

**SQUATTING AS A FORCE IN PLANNING**

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Squatters are viewed by most people as a menace. Their activities are seen as merely frustrating the attempts of planners, architects and other professionals to improve the environment. I dispute this view, and in the following paper want to make two proposals. First; that if we look closely at the reasons why people squat, it enables us to identify fundamental problems of the planning process. And second; that squatting provides the planner who is dissatisfied with his present role in society, a viable alternative. Throughout the essay I shall use the term 'planner' to denote all those involved with planning the built environment, and not merely the professional town planner.

The squatting movement is not cohesive, but contains people with diverse ideologies and objectives. In order to identify the forces at work, I will first look at three separate squats, each of which illuminates different problems. These occurred at Arbor House in Tower Hamlets, Myrdle Street in Tower Hamlets, and the Prince of Wales Crescent area in Kentish Town. I will then discuss some defects of the planner's present role and relate this to the process of squatting.

Arbour House is a five-storey tenement block in Tower Hamlets containing seventy-five flats. It was built in 1937 and has been managed ever since by the local Council; originally Stepney and now Tower Hamlets. In September 1969 three homeless families moved into three flats which they claimed had been empty for eighteen months, and proceeded to live there. The Council were intending to convert and modernise the block and were slowly removing existing tenants. For eleven months the Council attempted to oust the squatters both with court orders and with harrassment tactics like turning off the electricity, but by skilful legal manoeuvring and use of publicity the squatters fended off all attacks and steadily increased their number to thirty-two families, including sixty children. In August 1970 the High Court finally issued eviction orders, but the families remained unimpressed and prepared barbed wire defences to repel bailiffs. The Council were loath to enforce eviction as by this time Arbor House was national

news and they had after all to face elections. Yet they were unable to offer the squatters alternative accommodation other than welfare accommodation which the squatters rejected..

Eventually a settlement was arrived at which led to the formation of the Tower Hamlets Family Squatters Association. The Council agreed to loan empty houses to this Association provided they were vacated when required for redevelopment. After the settlement Arbor House was slowly evacuated as shortlife housing was handed over by the Council.

As a background to this event it must be appreciated that many people in Tower Hamlets are living in appalling conditions. Tower Hamlets, in common with other inner London boroughs has a chronic shortage of housing, coupled with an exodus of population and industry, and a dwindling base of rate income. In addition, it suffered extensive bomb damage during the war and for historical reasons has some of the worst slums in London. The following figures, taken from the Medical Officer of Health's annual reports, give an indication of the problem:

	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971
Waiting list	8015	8026	7616	6945	6269	5830
New dwellings	951	1120	2123	1978	1670	1202
Application for rehousing to larger or smaller accom;	1668	1040	1222	830	1372	1319

Also in 1965 he estimated there were 13,800 'unfit' properties.

Apart from its size, there are other problems with the waiting list. To qualify one must have lived in the Borough for two years. Also, by virtue of the priority system, single people, childless couples, the young and the old have little hope of receiving accommodation. So homelessness proper - i.e. no roof over the head - occurs frequently as the result of marital disputes, young couples being thrown out of inlaw's homes, and eviction for rent arrears.

Yet if one takes a walk around Tower Hamlets it becomes apparent that a large number of houses are unoccupied. Indeed, it is a strange paradox today that while SHELTER and even government inform us that homelessness is increasing,

the excessive number of vacant buildings is obvious to everyone. The 1971 Greater London Census indicated that there were almost 100,000 unoccupied properties in London at that time. In view of the consistent failure of government, planners and charities to solve this paradox, it is not surprising that ordinary people have taken the initiative by squatting.

Property is left empty for a variety of reasons. One of these is bureaucratic incompetence of which the conversion of Arbor House provides a prime example.

After the first tenants were removed there was a period of five years before the block could be reinhabited. Even if the squatters had not added to the delay, this period would have been almost four years, which is absurd in view of the housing shortage and the technical simplicity of the work.

There are several reasons why the conversion took so long. Firstly, the division of functions within the Council. The conversion was first conceived by the Engineers and Surveyors Department which was also responsible for the design and construction procedure. But it was the Housing Department which had the responsibility for removing the occupants and finding them somewhere else to live. The engineers and surveyors performed the operation as cheaply as possible, but in their budget they did not consider the lost rent or the cost of providing welfare accommodation for an equivalent number of people, because these responsibilities belonged to another department. For the same reason the actual construction process was out of touch with the purpose of the construction; the whole building was treated as a single unit for construction purposes, this being the most economically efficient way for the contractors to do their part.

If the separate Council departments had coordinated their efforts a more sensible deployment of resources might have been achieved. In this example we are only considering the conversion of a single tenement block, but the same malaise is apparent in the treatment of large comprehensive development areas in the Borough. Each Council department keeps dogmatically to its own area of

responsibility. There is a need for a corporate planning approach in order to coordinate separate departments, but unfortunately the structure of local government frustrates any move in this direction.

Another problem is that the designers were working to standards and regulations laid down by remote bodies frequently outdated. We must continually rethink our definition of what constitutes a slum. Existing standards and procedures are based on nineteenth century legislation designed to control the menace to health presented by the slums of industrial cities of that day. Civic planning, public health legislation and building byelaws were originally fashioned by a militant generation of sanitary engineers and medical officers who were ignorant of the germ theory of disease and much learnt since about nutrition. Therefore cleanliness was assumed to be the route to health. This was an error, or at an oversimplification as shown by experience of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Holland who have less taps, baths and water-borne sanitation without a corresponding increase in disease.

But this reasoning still pervades government thinking about slums. Slum clearance has always been seen as a once-for-all task. For instance, a Ministry of Health circular of 1933 states:

'In the opinion of the minister, to make sure that the evil should be remedied, it is necessary to fix a limited time for the work, and to prepare a timetable for its progress and completion within the time limited..... The time should, so far as is practicable, be drawn up on the basis of clearing all areas that require clearance not later than 1938.'<sup>(1)</sup>

This kind of statement has been repeated many times. The Tower Hamlets medical officer of health stated in 1969: 'hopes are high to see the last of the slum areas represented by 1975.'<sup>(2)</sup>

In the meantime standards and social norms change. Conditions that should be regarded as intolerable depend less on the structure and equipment of individual dwellings, and more on the way housing is used and of the character of the

environment in which it stands.

A further problem, related to the first two, is the tendency of planners and administrators to deal in large units. Arbor House was considered as a single unit for construction purposes but could have been split into wing or even single flat units. This would have involved less disruption and reduced the necessity for flats to stand empty. Although schemes which use long runs or standardised components offer the most economic form of building, and make life simpler for the designers, it is not necessarily in the interests of housing needs.

Dealing in large units also creates problems of decanting. As at Arbor House, builders like to start with a clear site. Because it takes so long to get people moved, decanting has to start years before the houses are needed and consequently properties stand empty. (It is these properties which squatters are now using as a result of the settlement). In one development area resident families were moved out prior to the area being flattened. The development was then delayed and so the property was used to house problem families. Owing to a change in development policy the architects decided they did not want to knock the area down, but additional pressure was brought to bear by local residents as the area now contained 'undesirables'.

Economics of scale and organisational simplicity lead to planning in larger and larger units. But what is needed for the individual is planning consideration at the micro level.

Much publicity has been given to evil landlords, and the failure of the 'free market' to provide housing, and it might be assumed that once land is publicly owned all will be well. But as Donnison warns:

'A government which drastically restricts the operation of price mechanisms and the rights of property owners needs to be peculiarly well equipped with alternative criteria for determining what people want and how the stock of housing should be used.' (3)

It would appear that Tower Hamlets is not 'peculiarly well equipped.'

One root cause behind the failure of Tower Hamlets to provide adequate housing is undoubtedly lack of financial reserves. In theory a Local Authority has many advantages as a housing controller; it can help those in greatest need; make more efficient use of space; provide security of tenure; protect tenants from abuses found in private property; and enables the community to acquire capital gains and apply them in a constructive fashion. But the Milner Holland report makes it clear that Local Authorities cannot make a contribution unless the tangle of debt burdens imposed on them by accidents of history are more rationally distributed. A way must be found to place the burden of finance for rehousing on those who can most afford it.

Now we move to another squat which is taking place at Parfett Street and Myrdle Street, E.1. The main difference between this squat and the one at Arbor House is that the houses belong to a property company - Epracet - whose sole aim is speculation. They are due to be pulled down in 1975 as part of a slum clearance programme and were left empty for months before squatters moved in. The squatters attempted to persuade Tower Hamlets Council to place a control order on the houses, but initially the Council refused on the grounds that the 'condition of the houses did not endanger the health or safety of the occupants.'<sup>(4)</sup>

They then tried to persuade the Council to bring forward compulsory purchase orders, but this also failed, although it was in the Council's power to do this. They claimed that properties were being sold and resold in order to create an artificially high price for the purposes of compulsory purchase by the community. 'He (a squatter spokesman) cited three properties in Parfett Street sold for £1,870, then for £4,000. two years later, and for £6,000. two years after that.'<sup>(5)</sup>

Epracet eventually obtained eviction orders from the court/<sup>but</sup> by moving from one house to another, switching named persons in houses and other tactics, the squatters managed to stay.

Several colourful demonstrations and an illegal eviction caused considerable interest in the press and television who were sympathetic to the squatters.

Negotiations then reopened with the Council and at present it seems likely the Council will use its powers under section 16 of the 1957 Housing Act to make a closing order on the houses, on the grounds that they are 'unfit'. It could then purchase the houses under the Act's section 17(2) and rehabilitate them with grant aid for temporary accommodation.

By this action squatters are attacking one of the most contentious issues of planning; the right of individuals to own land and to make profits from the sale of land. This issue has always been at the heart of planning. One of the most exciting ideas of Howard's Garden City concept was that all land was to be owned by the municipality. Any increase of land value owing to land-use would therefore accrue to the community. The 1947 Town and County Planning Act introduced development charges in order to obtain a similar result, but these were scrapped by the Conservative government in 1954 on the grounds that they had proved 'too unreliable an instrument to act as the lynch-pin of a permanent settlement.'<sup>(6)</sup> The Land Commission established in 1967 had as one of its main objectives 'to secure that a substantial part of the development value created by the community returns to the community and that the burden of the cost of land for essential purposes is reduced.'<sup>(7)</sup>

This objective was met by introducing a betterment levy. Unfortunately this whole apparatus was scrapped, again by a Conservative government, in 1971, on the grounds that it had 'no place in a free society.' The recent inflation of land values is apparent to everyone, and the only people who benefit are those with a stake in property. The rewards for property development are quite out of proportion to the skills exercised and the risks taken and more millionaires have been thrown up recently by property development than any other branch of commerce or industry. The losers are inevitably those who do not own land, and the community at large.

There is much empty private property in London, from that emotive symbol Centre Point, to properties like Myrdle Street, and the reasons for it being



empty are more repugnant than with council property; namely that the present market situation allows individuals to make more money by leaving their property empty than by having it occupied. The squatters hope that by occupying this property they will attract public attention to the problem. Hopefully this might lead to legislative action.

In Kentish Town, squatting of a very different nature is taking place. Within close proximity to Prince of Wales Crescent there are approximately three hundred squatters and the number is growing rapidly. The houses are empty for much the same reasons as indicated at Arbor House; namely bureaucratic insensitivity coupled with large scale planning. It also seems to be deliberate policy. "The number of voids is an expression of progress. The national vacancy rate is 2% which is too low. We probably need a vacancy rate of 5% to encourage mobility." "2,564 of the Council's 21,000 tenancies were shown as void on the date of the last computer print out." (8) Camden Council's vacancy rate is therefore over 12% - progress indeed!

But the squatters in Kentish Town are doing more than merely demanding the Camden Council provide for housing. They are asking that occupants be allowed to build and repair their own houses. They are pointing out the need for self-help housing programme. Doctor John Pollard (unofficial squatter spokesman) carried out a survey of 121 squatters whom he knew personally. He found that 32% of these had a university degree, and that their occupations were extremely wide ranging. Nearly all of them could be described as craftsmen in that they wanted to be able to work for themselves at something they were interested in. There is no organised movement like that of the family squatters. Most of them, on hearing about the empty houses, just arrived and set themselves up. (Harassment occurs rarely and occupying houses no longer requires the careful pre-planning necessary a few years ago). Their main non-paid occupation is renovating the Council's property at no expense to the Council.

A real new community has grown up; a diverse group of people who are trying

to lead a new way of life within the existing societal structure. In addition to renovating houses they have set up workshops and studios and built a park, all at their own expense. The park

'contains a patio/stage area, a sandpit, a nearly completed paddling pool, a lawn, a paved area, a cafe, a Wendy house, a food stall, two tree houses, and several walls painted by local artists.' 'The estimated saving to the Council in the improvement of its assets is £2,000.' 'A free food restaurant is at present being constructed using donated labour and materials (19) and a store has been opened with free and nearly free goods and it continues to recycle unwanted mattresses, furniture, clothing, toys, etc. to the general public.' 'A creche has been started for local residents' children younger than three years.' (10) Also two community newspapers, 'Crescent Community' and 'Here and Now Times', have been published.

In his report 'Squat' Doctor John Pollard suggests that Camden should encourage a self-help programme of conversion of its properties. This it should do by means of conversion grants (subsidised by the government under existing legislation) to the occupiers and the offer of rent free accommodation for a period of time. By means of this, he estimates the Council could save £1,200,000. each year.

A part from the report quoted above, these squatters have been relatively inarticulate compared with the earlier pioneers, and there have been no spectacular campaigns or demands made. Yet what they are doing says a lot to planners. They are questioning the need for planning at the level which it currently operates. In terms of dwellings, they are objecting to the overstandardised, ready wall-papered, off-the-peg unit that results from rigid cost yardsticks and because of bureaucracy design which is inevitably aimed to suit the majority. Also the amount of choice offered by planners at the microlevel is insufficient. The following cynical passage from a community newspaper makes the point:

"But we mustn't grumble, they are giving us three choices. Trees can go here, here or here.....We can have this road, or that road blocked and a

real choice can be made outside our front doors, as to whether we have a one foot brick wall with a hedge, a three foot brick wall without a hedge, or a nice three foot fence. They must be joking. The roof's leaking, the dustbin overflowing, and the landlord's banging on the door. What do we care about his.....fence."

The three squats discussed so far have each been the reaction of certain individuals to a different set of circumstances. But all three seem to be symptoms of one underlying problem: namely the alienation of the planned from the planner.

There is an increasing distance between workers and those 'unions and managements' who take decisions on their behalf; between residents in the city, particularly if they are poor, and those who represent and govern them; between the claims of politicians and industrialists that people have never had it so good, and the actual experience of those who have never had it in any material sense, and who are progressively alienated from any responsibility for their lives at work and in their communities. (12)

It is almost irrelevant which political party is in control, the mechanisms for controlling the environment are still the same; are still just as remote from the individual. Decisions are taken by professionals for whom the individual citizen is no more than a statistic.

This has always been so. Planning has always been an activity carried out by a few for the benefit of the many. Yet in recent years there have been increasing demands for the many to have a greater say in government than is provided by our system of representative democracy. People are no longer content to sit back and let experts do everything, especially when they do not appear to do it very well.

The planners' reply to these demands has been to introduce 'public participation.' This is not the place for an analysis of participation, but it is worthe

mentioning a fundamental infirmity of participation as currently undertaken by planners. While allowing the public to make suggestions and objections, there is no mechanism for ensuring that anything the public says will be taken into consideration, except the good faith of the planners. Participation is therefore at the consultative level on Sherry Arnstein's latter. (13) Decisions are still taken by professionals who have their own inherent value systems and goals. So while the move towards public participation is welcome, it has not gone far enough, and has not solved the fundamental problem that planning is not a value free, rational activity. Planning in this country has traditionally been 'apolitical', being a part of the Welfare State apparatus. It has been seen as a problem-solving activity, using the empirical methodology handed down by Geddes and others of 'survey, analysis, plan and implementation.'

Recently more planners have become aware that in reality planning is a political activity, concerning the distribution of scarce resources between power groups. They have realised that traditional planning leads to the 'support or rationalisation of the status quo, in situations where fundamental changes are necessary.' (14) They have therefore begun to question the validity of their role and attempted to define alternative modes of operation. One of these modes currently in favour is advocacy planning.

The ethic of advocacy planning proposes that planners should align themselves with minority groups, with whom they sympathise, and fight their cause. In some way it is assumed that if all planners are planning for those they sympathise with, society will be better off. The radical argument rather assumed that 'if they were in charge everything would be all right, which in many respects is no different from the planner's traditional view of himself.' (15)

Another problem with advocacy planning is that it induces people to accept the bureaucratic norms of the present social institutions instead of questioning them. The neighbourhood council, in order to deal with the official bureaucracy, creates one of its own. The average person is still kept away from control of his own environment by the barrier of legal and professional expertise. 'Unfortunately

while action as an advocate may prove very rewarding for the professional, it effectively minimises the necessity for any of the rules of the game being changed so as to include the poor themselves.' (16)

In 'After the Planners' Goodman puts forward a proposal for a new professionalism which 'sees as its main purpose the creation of a cultural revolution.... and in which intellectuals and professionals desert their present roles and help create joint educational experiences for layman and professional alike.' (17)

He advocates guerilla architecture in which squatting plays a major part. While this cannot be an end in itself, 'its usefulness....is as a strategic tactic in an ongoing struggle for change. It sometimes makes possible shorter-term successes, while often publicly expressing the need for sweeping changes in housing policies.' 'With a form of direct action like guerilla architecture, the authorities must deal with what is already built. It is they who are put in a defensive position.....The people either win their demands or at least expose the oppression of those who control the environment. At the very least they don't waste their time in a ritual of participation which they can't control.(18)

Goodman's proposals apply specifically to the American situation and in Britain, with stronger governmental machinery and professional institutes, the emphasis is slightly changed. But the relationship between planning and the poor is remarkably similar. The poor are moved around, always one step ahead of the developers, with no means of escape. Their lack of skill, their culture and their apathy forces them to remain near the heart of the city, where they remain powerless. The planners traditional view of such people has been at the least arrogant disregard, as the following passage shows:

One result of slum clearance is that a large number of people are moved considerable distances, with devastating effect on the social groupings built up over the years. This a good thing when we are dealing with people who have no initiative or civic pride. The task surely is to break up such groupings even though the people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment...' (19)

Direct action is becoming increasingly frequent and reflects a growing awareness by the public that existing machinery is inadequate. It seems to work. At Arbor House, Myrdle Street, and in Kentish Town the squatters achieved more change than any number of thesis on the subject could have done, and succeeded where researchers, social workers and government circulars had failed. In Tower Hamlets the Council was forced to use its empty property and the squatters succeeded in housing themselves and others. Tower Hamlets Family Squatters Association is currently housing ninety-five families in houses loaned by the Council under the terms of the agreement. It is conceivable that this agreement could have been reached without a direct conflict, but all the evidence from this case and from similar situations indicates this unlikely. Local authorities have a bureaucratic structure whose 'dynamic conservatism' (20) serves to prevent any change, especially when that change is inherently challenging its efficiency. At Myrdle Street also, continuous direct action resulted in the Council reversing its decision not to use closing orders as a way to acquire the property. It is likely that in all three cases, the squatters' action made the respective Councils reconsider their attitudes, and the publicity received has probably caused repercussions throughout the housing field.

That direct action works, at least in the short-term, is undeniable.

Whether it is ethically justifiable depends on one's ideological standpoint.

I must emphasise that I do not reject the need for planning on a large scale. Planning is to do with allocation of resources and this is vitally important both on a global and on a national level. To leave this allocation to natural forces (market or otherwise) is clearly undesirable. The question is at what level an individual should be left to make his own decisions and what his relationship to the decision process should be. In recent times the trend has been towards larger and larger units in city management, as the current local government reorganisation typifies. But 'efficient city management, with all the specialisations this involves, could make itself wellnigh immune to representations from elected representatives as well as those they represent.' (21) Current changes are

primarily a response to geographical and economic forces, and it is extremely disappointing that no 'third tier' of community councils at neighbourhood level was included in the proposals.

To conclude: It would be dangerous to draw any single conclusion about the action of squatters. People squat because they are homeless; because they want to cause social change; or simply because they enjoy the freedom that squatting offers. By studying both the conscious and unconscious reasons why squatting occurs, we can identify fundamental problems of the planning process. These relate to bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of planning power over developers, and the alienation of planner from the planned. Finally, squatting and other forms of direct action provide an opportunity for the planner to break out of his traditional role of planning for people, and start planning with people. Squatting should not be seen as a menace but as an opportunity for planners to gain a greater understanding of their function.

Notes.

1. Donnison, 'The Government of Housing'.
2. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health 1969.
3. Donnison, op. cit.
4. East London Advertiser, 26 January 1973.
5. Guardian, 14 February 1973.
6. Cullingworth, 'Town and Country Planning in Britain'.
7. Ibid.
8. Pollard, 'Squat' - quotes from the Director of Housing.
9. Pollard, 'Squat'.
10. Ibid.
11. North Paddington News.
12. John Palmer, Introduction to 'After the Planners'.
13. Journal of the Town Planning Institute, April 1971.
14. Goodman, 'After the Planners'.
15. Stephen Ward, 'The ethics of planning'.
16. Goodman, op. cit.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Wilfred Burns, New Towns for Old - reprinted in Goodman's 'After the Planners'.
20. A concept proposed by Donald Schon in 'Beyond the Stable State'.
21. Built Environment, June 1972.



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