
MAKING SPACE:

SQUATTING, TRESPASS & DIRECT HOUSING ACTION

Alternative radical histories
and campaigns continuing today.



Sam Burgum
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squattinglondon.wordpress.com



Property ownership is not a given, but a social and legal construction, with a specific history.



My land – a squatter fable

A man is out walking on a hillside when suddenly the owner appears.

'Get off my land', he yells.

'Who says it's your land?' demands the intruder.

'I do, and I've got the deeds to prove it.'

'Well, where did you get it from?'

'From my father.'

'And where did he get it from?'

'From his father. He was the seventeenth Earl.

The estate originally belonged to the first Earl.'

'And how did he get it?'

'He fought for it in the War of the Roses.'

Right – then I'll fight you for it!

Magna Carta (1215)

established a legal precedent for protecting property owners from arbitrary possession by the state.

'For a man's home is his castle, and each man's home is his safest refuge'

- Edward Coke, 1604

Charter of the Forest (1217)

asserted the rights of the 'commons' (i.e. propertyless) to access the 143 royal forests enclosed since 1066.

Enclosure Acts (1760-1870)

enclosed 7million acres of commons through 4000 acts of parliament.

John Locke (1632-1704)

argued that enclosure could only be justified if:

- 'As much and as good' was left to others;
- Unused property could be forfeited for better use.

This logic was used to dispossess indigenous people of land, which appeared 'unused' to European settlers.

‘England is not a Free people till the poor that have no land... live as Comfortably as the landlords that live in their inclosures.’



Many post-Civil war movements and sects saw the execution of King Charles as ending a centuries-long Norman oppression. They therefore called for the redistribution of crown land to ease the distress of the poor.

The power of inclosing land, and owning property, was brought into the Creation by your Ancestors by the Sword; which first did murder their fellow Creatures, Men, and after plunder or steal away their land, and left this land successively to you.’

- *Gerrard Winstanley, 1649*

Three months after the execution of Charles, **The Diggers** (1649) squatted St George’s Hill, Surrey, arguing that the earth was a common treasury for all. Forcibly moved to Cobham in August, they were brutally evicted by the landowner, John Platt, in April 1650.

Digger colonies were also established in Barnet, Enfield, Dunstable, Wellingborough (Notts), Iver (Bucks), Gloucestershire, and Kent.

The Guardian



wignadiggersfestival.org



The Diggers 1649

GERRARD WINSTANLEY

English Nursery Rhyme, c.1764

They hang the man and flog the woman,
That steals the goose from off the common.
But let the greater felon loose,
That steals the common from the goose.



For workers in the 19th/20thC, the countryside was a weekend salvation from the overcrowded and polluted industrial cities.

Accessing Land



Squattings: the Real Story



roselake.co.uk



mediastorehouse.com



Responding to mass unemployment, the **Landgrabbers** (1906) took over derelict land in Leeds, Manchester, Bradford, and London. Their aim was to get people 'back to the land'.

'I don't consider that I have acted illegally in taking possession of disused land which rightfully belongs to the people.' - Ben 'the Captain' Cunningham, Plaistow, 1906.

In the inter-war period, the urban poor (largely from London) took advantage of new transport links and a lack of planning laws, self-building holiday huts, homes, and settlements in the country.

Despite many **Plotlanders** having purchased their land, they were labelled 'squatters' by the rich, who saw them as a blight on the landscape.

The **Kinder Scout Mass Trespass** (1932) is widely recognised as having paved the way for the National Parks Act (1949) and the 'right to roam', established in law by the Countryside Rights of Way Act (2000).

A poem on the Trespass Trail

As I trudge through the Peat at a pace so slow,
 There is time to remember the debt we owe.
 To the Kinder Trespass and the rights they did seek,
 Allowing us freely to ramble the Dark Peak.

'The ownership of a property is a secondary consideration to the fact that it is empty'



The London Underground was initially locked during the blitz and it was only after the Communist Party squatted a station to shelter local people from the bombs, that using the tube became official policy.

The blitz destroyed 218000 homes (with a further 250,000 uninhabitable) exasperating an already desperate pre-war housing crisis in UK cities, as did the demobilisation of 3.5m servicemen and a baby boom.

In July 1945, **The Vigilantes** moved their families to empty hotels in Brighton. This action forced the extension of wartime requisitioning powers into peacetime, allowing councils to take over empty private property for temporary housing.

By summer 1946, the housing situation had little improved, so 40,000+ **Home Front Squatters** all over the country took matters into their own hands, squatting 936 empty service camps.

In September 1000 people took over empty luxury flats as part of **The Great Sunday Squat**. Leaders were arrested, but the action sped-up housebuilding and forced greater use of requisitioning powers.

londonotopia.net



Life Magazine



Accessing Shelter

The Telegraph

HOME NEWS SP

News

UK World Politics General Election 2017 Science Education Health Brexit

★ News

Jeremy Corbyn: Empty homes owned by rich should be 'requisitioned' for Grenfell Tower residents

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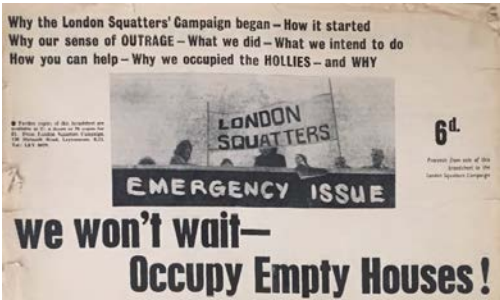
11 Comments



Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour leader, comforts a resident



These Homes Need People / These People Need Homes



ASS Archives

Inspired by hostel occupations in the mid-1960s, the **London Squatters' Campaign** took over empty houses so that homeless families could live in them.

The **Redbridge campaign** (1969) saw housing secured for some homeless families, as well as establishing a precedent for so-called 'squatters rights' (using property law designed to protect owners to defend squatted homes from eviction).

London (2016/17)

8,108 Rough Sleepers
54,660 Temp Accommodation
20,000+ empty homes

England

115,550 Statutory Homeless
79,190 Temp Accommodation
205,000+ empty homes

UK

Est. 400,000 hidden homeless

The occupation of **Centrepoint** (1976) demanded that the office block (empty since completion in 1963) should be requisitioned for emergency housing.

Today, empty commercial property in London alone could create 400,000 new homes.

Accessing Housing



Squating: the Real Story



ASS Archives



'Something for Nothing' or 'Nothing for Something'?

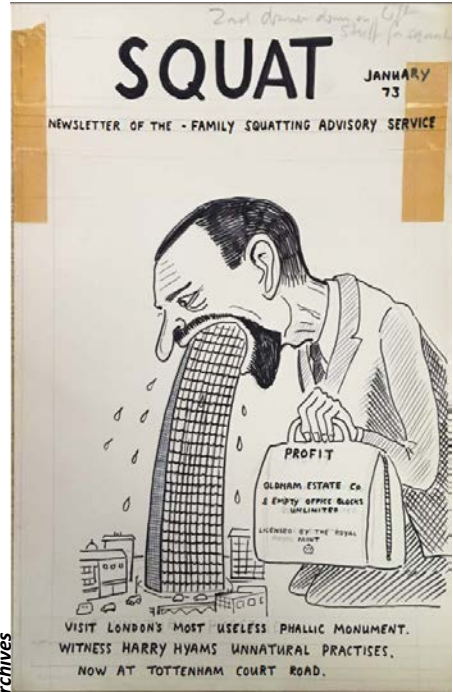


Since the council sold **Tolmers Square** to a private developer, residents had experienced a decline in living standards. Threatened with an office block, the decision to squat in 1973 not only prevented construction, but forced Camden to buy the buildings back.

Purchased by Lambeth council in 1967 with the intention of building high-rises, squatters at **Villa Road** not only saved the 19thC townhouses, but took over ownership as a co-op.

In October 1975, when squatters at **Elgin Avenue** secured alternative accommodation for 200 people living there, they considered this a victory. Others, however, argued that their voluntary eviction was a surrender.

Frustrated by squatters, some councils have turned to 'gutting' empty houses, destroying roofs, stairwells, floors, smashing windows, and pouring concrete down drainpipes in the middle of a housing crisis. In response, squatters have turned to repair and renovation, **putting houses back into use and learning new skills** in the process.



ASS Archives



Use-Value vs. Speculation



In addition to housing campaigns, squatting can provide spaces in which other groups can organise.



ASS Archives

As well as joining a trans-Atlantic struggle against racism; the **British Black Panthers** also addressed local issues, such as education, health, employment, police harassment, and housing, whilst raising consciousness through black poetry, music, and film.

A Means to Other Ends



Squatting: the Real Story

Olive Morris, together with Liz Obi, was the first to squat **121 RAILTON ROAD**, Brixton, in 1972, establishing the Sabaar Bookshop as a meeting place and information centre for black activists and groups.

Other groups, such as the **Bengali Housing Action Group**, used squatting as a means to escape exploitative informal renting, whilst creating communities that could protect against racism in wider society (whether from the public, state, or groups like National Front).



The 'hostile environment' which underpins the Windrush scandal far predates Theresa May's stint as Home Secretary. In contrast, squatting can be used to create **hospitable environments** for oppressed groups to fight back.

‘There wasn’t the constraints of careers,
property to tie us down to social expectations.
We were charting new territory’



Urban space is not experienced the same by everybody, and is overladen with patriarchal, racist, ableist, and heterosexual norms, that can be oppressive. Squatting can provide communal support and refuge for these groups.

In the 1970s, the state did not recognise women fleeing domestic violence as ‘homeless’ and refused to house them. Women-only squats, such as **Trederwen Road**, Hackney, therefore provided refuge, at a time when women and lesbians alike had few legal rights. Such squats provided space to live communally outside the post-war ‘suburban dream’.

As well as the Black Panthers, Railton Road saw the **South London Gay Community Centre** established in 1974, in addition to rows of squatted houses. Today, 24% of homeless people identify as LGBT+ and 77% of this group believe coming out to their parents was the main factor.

In the early 1980s, 121 Railton Road became the **121 Centre**, hosting many radical groups and events, until its eventual eviction in 1999.

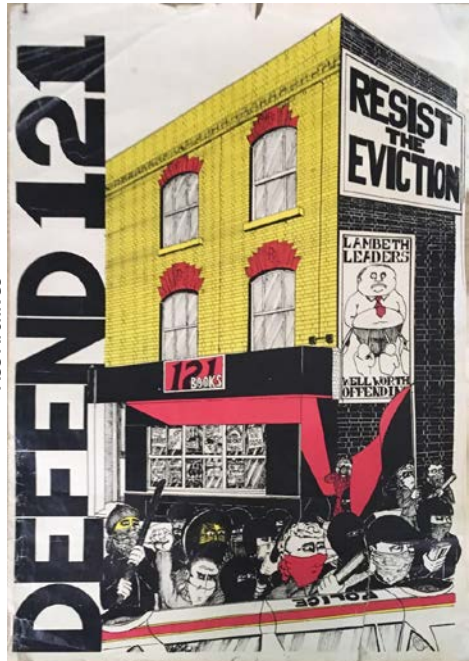
Oxford Uni Press



squat.net



ASS Archives



Alternative Living Arrangements



Much of the music and artistic culture we enjoy and count amongst our heritage today was made possible by squatting.



Squatting: the Real Story



Arcadia



Sam Burquim (TAA 2018)

Alternative Art & Culture

From the mid-1970s onwards, an eclectic mix of freethinkers, hippies, anarchists, punks, creatives, artists, writers, actors, drop-outs, activists, homeless, and drug addicts began squatting derelict houses on Freston Road, Notting Hill.

Threatened by regeneration, they declared independence from the UK, as the **Free Independent Republic of Frestonia**, requesting peacekeeping troops from the UN to prevent invasion (eviction).

Frestonia became infamous for its alternative art & culture, founding the Car Breaker Art Gallery, the Apocalypse Hotel, and Mutoid Waste Company (members of which later created Arcadia). **The Clash** (who began in squats) recorded at Frestonia. Motorhead also rehearsed there.

By providing rehearsal, studio, and events space; squatting and trespass have been crucial for dub, punk, electro-pop, dance, and grime music. **Artists who began in squats or raves** include: Sex Pistols, Boomtown Rats, Eurythmics, Eric Clapton, Depeche Mode, the Levellers, Crass, Spiral Tribe and Orbital.

Squatting provides space for experimental living, seeking to create alternative blueprints for a future economy and society.



Eco-Villages emphasise values of self-sufficiency, low-impact design, communal living, and permaculture, withdrawing from the urban and experimenting with sustainable and eco-centric lifestyles.

‘We have spent so long in the countryside now that going into towns, let alone cities, seems alien and oppressive to us. We see these feelings as healthy. Humanity is rooted in nature, not concrete’
- *Laugh, Donga Tribe*

In response to the roadbuilding projects of the early 1990s, the **anti-roads movement** squatted and defended buildings, forests, and countryside due to be demolished for construction (including Twyford Down, Claremont Road, and Newbury Bypass). As well as conservation, these activists protested the encouragement of more cars.

Closely tied to the anti-roads movement, **Reclaim the Streets** sought to take the city back from cars and corporate/consumer capitalism through street parties. From the first major party on Camden High Street (1995), RTS planted trees in the M41 (1996).

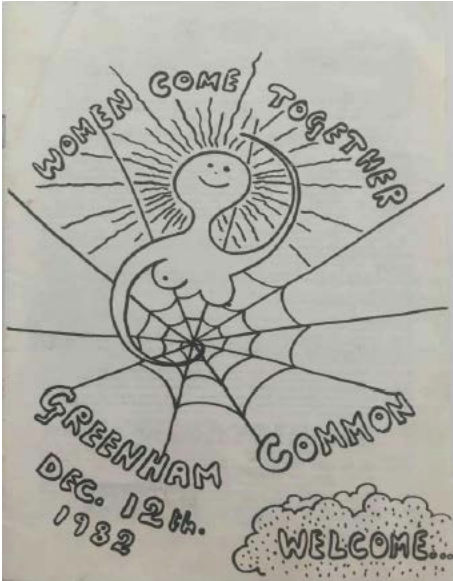


Resistance Exhibition

Future Alternatives



'Our resistance is as transnational as capital'



ASSS Archives

Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1981) against plans to site 96 U.S. cruise missiles at the Greenham airbase saw human chains and trespassing. While missiles were removed in 1991, the camp continued against nuclear weapons until 2000.

'Women have been leaving home for peace, rather than men leaving home for war.'
- *Women for Life on Earth, 1981*

In 2003, the **march against war in Iraq** was the largest in history, drawing 6-8 million people in 600 cities world-wide.

Inspired by indigenous movements (e.g. Zapatistas) and attempts to build alternatives to global capitalism (such as the World Social Forum); the **Global Justice Movement** saw violent clashes at world economic conferences, including Seattle 1999 and Prague 2000.

After the financial crisis, the Arab Spring, European Summer, and American Fall of 2011 saw urban occupations all over the globe. The **Occupy movement** alone counted 1518 camps in 70 different countries.

Global Justice



Resistance Exhibition



Shutterstock



Squatting and direct housing actions embody the limits of how property, housing, and land is distributed today.



Streets Kitchen

Streets Kitchen work to support the homeless. Their slogan 'solidarity not charity' sets them apart from other charities in willing to take direct action in order to shelter people.

In March 2018, Streets Kitchen squatted an empty office block on Great Portland Street, in order to shelter 100 people from the 'Beast from the East' snowstorm. The **Sofia Solidarity Centre** was evicted, and the building remains empty today.

449 people died homeless in the UK between Oct 2017 - Oct 2018.

Facing regeneration and social cleansing, **a number of housing estates have occupied buildings** in protest. Including Carpenters (Focus E15), Aylesbury, & Sweetsway Estates, as well as Tidemill Gardens.

In London, 56,513 housing units have already been demolished due to regeneration schemes.

In 2011, **Camp Constant** sought to defend the Dale Farm traveller site from eviction, in solidarity with a large community who had been living on the ex-scrapyard for over 10 years.

Actions Today: Housing & Community



Sam Burghum



Nourra Medra



Daily Mirror

Despite laws and injunctions which have aimed to control trespass, activists continue to do so as part of direct actions for justice.



In 2017, 15 activists from **End Deportations** trespassed onto Stansted airport in order to prevent a chartered plane from deporting undocumented migrants. They unfurled banners which read 'mass deportations kill' and 'no-one is illegal'.

Daily Star



A year previously, **Black Lives Matter UK** occupied London City Airport, highlighting the uneven and racist impact of climate change, as well as the 3176 migrants who had gone missing on the Mediterranean in 2016.

BBC



Since 2010, **Grow Heathrow** have squatted an abandoned market site in Sipson, in protest of a third runway which would increase climate damage and destroy the village.

drillordrop.com



In 2018, for the first time since the Kinder Scout Trespass, 3 protestors were charged with public nuisance for lorry-surfing against **fracking** in Blackpool.

LBC



Actions Today: Resistance

Student occupations have had a renaissance in recent years, especially since the trebling of tuition fees in 2010.



Disclaimer: by definition, exhibitions (and the archives they draw from) are never complete. However, it is hoped examples included here demonstrate the broad church of squatting, trespass, and direct housing action, as well as some of the most noteworthy UK actions.

Why Archive? rediscovering activist histories can help develop movement legacies as well as draw practical lessons from actions of the past, unsettling taken-for-granted views and re-orientating us towards possibilities for change in the present.

About Me: I am a researcher based in Urban Studies & Planning, University of Sheffield, currently conducting a project in London on squatting, resistance, and the housing crisis. samuelburgum.uk / s.burgum@sheffield.ac.uk / @sjburgum

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Useful Links:

Advisory Service for Squatting (ASS) – squatter.org.uk
Resistance Exhibition – [Facebook/historyofresistance](https://www.facebook.com/historyofresistance)
Streets Kitchen – streetskitchen.org
End Deportations – enddeportations.com
Frack Off: Extreme Energy Action Network – frack-off.org.uk
ACORN renters union – acorntheunion.org.uk