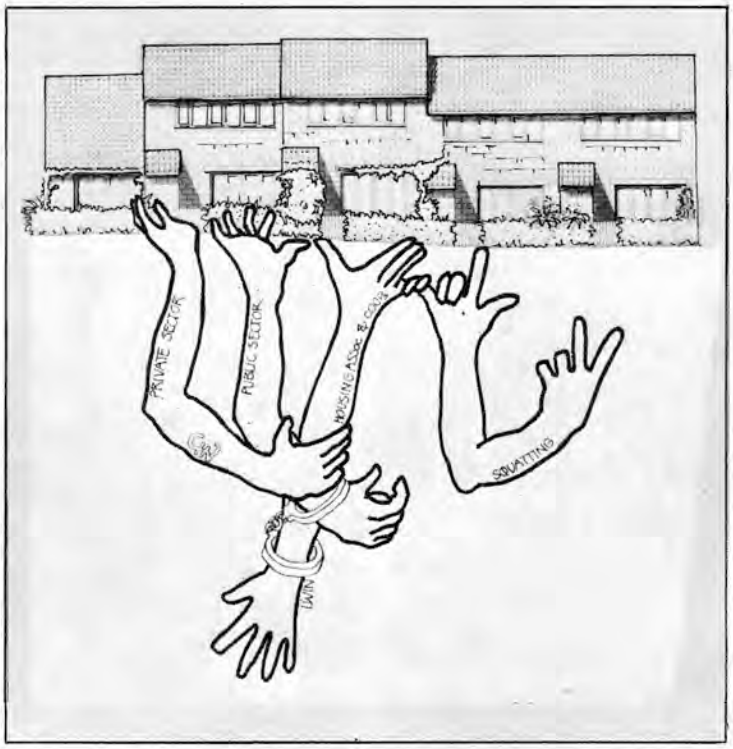
SQUATTING
THE FOURTH ARM OF HOUSING ?

MARK GIMSON, CAROLINE LWIN & NICK WATES

In Britain squatting has grown rapidly over the past few years and is now a significant factor in the housing field. Although no reliable statistics are available, there are probably 50 000 squatters in Britain, with 30 000 in London alone. We are not talking here about the invasion of land as happens in many Third World countries, but the occupation of empty buildings by people without the owner's permission.

This phenomenon has occurred in most European countries, but its extent and nature vary because of different housing situations and legal frameworks. Britain has a unique legal position in that squatting does not constitute a criminal offence. If someone 'deprives the owner of the enjoyment of his property', there is nothing whatsoever the police can do to get the property back. The owner has to take civil proceedings against the trespassers, and this will, in London anyway, take several months, and costs a great deal in legal fees.

Squatting occured in Britain after both the first and second World Wars, mainly in disused army camps. The latest wave started in 1968 and has gradually been gathering momentum since. There are good reasons why this should have happened now. On the one hand there has been a desperate shortage of homes: at least 250 000 people in Britain have no permanent home, and about one million inhabited houses are unfit for human habitation according to government standards. On the other hand the number of good houses left empty has increased drastically: 100 000 identified in Greater London alone in 1971. Squatters have merely put two and two together by taking direct action to house themselves in the empty buildings. But by doing so they have done more than merely provide themselves with a roof, and in this article we intend to look at some of the wider effects of the squatting movement; on personal lifestyle; on local communities; on public opinion and the media; and on the establishment.



In Britain as in other Western countries, squatting of empty houses has grown rapidly over the past few years. Squatting is the most extreme form of direct action in the field of housing; at the same time it has become a significant factor – a fourth arm – of housing provision.

Personal lifestyle

Squatting has provided individuals with a freedom from many of the constraints normally imposed on them by society. A range of skills, attitudes and projects have developed which are denied to people in other forms of tenure.

The process of liberation begins with the very act of entering someone else's property often through a roof or broken window to take it over as your home. This in itself breaks with fundamental tenet of society in which we have all been brought up to believe: the sacred value of private property.

Empty properties are often found in a derelict state, either through neglect or through deliberate vandalism on the part of the owner to discourage squatting. The first task for squatters is usually, therefore, to effect repairs to their houses – mending windows, staircases and leaky roofs, and replacing drainage, plumbing, wiring and, in some cases, even whole floors and walls. New kitchens and bathrooms may have to be installed, and there is always general decoration to be done.

Their relationship to their buildings as users is freer and more spontaneous even than owner occupiers, who are usually constrained by considerations of market value and saleability. This has produced imaginative and uninhibited attitudes towards the physical limitations of their dwellings. Squatters will knock down walls between rooms and houses or build extensions as their space requirements demand. It has also produced some of the rare examples of self-expression to be found in the contemporary British built environment, 1.

This unrestrained approach to the use of space has made possible a variety of different lifestyles. Squatters have been able to test the potentials of communal living without the pressures of commitment which accompany experiments such as rural communes, where there has been a substantial financial investment by the participants, 2. Homosexuals and lesbians have been able to live in a way which society would otherwise seek to repress.

Freedom from the financial constraints of having to pay rent or mortgage repayments has enabled them to evade full-time jobs and given them a chance to explore other possibilities. A range of alternative projects and services such as food co-ops, cost-price shops and cafes, art, printing or other workshops, and building co-operatives has developed. The availability of free space has also provided fertile breeding ground for the setting up of organisations for women, gays, and religious, political and other radical groups.

What is probably most significant, however, is the politicising effect the act of squatting can have on the squatters themselves. Brought face to face with homelessness, property speculation, and incompetent local authorities, squatters gain first-hand experience of the mechanics of the housing crisis and may come to realise that it is inherent in the capitalist system. Neither the basic way in which resources are distributed nor the injustice this causes, in this case homelessness, have changed since Engels wrote a century ago:-

> Capital does not want to abolish the housing shortage even if it could . . . In such a society the housing shortage is no accident; it is a necessary institution and can be abolished together with all its effects on health etc., only if the whole social order from which it springs is fundamentally refashioned. (Frederick Engels: *the housing question*, 1872)

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One of the prerequisites of a civilised social order must be that all people have the right to a reasonable dwelling.

Local communities

Planning blight has violated every city in Britain. Buildings are left empty for a variety of reasons. Local authorities leave property vacant because of inflexibility in dealing with redevelopment schemes and through sheer mismanagement of their housing stock. Property developers may leave aging property vacant as a deliberate policy to speed up the process of decay so that they can set the provisions they need for redevelopment, or, in the case of new property, as a means of increasing rent levels. And because of their dependence on finance capital, local authorities themselves usually operate with some of the methods and motivations of property developers.

But leaving property empty does not effect merely those people who might otherwise be living in it. It affects the whole community. Corrugated iron is unsightly, and empty houses breed rats and germs, encourage vandals and dossers, and can fall into a state of dangerous structural disrepair. Local shops suffer from declining trade and the whole community becomes demoralised. An influx of squatters reverses these trends and brings new life into an area. Houses are repaired and repainted, local shops and cafes revitalised and community social life revived, 3.

Public opinion and the media

A small but growing proportion of the population in Britain now have some contact with squatting, either directly through first-hand experience or indirectly through friends or relatives. But the majority form their opinions from the media. In rare cases the media have been sympathetic, but their basic sensationalist and reactionary attitude has had a damaging effect on the squatting movement, and squatters have been used as scapegoats for many of the evils of society.

This attack on squatters came to a head in the summer of 1975 when the Mirror group of newspapers launched a massive anti-squatter campaign following their 15-man 6-week probe into 'The new squatter army'. 'Squatting, 1975, is highly organised, nationwide, spreading rapidly – and DANGEROUSLY . . . it is not only a social problem, but a sinister political threat.' After this, hardly a day went by without one or other of the national papers carrying a paragraph on squatting. Under headings like 'Smashed by the grabbers: how the new squatters ruin hopes of the real needy', most of the articles made a hysterical and bigoted attack on squatters, who were all identified as morally corrupt individuals, largely responsible for Britain's housing problems, 4.

This campaign was supported by a flurry of angry letters particularly in *The Times* from property owners, civil servants, Members of Parliament and lawyers, usually based on the theory that squatters are irresponsible hippy drop-outs or political extremists or both.

However, the facts show otherwise. A council survey of squatters in the London borough of Lambeth showed that: 'About 60% of the dwellings are occupied by households with children: in some cases there is more than one family in a dwelling. The remainder are occupied by couples and single people, some living alone and others in groups. Two-thirds of the squatters from whom information was obtained came from within Lambeth and most of the remainder from other parts of London.' These statistics also invalidate the argument often use by councils that the squatters

1. Guerrilla building. On the roof of his squat somewhere in London, Andy Ingham defies the planning control system with this roof extension that he built from second-hand materials.

2. Communal living through squatting. The Palm Court Hotel in Richmond was moved into last November by Chiswick Women's Aid Centre with 17 battered wives and 34 children. They had been forced into seeking larger accommodation by Hounslow Council, and they found the hotel, which had been empty for about five years, to be ideal. With terraced gardens leading down to the Thames and over 100 rooms, communal life has been able to flourish and a safe environment has been provided for mothers and children. Eventually the hotel is intended to provide a community centre for the whole of Richmond.

3. Community social life revived by squatters. The annual Tolmers Village Carnival in central London is one of the many social events initiated and organised largely by squatters for the local community as a whole. As one tenant commented: 'I think the squatters have introduced the only communal element we have ever had in this district. I've lived here 23 years and there's been nothing but back-biting. And now the squatters have really brought a friendly atmosphere in.'

are not their responsibility because they are not natives of their borough.

During the 1975 'squatter-bashing' campaign, only a handful of articles attempted serious consideration of the basic issues and underlying causes. So the effect was, as the *Shelter Information Bulletin* pointed out, to create a 'climate of public opinion offering fertile soil for the Law Commission's working paper of last year [that trespass be a criminal offence] or even sterner measures. Anyone of a suspicious humour might be forgiven for wondering if the field were not being deliberately tilled.'

The Establishment

Squatting poses a direct threat to the Establishment, as it raises many questions about its ability to cope with the current housing crisis. Why are there so many empty houses? Why are so many people homeless? Why is it that sound houses have to be destroyed for redevelopments which often house less people than the original buildings, and often in less satisfactory environmental conditions? Why is the cost of housing as a component of the average household expenditure steadily rising? Why is it that certain sections of society, particularly young single people are not catered for?

By raising these questions, and backing them up with direct action, squatters have been able to force the authorities to take some action. Local authorities have frequently been persuaded to alter their proposals for particular areas of housing and development; to alter their policies about the nature of accommodation provided; and in some cases, to make internal organisational changes to try and speed up procedures and iron out inefficiency.

The initial response of the Establishment to squatting was confrontation; to evict immediately; to vandalise houses so as to render them unsquattable, 6; to attempt to discredit squatters; and to introduce legislation to make squatting more difficult.

But this response did little to solve the housing crisis, which increased rather than diminished. Evictions could be difficult and generate bad publicity if the squatters were well organised. So could the vandalising of sound houses, especially when they were going to be rehabilitated eventually anyway. In many cases squatters merely reoccupied property after they had been evicted, so that the authorities were back where they started. At the time of writing there are proposals in train in the form of the Criminal Trespass Bill to make squatting an illegal activity. But this bill is meeting with increasing opposition even from sectors within the Establishment which realise the futility of trying to prevent squatting while homelessness and empty property are both rampant. It would merely lead to squatting becoming more overtly political, militant, and 'anti-authority', 5, as it is in Italy, for instance. There squatting was the springboard for the arrival on the political scene of the revolutionary and now significant Lotta Continua group. In Milan in 1971, for example, in one day the group helped 70 immigrant families to squat, and 30 000 demonstrators supported this action.

The Establishment has therefore changed from open confrontation to 'divide and rule' tactics and co-option. The present Labour Government has pressed councils to adopt the more sophisticated policy of trying to institutionalise squatting by persuading squatters to organise themselves into associations, which can to some extent be controlled and manipulated by the authorities. This tendency has reached its zenith in the attempt by government agencies to persuade several groups of squatters to become tenant co-operatives. Councils have also co-opted squatters by granting 'licences' to so-called 'official' squatters, 7.

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Workers Press

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Rick Massey

4. Squatters confront the Establishment. During the summer of 1975, not only did the press unleash its campaign against squatters, but also an important struggle came to a head. In Elgin Avenue, Notting Hill Gate, the squatters were refusing to move until everyone was offered reasonable alternative housing. After years of rejecting this demand, when it came to a showdown on the day of evictions the Greater London Council gave in. The Establishment is shown above as represented by an Under Sheriff and a Chief Superintendent waiting for the word to come through that the squatters would accept the houses offered to them.

5. Squatting as a political protest. In March 1974, a block of luxury flats in Dover Street at the heart of Mayfair was squatted as a public demonstration against homelessness and empty property. It was the first such political protest to follow the occupation of Centre Point two months earlier. Within two days, 40 people including 6 families had arrived and been rehoused in rooms with fitted carpets, luxury kitchens and central heating. They immediately formed a committee to organise security, publicity and to make demands on central government to aid the homeless and fight property speculation.

6. Vandalism by property owners repaired by squatters. Like other property owners, the Crown Commissioners tried to deter squatters by vandalising their own houses to make them uninhabitable. At 65 Albany Street in central London, they smashed the plumbing and removed most of the floor-boards (above left). Nevertheless, squatters did move in soon after this and repaired the damage (above right). The ground floor of this house was used as a community cafe during the summer of 1975.

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7. Squatter organisations can be co-opted by the Establishment. 'Patchwork' is a typical official squatter organisation. After modest beginnings, it has gradually found itself being bombarded with houses by London Borough of Westminster Council, who were thankful to find a 'respectable' organisation to use their empty properties awaiting redevelopment. Naturally, Patchwork's well intentioned organisers were delighted with this windfall. But they have never reassessed their position and accepted that they are now playing an important political role in the borough's housing. The inhabitants of this house and many others in Paddington have recently been told by Patchwork to leave because the council want to demolish the area. It seems that Patchwork has gradually become part of the Establishment.

Workers Press

8. Housing struggles and work struggles. Squatters in inner London are often students or middle-class drop-outs, whereas in the outer boroughs almost all are young homeless and working class. The big squat at Summer House in London's East End has been led by people with experience in trades union struggles. They have dealt with the external agencies – the press, the council and the government – with a skill which other squatters could learn much from. But this has been at the expense of the internal politics of the block and seems to have led to an alienation of the leadership from the others. Tactics which have proved effective in work struggles are not necessarily suitable in housing struggles.

If you believe that the housing and other problems of poor and homeless people can ever be solved without basic changes to the existing social, economic and political structures, then this institutionalisation of squatting will seem to be a progressive policy. But if you believe, as we do, that fundamental changes are necessary, then you will assess these moves as a subtle way for the Establishment to absorb and neutralise dangerous pressures on it.

This policy of accepting squatters is encouraged by the fact that to many central London borough councils squatters are actually a more profitable proposition than rent-paying tenants.

In Camden for instance figures released in June 1975 by the finance department showed that Council rents no longer covered repairs, maintenance, supervision and management of the property – all functions which squatters carry out themselves.

Conclusions

Contrary to popular myth, the squatting movement has never been a centrally organised or orchestrated campaign, but has derived its momentum from a large number of individuals reacting to the housing crisis in similar way, connected by an informal network of contacts and publications, **9.** However there is a critical relationship between housing struggles and work struggles which expresses itself in the communication and mutual support between squatters and tenants on the housing side, and trades unionists on the work side. All parties are to blame for the fact that these links have not been as strong or productive as they might have been, **8.** But at local level there has already been some successful collaboration, and in many cases trades councils have blacked the cutting off of squatters' services by public authorities. Squatters have also been responsible for encouraging one recent change in trades union tactics – the factory occupations and workins. The next step, following the Green Bans of building workers in Australia and Birmingham, is for trades unions to refuse to demolish useful and structurally sound buildings, to physically defend squatters faced with eviction, and to make demands about the kind of buildings which should be erected.

In the meantime squatting is the most extreme form of direct action in the field of housing and is one of the few phenomena in Britain which contains the seeds of radical change. Squatters are taking more control of their lives and at the same time defying and attacking the authorities and the system they operate. By doing so they show, on a personal and on a political level, what some of the potentials are when the accepted constraints of society are removed.

But above all, at a time of economic recession, squatting must be regarded seriously in terms of housing provision. It has become an important factor in this field – a fourth arm. □

Further reading

Bailey, Ron (1973): *The squatters.* Penguin special

Bailey, Ron (30 Nov 74): 'Squatting tactics', in *Wildcat* 3.

Graft-on/ City Growers (6/73): 'Squatters' policies', in *AD* p 340.

Law Commission (28 Jun 74): *Offences of entering and remaining on property.* Working paper No 52.

Litterick, Ian (17 Feb 72): 'Group squat', in *New Society.*

Lotta Continua (1971): *Take over the city.*

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Pollard, John (8/73: 'Squatting in the city', in *AD* p504.

Release (1975): *Entering and remaining on property.*

Wates, Nick (forthcoming May 76): The battle for Tolmers Square. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

(Most pamphlets are available from Rising Free, 197 King's Cross Rd, London WC1.)

Mark Gimson is a student at the Architectural Association.

Caroline Lwin is an architectural assistant with Martin Richardson.

Nick Wates studied architecture and planning and is at present finishing his book *The battle for Tolmers Square.*

All three contributors are themselves squatters – Mark off Albany Street and Caroline & Nick in Tolmers Square.

Philip Walmuth

9. Squatting in the provinces. Squatting has spread from London to cities and towns all over Britain. In the small Pennine town of Hebden Bridge, everyone becomes quickly aware of any unusual activity, and there has been some hostility towards the squatters. They are occupying council houses which are lying vacant as a result of the council's plans to turn the town into a commuter and tourist centre. However, many local people agree with the squatters that his bureaucratic fantasy ignores the real problems of the predominantly working-class people of the town.