

Keeping Occupied - six months on the squatted Ocean Estate

Keith Hallack 2009-11-09 22:21

This is a politicised look at the my last six months living in what was a mass squat in Stepney Green. I'm writing this at the request of another L&S member who pointed out that lots of what I have been doing over the last few months is political and worth recording. I already knew it was political to a point, and I had started writing up action reports and articles on the place I've lived for the half a year several times, but it always fell apart after a few lines because it felt too personal to express properly. Now that all of the events are in the past, I'll try and record it in an intentionally personal manner – it is better to have any record at all than none.

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...and that was that.

recession. With no job, and no strong claim to housing from the council (able bodied, single, young, educated etc.) I expected to be at my parents for the foreseeable. After visiting my friends flat on the notorious Ocean Estate in Stepney Green I spotted a spare room and asked if I could move in. Over the next 2 months I repainted the walls, built desks and shelves, installed an electric shower, polished the floor tiles, replaced the smashed window panes with Perspex and built a double bed; but there was no denying it whatever I did, I still had a room in a squat.

My reservations about squatting being more effort than it was worth were overcome by my need to not feel completely inadequate and have a place of my own in my mid 20s. These reservations were not shared by my neighbours: they had been

aware they had very little chance of alternative housing far longer than I had. I knew my flatmate from a community occupation we had both been at in 2006 and from L&S which he joined 3 months after it started. He left school at 16 and has only ever been able to find casual work like waiting: he has lived in squats since leaving home. He has made a housing claim recently on the basis of homelessness (squatting can count as homeless) but does not expect the council to approve it. Other neighbours on my floor included a 17 year old who had met us through LCAP after being thrown out of home, and he was later joined by a homeless couple who had been staying on friends sofas. Above us in our block were Polish migrant

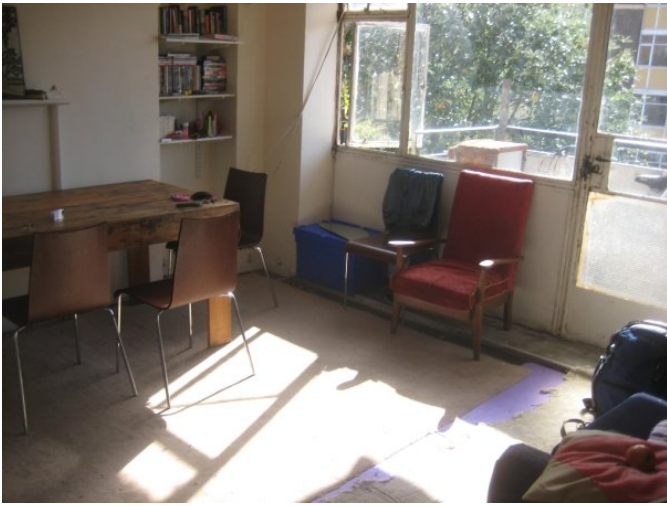
Moving in

In the space of a month I split up with my long term partner of over half a decade and finished a degree course that had taken me 4 years. With no one to share the rent and no reason to stay near the university, I had to move onto the sofa bed in my parents place in East London. I have worked in construction on and off since 16 years old, but my last agency will not take me back after leaving to go back to university without giving them due notice, and there was hardly any labouring work at this point – construction being hit the hardest very early in current



Writing this piece

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workers and a fifty year old woman who has been fighting for accommodation from the council for several years. We lived in a three story block built in 1949 in the Attlee's massive post-war council housing push, "homes for heroes" – the third and most genuine wave of state housing provision. The blocks are old but well built and much more homely than the later Brutalist 1960's towers. When I moved in there were still 4 paying tenants, 3 of them families with young children.

Our block was identical to 7 other blocks built side by side, and identical to blocks throughout the square mile that makes up the Ocean Estate, which also has the later tower blocks and even later terrace house revival style council buildings from the 1990's onwards when councils came to realise that they were right first

time (1920's and 30's) and should build housing as close as possible to normal commercial stock. The Ocean looks as close to an American style ghetto as you get in England. In terms of crime there are far worse places, but in terms of concentrated poverty, overcrowding (inside flats and just in general), and decaying buildings it is similar to 1970's Brooklyn. It is overwhelmingly Bangladeshi, to the point where many street signs are in Bangladeshi and many residents speak only this language. Tower Hamlets has the highest number of a single ethnic group which is not White-British, but it is important to note that apparently even then no London borough has a non-white majority. In my area though, the communal space and social life is majority Bangladeshi, giving the impression of a majority. This plays a significant role in any political or social interaction, it isn't just me spouting. George Galloway was elected MP here on the basis of being seen as a Muslim friendly, even pro-Islam, candidate and being endorsed by the Mosques whilst his party (RESPECT) tanked everywhere else; you can hear people listening to his radio talk show in shops and taxis everywhere. He presents a TV show for a cable channel owned and run by Iran and adverts for the station are common in the area.



Life on our blocks has changed significantly for the tenants over the last ten years – it was in 2000 that Tony Blair used the Ocean as a stage to launch his anti-poverty initiatives, suggesting silently that no one should live like this anymore. But rather than development, they have used the £56 million 'New Deal' for dispersal. Around my block council tenants were asked if they would accept mass transfer, and tenants voted no. The council considered their views, and transferred them anyway – mostly to Barking and Dagenham. Where they cannot simply move someone to other council housing because they own the flat or rent from a private landlord who does, they offer them an inadequate amount of money for their property. The family downstairs say they will have to move to Manchester or Sheffield to find somewhere half the size with what the council have offered. By transferring them a few at a time, the council has left the blocks increasingly desolate and inhospitable for remaining tenants – and eventually they can remove the last few with Compulsory Purchase Orders. As for what they want to do with our blocks, it is a simple case of selling the land to a private developer who will knock them down and build private housing. By law 20% of this will have to be "social housing", but social housing can simply be housing for Key Workers (NHS, teachers etc. – comparatively safe jobs): it does not replace council housing, and certainly at 20% couldn't accommodate the current residents even if it was actual council housing.

The piecemeal removal of residents has had two other effects. The area is no longer as notorious - with less people has come an end to the siege mentality locals lived under when the Ocean was the cheapest place to buy heroin in Europe (circa 2001); and the empty flats have been squatted. The oldest squats I know of have been open for 5 years, and several have

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been evicted only to be reopened, sometimes many times over. As there were always paying tenants left in the buildings, evictions were not immediate as the council couldn't actually knock them down until they were totally empty. Since I have been living here though, the process has been accelerating rapidly. 24 hour private security with dogs watch every block purely to stop squatters moving in (they actually ignore violent crime and open heroin dealing – I have witnessed this), and whole blocks have been given notice of eviction.

First meeting

A week after I moved I attended a squatters' general meeting. These were arranged by a text-out from a squatter who had unlimited texts, and this system was also used to call out squatters to emergencies like attacks or evictions. When I asked who the chair was and raised my hand to make points I was laughed at, but this actually was the system they used informally - even if they didn't recognise it. The meeting had about 30 people in it and we discussed what we were going to do in response to the arrest of a couple accused of breaking into an empty flat. A number of actions were suggested and we

eventually decided we would open the flat in a big group with support from

This is tenants a vegetable garden creatively carved outside. The plan was fleshed out at a meeting the following week, roles were handed out and my flatmate became the Action Coordinator at his suggestion, a role we knew from LCAP work.

Action and statement

The action went off without a hitch. 50 of us in hats and scarves descended on the empty flat, dropping a banner from the balcony above to hide the opening team, and formed a human wall to stop the security from reaching them on the corridor. A police liaison volunteer in a hi-vis vest talked to the security and then the police, whilst another person filmed them: they were prevented from using force or their dogs by these. The law was on our side, so long as we kept the openers covered: the only crime was breaking and entering, which you need a witness statement for. If you do not see who it was, there is no crime. As soon as a door is in place with a Section 6 notice, the space is legally squatted and cannot be entered without legal recourse. After about an hour the police, security and Tower Hamlets Housing officers left, and the flat is still occupied by the couple to this day.



One of the blocks - this one was about 70% squatted at one point.

There was a lot of controversy over the action. Those on it felt it had been a success, but several people outside said it had been an own goal that alienated paying tenants and showed the squatters to be a united and threatening group who would use force and numbers to get their way. There was criticism that we wore hoods, which we did to disguise the identities of the opening team (everyone wears a hood, everyone looks alike), and there was even a suggestion that the action was sexist due to it being macho. I reject the last one out of hand: the action was called and directed by women, and "macho" direct action is sexist only if you assume gender roles and think that force is masculine. I didn't address this at the time. I did accept that the action might have worried the tenants though, and in light of that I wrote a statement that we posted on stairwells. The security took them down and we only delivered a few door to door: we hoped to have it translated into Bengali first, but our translator worked in the local community and did not want to be associated with the squatters at that time.

Junky on a hot tin roof

At one point we did actually have a communal flat for meeting space, but nobody seemed to know who had the keys – so our next general meeting was in a park. Problems with the action were considered and I was asked to help draft and print the statement. We discussed new and tougher problems, such as hard drugs in the area. The dealers had a corner that they

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never left and we never went near, but the junkies they sold to would use our stairwells and lifts as chasing and shooting galleries. Opinions on what to do were divided, but one suggestion was to organise against a local pharmacy which actually sold syringes at a high price (which are free from the council to stop the spread of HIV). Confronting the dealers themselves was seen as way out of our league, and there was some confusion between anti-social and recreational drug use. Some people felt we had no right to talk about acting against drug use if we saw no inherent evil in it, but this was a minority opinion and others were able to argue that the resulting anti-social behaviour was what we needed to prevent – we were not passing judgement on personal choices which did not harm others. One woman told us she had a junky living in the roof of her block that had tried to get in to her flat by the trap door when she was home alone! I was amongst the group who argued successfully for his eviction.

On a chosen day, as soon as the junkie was seen leaving, a text went out and 10 of us went to the block. We entered the roof and found a television, suitcase, clothes, shoes, and mattress, blankets, and of course used needles and burnt foil. We removed all of these to a pile outside the block for him to take on his return. We stacked weights on the main hatch and locked it again from the outside with a new lock, leaving the roof by the trap door in the woman's flat.

Techno Techno Techno

A recurring problem on the estate was loud music; the mix of squatters included lots of people from the freeparty subculture. Lots of them viewed squats as a place to have parties, no matter what their size or how near they were to other people. I know from experience of putting on unlicensed parties myself that the police will shut down any party in a residential area for noise pollution; the fact they did not do that here suggests they have little more than contempt for the residents, whether they are paying tenants or squatters. Residents, and maybe other squatters, ended up sabotaging the electricity supply to the worst offending buildings. This is fair play; apparently simply asking them to turn the music down or off met with "we have rights too!" and general abuse. When the squat next door to me had its own all night techno party I was met with "hey man, it's a squat" as some sort of explanation. I rounded up as many fellow sleep-enthusiasts as I could and knocked again and again, getting the same response. We returned in the day and argued with the culprit at length. Even though he made a show of not budging on his opinions, there have been no parties at his since. If this had been taken up on mass, with big delegations going to the worst offending party-squats to have a go at them, maybe it would have had an effect overall. It shouldn't be necessary in the first place though, and I include these events to illustrate some of the perils of "the squatting scene".

When Kids Attack

The immediate problem that this sort of antisocial behaviour caused was not attention from the law, but quite the opposite. Large groups of Bangladeshi lads saw the squatters as on a level with them; the squatters, given the outlandish appearance of both themselves and their buildings, were outside of the mainstream/lawless, an acceptable target for harassment. This is only a supposition, but when the kids attacked, they attacked the most obviously squatted block covered in graffiti and dirt where the loud parties were held. My block, which started with as many tenants as squatters, and we which kept clean, never came in for serious attack. I mean serious attack too – squatters from the building in question were beaten badly by gangs of lads, their windows were smashed and one flat was even set on fire with someone in it (they escaped). As far as we can tell the kids were doing it purely because they could get away with it. The police weren't called and the security guards let them get on with it: during one window smashing session they were heard actually encouraging the kids, but asking them to watch out for security cars when throwing bricks. Whenever attacks occurred we got to the scene as quickly as possible and just talked to the kids, to let them know they were being watched and distract them. They were generally drunk on cheap vodka and Boost energy drink, the chosen tippie of men who are too Muslim for pubs but not for drunken violence. Although we still think there was no motive for these attacks other than general hooliganism and maybe dislike of outsiders, I personally think the obvious anti-community attitude of the party-squats made them more of a target than others. It isn't that the kids were acting as the militant wing of the Residents Association, but they could see that these squatters were opting out of the local community, and therefore opting into their world by way of drugs and parties. Talking to one lad during a de-escalation attempt, he blamed the trouble on 'druggies and squatters': from my appearance and attitude he must not have thought I was a squatter.

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Councilling

About 2 months ago one of the blocks which was totally squatted was served a mass eviction notice. After postponing the hearing for a week, a second court date ruled the squatters had a week to leave or be evicted by High Court Bailiffs. These can actually arrest you if you refuse to leave on demand, and they cost thousands of pounds a day. Clearly, the Council saw this as money well spent. They had already launched a propaganda war in the area warning residents away from one particular block with a leaflet carrying a picture of a heroin needle – utter bollocks, if the council or police had evidence that it was a shooting gallery or crackhouse it could have been evicted there and then under special legislation. Instead, by depicting the slightly anti-social but unthreatening block as a site of serious crime, they could duck having to deal with the real heroin dealers who were parked openly on the edge of the estate trading 24/7. Evicting the squats could be made to look like tackling crime, which is the exact tone the local press often take [“Armed Police Raid Squat”] making no distinction between a squat and crackhouse.

In response 4 of us attended an open council meeting to argue our case. We explained that we actually evicted a heroin user and kept the blocks busy and safe. We asked that we set a date for an eviction far into the future when the blocks were ready to be knocked down after all tenants had left. This was dismissed out of hand by the councillors and they rejected any further contact with us.

A Plague On Both Our Houses

There was no mass eviction, the block in question voluntarily packed up and left. After this people began to leave slowly from the other blocks too. The sense of momentum and cohesion we had subsided and there were no more general meetings. There are only 2 tenants left in my block now, and every unused corridor has been sealed off with sheet metal. The guards watch us intently and a sense of doom lingers. In the same week, two friends called me asking if there was a chance of accommodation, and hoping that we could open more empties and get our community going again I said yes. Due to the non-stop surveillance, it was decided any opening would take the Bear Hunt approach: when you cannot go around it or under it, you have to go through it. A breaker (smaller, electric version of a pneumatic drill) was rented, and a hole was chipped out of the wall of one squat into the empty flat next door. Obviously this made quite some noise, but I'm at a loss as to how the guards and police who turned up just as the work was done knew that a hole had been made – I'm assuming guesswork. They gave everyone in the flat the option of opening the door and clearing their things out in 30 minutes, or the door being broken down and everyone inside being arrested for criminal damage. “And I can smell cannabis” added one PC for good measure. Unfortunately nobody in the flat knew that none of this was legal: police cannot enter without a warrant, which they did not have, and cannot charge anyone with criminal damage without a witness, which they did not have. Their major priority is getting the door open – once they enter the property, it is no longer legally occupied.

After the success of this police operation, similar tricks were pulled on the flats upstairs from me. Realising one squatter was out, cops broke in and evicted the place in her absence, then talked their way into the neighbours and arrested 2 people for abstracting (stealing) electricity, a charge they later dropped. A third person in the flat was not arrested, and was actually told that as long as he stayed there, the squat would remain – something they wouldn't have known if the police had not said. These opportunist operations seem to be spurred on by the Council or security guards, with the police not consistent in their response.

Adding to the week-long Festival of General Misfortune, our roof began to leak. When the tenants above us left, “Environmental Protection Services” smashed up the flat, leaving a burst water-pipe running. Cracks and drips appeared first in our kitchen and then in a bedroom, and soon all available bowls and cups were scattered across the flat catching the deluge. We called Tower Hamlets Housing repairs hotline and the first person they sent clearly did not realise we were a squat, apologising and promising the leaking flat would be opened up and fixed in 24 hours. Someone higher up sussed. When we called back 48 hours later they told us they told us the building was condemned and they had no obligation to stop the roof falling on squatters. We have heard a rumour that some kind of squat-sympathetic plumbing ninjas entered the flat under cover of darkness and stopped the leak, but cannot comment on the truth of this. The leak started again a day later anyway.

Regrets, I have a few

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The principal mistake in my time here was to try and politicise something in a way that would have required miracles to work. Turning a mass squat by a totally diverse group of people into direct action against privatisation and uneven 'regeneration' was beyond ambitious, and we only took to it half heartedly, our energy going in ebbs and flows with the general energy of the community. It was never actually made into a priority by me or my housemate, our political commitments at this time were not to our home. We made no approaches to the local Residents Association or to Defend Council Housing who have a very strong branch in the borough, an obvious first step. With that said then, it is almost by accident that I have had such a massive dose of local organising and a rough education of the challenges and solutions to community control. No I'm not currently in the local Tenants Association, but how many people can say they got together with their neighbours and evicted a junky? If a big group of lads started throwing things or attacking a house near me, the knowledge that 5 or more people just talking to them calmly and distracting them might be all it took to sort things out is a revelation to me, someone who has largely preferred to look the other way in my own city after being repeatedly attacked or mugged by gangs as a teenager. I walk that bit taller in lived experience that people can and will back each other up in these situations. The squatters are something of an 'intentional community' so it is miles from the challenge of building familiarity, trust and confidence amongst residents in an area where you don't already have so much in common; but despite this I refuse to accept the confidence I have gained to do community work is in any way false.

This Is The End

The situation in the car park just now sums up why I'm on the left, and why I'll likely stay on the left all my life. I don't have any great hatred of injustice, it passes me by mostly; it is unpleasant but it doesn't drive me to my conclusions and actions – I don't cry over pictures of starving kids in the papers or write to my MP about the landmines in Cambodia. I only favour equality because it makes it simpler to relate to other people. What I hate is the total senselessness of our actions in modern society.

We started out with just a council worker and a plumber, both nice guys who had no problem with us being squatters, asking us about the leak. We told them exactly where it was, but they wanted to look in other empty flats to check because they think they already fixed it last week which meant taking the steel sheets back off. So they called Orbis, the company that puts the steel sheets on properties to stop them being squatted – they seem to be a monopoly in London, every eviction and closure is carried out by them. They are professional anti-squatters. My question is not 'why is there a gap in the market for a company purely to close useable properties?' That's simple – the economy wants the housing market to stay artificially competitive; if squatting were easier it might become more widespread. In all honesty the council is probably liable if some kid wanders into an empty building and falls down a lift shaft too – it isn't all malicious reasoning. What I cannot comprehend is why a group of working class people who turned up in 2 Orbis vans, the same sort of people I clock into work with every day (I'm now more or less a builder again) would automatically hate the squatters and take perverse pleasure in trying to turn fixing a leak into working out which properties they could do an ad hoc eviction on. "There's no one in there Terry, fuck the key – we got our universal key here innit. Break in and chuck their fucking stuff over the balcony." Why? Cos they're prepared to live in a condemned building to avoid rent? What difference does it make to the Orbis worker? We were told by a Housing Officer from the council that the building will be stay up now for another 8 weeks. What is the point then, in breaking into peoples' homes, throwing their belongings into the rain and smashing up sinks and windows so that no one can live there for a further 8 weeks? In this life we take pride in what we do for a living, even if we do badly. Whether you spray rough sleepers with cold water to move them on, throw punters down flights of stairs in nightclubs, repossess cars or sell televisions on hire-purchase you know customers will default on, you're just doing your job. We never question it, not seriously. We are paid to do it, and therefore it is valid. Anything you get paid to do is worthwhile, the cash justifies it. We can never rationally talk about what we want to do with our lives, what a happy and productive life actually is, so long as money makes our motivations.

Even though we technically have two months if they leave us alone, the combined forces of the guards, Housing Officers and police can strike at any time now in any way. They could break in when we're all out, they could cook up a charge they later drop to raid us with, they could destroy the building some more. The security have always been scum, hitting their dogs, making death threats and yelling racial and sexual abuse; but now they seem calm, like they know they have the upper

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hand. No new flats are opening and they are closing squats at a record pace. The first block to be totally emptied is being demolished this week, and builders have sprayed measurements on the lawn around our building.

Post script

It is three months since the above piece was written. First things first, we're still in the flat: we went to court in mid September 2009 and lost legal possession of the property to council. We moved most of our things and waited for the warrant – the letter that would give us a final date to quit the building. It is now early November and we are still waiting. A call to the council's planning department under the guise of a concerned resident revealed that our block cannot be demolished until at least March 2010 now anyway. During the writing of the piece, we were heavily involved in an attempt to put the lessons learned into a distinct project – unimaginatively called the Tower Hamlets Housing Initiative. The idea was to combine the housing rights advocacy work we do in LCAP with the direct action element of squatting: we would seize empty council stock that was being sold off somewhere in the borough, renovate it, then recruit people we met at the Homeless Persons Unit who were willing to take the risk and join the fight and become residents. A three pronged legal, media and physical approach would be employed – challenging the council not only very publically, but directly, by taking the housing first and asking questions later. By the time the project fizzled out we actually had 2 potential residents and roughly 10 live-in activists, a fully researched building in our sights, the support of a local legal centre and no less than 3 people wanting to make a documentary about it all. But fizzle out it did; a wave of Possession Orders in early September threw most of us into looking after our own housing needs first, and many of the activists have now moved out of the borough.

About this time I started looking into making a Housing Allowance claim, finding myself unemployed again. In short, I was eventually told by an advisor in the HPU that squatting was probably my best option! Housing benefit varied each month, but for my age range it would be about £110 a week: in 3 weeks of looking we never found anything that price in the borough – because landlords that accepted Housing Allowance kept their rents high, knowing the money was guaranteed by the council and expecting the difference to be made up out of the tenants dole. If we did get a flat on HA, as soon as we found work, we would not be able to afford the rent – or spend almost all our wages on it. Despite the fact I have experienced this kind of madness several times working with other people, to go through it myself was still eye opening.

Occupation is a powerful tactic, not only against a private business but also against a private property. The government are being bankrupted by Housing Allowance, and are doing next to nothing to rebuild their own housing – it is simply inevitable that successive governments will cut spending on housing. At the same time there is an explosion of small-landlordism and second-home ownership amongst those who have 'made it' (or 'always had it'), and rising homelessness and mass unemployment amongst the young. Housing is as likely to lead to polarisation of social classes just as much as (un)employment. I've always been very aware - and probably overly sensitive – to the stereotypical image of squatters as plastic anarchists or dropouts; whether a self conscious mass movement of housing occupations comes about, or the viability of squatting just spreads organically amongst the struggling, what happens next is likely to sweep all preconceptions away.

<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/11/441493.shtml>