the reclaiming of public and private spaces, goods and provisions. The struggle against the economization of our daily lives is not merely a struggle against the market, but against economy itself, against the notion of scarcity. Most of the movement's practices are based on this notion of abundance.

According to the squatting movement, there are enough places to live in; you only need to occupy them. Punk and DIY culture show that anyone can make music, records, organise gigs, make 'zines, just do it. Like primitives, travellers are the hunters and gatherers of contemporary wild nature: the technological megacity, which offers more than enough waste to live on. The refugee aid movement or no-paper groups (supporting illegal immigrants) show that hospitality 'costs' nothing, but is a way to meet new friends, come into contact with other cultures and enhance your experience. Queers show that there is more than heterosexuality or homosexuality, more than man and woman. A collective like Rampenplan, which consists of a mobile kitchen, a publisher and a direct action video group, shows that it is possible to cook organic meals based on the principle of a 'fair' price and in doing so generate money for other projects, without expecting

anything in return. Even the LET-schemes, which use the principle of exchange, are based on the notion that everybody has some skills to offer somebody else, on abundance instead of scarcity. But most important is that the movement shows that you can have fun doing what you do. That you can play instead of work.

So what kind of community is the Dutch movement? It is clear that people participate together in direct actions and demonstrations, read the same magazines, go to the



same bars, gigs and festivals and some of them live together in squats or communally owned houses. They certainly meet. But they also meet people 'outside'; they attend schools or universities, or have a job. Hardly anyone is a full-time squatter anymore. You can live in a squat and study and work and play in a band and make love with men and women...

Although there are always people who try to formulate criteria as to who is 'inside' and who is not, the 'movement' of the '90s is relatively open, and because of that also lacks the sometimes suffocating pressure towards uniformity, which was characteristic of the social movements of the '70s and '80s, like the women's and gay movements, and also the squatters' movement.

What we see here is not a community, nor solidarity groups, but configurations of desire: networks of friendship and expression which undermine the prevailing relations of production, society, politics, family, the body, sex and even the cosmos. Lacking a single clear goal or programme, we see a multitude of struggles. There is no utopian tree from which readymade ideas about another world can be picked, but endless rhizomes on which at unexpected moments flowers appear.

The concept of rhizomes, modelled on the strange root systems of certain plants, was introduced by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They're opposed to the tree, which stands for the dominant Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, and also gnosticism, theology, ontology, philosophy. The tree exists in a hierarchical order of a central trunk with larger and smaller branches. The trunk forms the connection between all parts, thus in a way limiting connections. A rhizome, on the contrary, can be connected with any other at any point. A tree can be cut down, whereas rhizomes are much less subject to destruction. Rhizomes can grow again along another line if broken at some point. Rhizomes are abundant; if weeded out in one place, they will definitely show up somewhere else. Rhizomes are endless, as are desire and the imagination.

So utopianism didn't disappear after the '70s, it's everywhere—sometimes hidden, sometimes exposed. It can't be exterminated, because it's like a weed. It's the voice of desire and the imagination in a world dominated by material interests and reason. Like weeds, desire can be 'cultivated' for a shorter or longer period, it can be locked up within political organisations or single issue groups, but it can never be weeded out. In some periods it's more under-

ground, voluntarily so or because the state or political organisations (right or left) force it to be. But it will always find a way to break out. It will always find a hole to break through and flow free, a hole in the spectacle, temporarily or permanent.

submitted by 'Ravage', bi-weekly magazine, Van Ostadestraat 233n, 1073 TN Amsterdam, Holland

Footnotes

- 1 Saskia Poldervaart, 'Anti-utopisten maken zich er gemakkelijk vanaf' in 'de Volkskrant', June 1998
- 2 See Virginia Mamadouh, 'De stad in eigen hand', Amsterdam 1992.
- 3 8 March, 1980
- 4 No. 79, 28 September, 1983
- 5 Scum [editor's comment]
- 6 I prefer not to use the word 'lifestyle', because its meaning has been obscured, both by marketers and the American social ecologist Murray Bookchin. See his essay 'Social anarchism or lifestyle anarchism, an unbridgeable chasm', AK Press 1995.
- 7 Ronald van Haasteren *et al* in 'Het Gelijk...uitnodiging tot een debat', Papieren Tijger 199

