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***A Tool for Social Change: The squatters movement in Brighton and London  
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## Introduction

This paper will argue that squatting as a political tool began in England in its modern form with housing need and quickly branched into other areas of protest, which continue to this day, with the right to decent housing remaining as a fundamental driving force. We will focus on political squatting for several reasons: private residential squatting is of course much more common yet by its underground nature almost impossible to track; political squatting is open about its intentions as activism for social change and thus is easier to study; paradoxically the political squatting movement, a vibrant new social movement of over forty years' standing in the England is little theorised.

We will concentrate on two important time frames, namely the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the modern squatting movement began and the present day (the late 2000s and early 2010s), when squatting has been criminalised in residential buildings and hence is ostensibly at an endpoint.<sup>1</sup> Attempts were made to criminalise squatting previously in the late 1970s and mid 1990s, but for reasons of space we can only refer to these times briefly (although these moves do in themselves indicate the continuance of squatting as a movement). We will focus chiefly on Brighton and London, two places where the squatters movement has existed and persisted since the late 1960s, perhaps in ebbs and flows, yet with a collective heritage (Needle Collective). Whilst there are land occupations and travellers living in Brighton and London (and the history of New Age Travellers needs to be documented) we do not have space to write about them here.

It is worth mentioning that statistics on numbers of squatters are few and far between. It is also worth noting that research on the squatters movement in London is sadly deficient compared to work on other major cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin and Copenhagen, which all also saw large political squatting movements in the 1970s (whilst this is not to ignore the useful sources which do exist, such as Platt, Reeve, Wates, Wates & Wolmar). This paper aims to contribute further to the beginnings of an analysis of the English squatters movement. That squatting can be considered a social movement is becoming an increasingly uncontroversial notion as this book itself indicates (or see Martinez, Mudu, Owens, Reeve). In this short piece we will not have space to consider such questions as the success or failure of the squatters movement.

As mentioned above, we will concentrate on squatting in Brighton and London, inquiring

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Waves of squatting have also previously occurred in the UK.

first into the beginnings of the modern wave and then moving forward into the present day.

### Beginnings of a movement - London

The modern squatting movement began in the England in the late 1960s, in the midst of a severe housing crisis. In certain districts of London, slum housing was the norm and the arrangement of temporary accommodation for homeless families was a shambles, whilst many Council-owned properties stood empty, awaiting demolition or even worse, simply stuck in bureaucratic limbo.

'Cathy Come Home', a BBC film directed by Ken Loach and designed to highlight the problems experienced by many homeless people, was first shown in 1966 and caused questions to be asked in Parliament. It was subsequently shown on national television two more times and this led directly to the foundation of Crisis (a homelessness charity) in 1967.

For Ron Bailey and other people working on tenancy rights and challenging recalcitrant local Council policies with painfully little visible improvement to be seen, the possibility of squatting empty houses quickly became a more and more attractive option in order to break the deadlock. As Bailey writes in *The Squatters*, "the immediate aim was of course, simply the rehousing of families from hostels or slums by means of squatting." Although his book is written after the fact and nothing was stated at the time, his explanation of the further aims of the group is still worth quoting in full:

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Obviously we hoped that our action would spark off a squatting campaign on a mass scale, and that homeless people and slum dwellers would be inspired to squat in large numbers by small but successful actions. But the main purpose of the movement was even wider than this - we hoped to start an all-out attack on the housing authorities, with ordinary people taking action for themselves. Finally, and in close conjunction with this, we saw our campaign as having a radicalising effect on existing movements in the housing field - tenants associations, action committees, community project groups, etc. If these could be radicalised and linked together then we really would have achieved something.

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Thus, after some symbolic actions, the squatters began to occupy buildings in the borough

of Redbridge in north-east London, which included the districts of Ilford, Redbridge and Wanstead. Bailey charts the legal steps used to keep the local Councils from regaining possession and also recounts the resistance employed against bailiffs. Some evictions were successfully prevented but two of the most notorious incidents occurred on Monday April 21, 1969. The events of this day are not necessarily more meaningful than others but can be taken as emblematic of the struggle as a whole. The Beresford family, living at 18, Grosvenor Road in Redbridge, were evicted with their seven children in the early morning. They had not been presented with any legal documentation and indeed had not even been asked to leave before bailiffs and police broke into the house. Events were repeated at 43, Cleveland Road in Redbridge, where bailiffs smashed their way in and broke the jaw of a member of the London Squatters Campaign, David Jenkins. The family occupying the house, the Flemings, asked if the bailiffs had a court order and were told "Are these your children? Keep your mouth shut if you know what's good for you and your family." The family were evicted, all their furniture broken up and the house rendered uninhabitable.

However, this short term defeat was miraculously converted into a long term victory which contributed to the establishment of the 'right to squat' (that is to say, the actual pragmatic possibility as opposed to the legal justifications which were now being tested on the ground), when the London Squatters Campaign made a pamphlet about the events of April 21. As a result of that, a national television show, Thames Today, interviewed the families and David Jenkins (whose jaw was wired up) and an investigative journalist from the Sunday Times got involved. The latter was able to find the name of the bailiff company, which was Southern Provincial Investigations (run by Barrie Quartermain). The squatters were then able to launch a prosecution against the bailiffs and through these legal steps, plus a chain of other equally important squatting actions which involved more violent confrontations and mainly successful eviction resistance, first Redbridge and then other local Councils became reluctant to use violent methods at evictions. Two factors were key here for the squatters, namely public support and sympathetic mainstream media coverage.

From initial actions housing homeless families, squatting spread like wildfire. The London Squatters Campaign soon had to add 'East' to its name to make a distinction from other London squat groups and later All London Squatters met as an umbrella organisation so as to allow the various groups to communicate. Adrian Franklin gives figures of 1,000 licensed squats and 1,000 unlicensed in 1971, exploding to 3,000 licensed and 35,000

unlicensed in 1974, and then rising to 5,000 licensed and 48,000 unlicensed in 1975-6 (Franklin). In *Squatting the Real Story*, Steve Platt gives an estimate of 40-50,000 squatters in the mid 1970s in the UK, mainly in London and also in Bristol, Portsmouth, Brighton, Swansea, Cambridge and Leicester (Wates & Wolmar).

In these numbers, squatters of course were bound to affect the society that they were part of, indeed it would be surprising if they had not. Franklin observes that “we have to try to understand why some 30,000 people per year decided to live in squats.”<sup>2</sup> It seems clear from the literature that housing need was a principle driver for squatting and once that was satisfied, squatters would pursue political, cultural and social aims (for UK: Bailey, Dee, Needle Collective, Platt, Reeve 2005 & 2009, Wates 1976 & 1984, Wates & Wolmar, for other countries: Martinez, Mudu, Owens, Pruijt). Two examples of later political interventions were the Centre Point occupation and the Tolmers Square resistance, both of which we will touch on briefly below. Again, whilst these are both famous events, we want to make clear that they are mentioned as representative of the movement, rather than being identified as defining moments for it. Some other struggles which would also be representative include Elgin Avenue, Frestonia, Prince of Wales Crescent, St. Agnes Place, Twickenham and Villa Road.

Centre Point was a 32 floor office building built in central London at the crossroads of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street. Notoriously, it had been left empty since its construction was finished in 1966, since the owner was speculating and waiting for one tenant to take on the whole block. In a meticulously planned action, squatters occupied the building in January 1974 in order to highlight the crisis of homelessness in the capital. The action lasted three days and opinion was ultimately split over whether the squatters should have remained barricaded in the building or not, but nevertheless attention had been brought to the issue.<sup>3</sup>

Tolmers Square and its surroundings, also in central London, was largely squatted from 1973 until 1979.<sup>4</sup> Property developers intended to demolish a 12 acre area to make way for bland commercial offices, but were successfully resisted by the squatters, who led an effective campaign against gentrification and speculation which linked tenants, community

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And he adds “this figure is based on known squats and probably severely underestimates the actual number squatting.”

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Incidentally, the homelessness charity Centrepoint had been set up in 1969 and was not formed as a response to this action as sometimes reported.

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Alara Wholefoods began in a squat in Tolmers Square in 1975.

groups and political parties, with the ultimate support of Camden Council (Wates 1976). Here we can see squatters taking action to house themselves, whilst at the same time battling to preserve an architecturally valuable square. “Demolitions and threats to Georgian Bloomsbury and to Tolmers Square in Euston (the ‘locus classicus of London’s intellectual squatting movement’), succeeded anew in drawing public attention to the plight of the squares, and precipitated the initial stirrings of the movement for their preservation” (Longstaffe-Gowan). The fight over development had begun long before the squatters became involved but local resistance had been worn down until the fresh energy arrived.<sup>5</sup> Nick Wates, one of the squatters, wrote that “It was only by taking direct action that anyone could intervene. By occupying empty buildings, squatters were able to halt the decline, revive the community and revive leadership in the struggle against the developers” (Wates 1976). All the squatters were eventually evicted and the square was partially demolished, yet as Wates comments in a later article:

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If it had not been for the campaigning, the office block would have been almost 3 times as large, there would have been far less and/or lower quality housing, many of the small streets with a wide range of thriving businesses would have been completely flattened and replaced with slabs of housing (Wates 1984).

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In terms of numbers the squatters movement peaked in the 1980s, when many squats were legalised or formed into housing co-operatives. In following years, squatting as a social movement declined in force yet persisted and both the legal and pragmatic right to squat has been held right up until the present day, when squatting in residential buildings was criminalised on September 1, 2012. As Aufheben record, “By the mid 1980s, virtually every town in England and Wales had its squats”. Further:

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This scene was particularly well organized, and more politicized, in the cities. On Bristol's Cheltenham Road, the Demolition Ballroom, Demolition Diner, and Full Marx book shop provided a valuable organizational focus, with the activities of the squatted venue and café supplemented by the information and contact address of the lefty book shop. [In South

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The squatters also collaborated with a film-maker to produce 'Tolmers Square - Beginning or End?' which was shown twice on BBC2.

London,] Brixton squatters not only had their own squatted cafés, crèches and book shop, but also Crowbar, their own Class War style squatting oriented paper. Strong links were forged with the squatting movement on the continent, particularly Germany, and draft dodgers from Italy were regularly encountered. And with direct communication supplemented by the then fortnightly Black Flag, a couple of phone calls and a short article could mobilize numbers in solidarity with other struggles (Aufheben 4).

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Tony Mahony was another member of the London Squatters Campaign. Interviewed in 1969 by the Irish current affairs magazine Nusight, Mahony states that he can only talk of what he knows, namely struggles in London and formulates these particular struggles as “an attempt through direct action by homeless people to achieve their right to a decent roof over their heads.” He adds that “in England the groups are local and autonomous which means there is no central strategy or single ideology.”

Looking at these events from today's vantage point, when squatters are demonised and squatting in residential buildings has just been criminalised, it is fascinating to ask the question as to why the squatters were supported by the general public. At least three reasons explain this: firstly, in a time of austerity, people still remembered the post-war squatters occupying army camps in 1946 to provide housing for themselves and respected the 'do it yourself' attitude of squatters renovating derelict houses; secondly, memories of the Rachman scandal were still fresh and slum landlords were generally disliked; thirdly and perhaps most importantly, the growing scandal of homelessness and the vast amount of empty Council properties gave a clear moral justification to squatters who occupied houses and repaired them.

Mahony's reference to a 'roof over their heads' is an oft-repeated phrase in the contemporary literature of the squatters themselves. Kesia Reeve describes the UK squatters movement as “the embodiment of all that the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were said to be” whilst also pointing out that it can refine the notion of a new social movement in that squatters showed willingness to compromise (sometimes engaging in negotiation to legalise projects for example) and wanted to satisfy their housing need as well as working towards cultural or political aims (2009). Crucially then, Reeve sees the squatters movement as also a “movement of the materially disadvantaged, seeking to achieve social welfare goals in a context of housing need”(2009). On a crude reading of the evidence supplied so far this might suggest that the

squatters movement was simply a combination of middle class activists “seeking autonomy and cultural expression” and working class people who “wanted little more than somewhere to live” yet this is to ignore the complexities of the squatters movement, in which people worked towards combined goals, as illustrated by the Tolmers Square example (Reeve 2009).

In order to explore this point further, we will look at the case of Brighton in the 1970s.

### Beginnings of a movement - Brighton

Bailey states that “outside London the longest and most determined squatting campaign took place in Brighton”. At this time Brighton had a large working-class population and terrible housing conditions, with slum landlords charging high rents and entire streets left derelict. A group called the Brighton Rents Project had been set up to campaign for tenants rights and was “an alliance of socialists, Labour Party supporters and housing militants of all kinds” (Bailey). Its first occupation was a token day-long squat of two Council-owned properties at North Place on May 10, 1969. Six days later, the same houses were again occupied in order to prevent their demolition to make way for a car park. Following this success, the Project picketed the Brighton Council meeting on May 22 and attempted to deliver a petition of 2,000 signatures displaying “public worry and concern about housing problems.” The Mayor stopped the meeting and invited the police to clear the Town Hall, which resulted in eleven arrests. Clearly, the nascent squatters movement was making an impact.

A Brighton squatters group was forming out of the May Day Manifesto group of socialists, young socialists, international socialists, anarchists and communists (some but not all of them students). A two part article published by an anonymous author in issues 18 and 19 of the alternative newspaper the Brighton Voice records that group campaigned on homelessness, surveying rented accommodation, keeping lists of empty houses and supporting rent registration by tenants. Inspired by the success of the North Place actions, the Rents Project and its May Day associates decided to squat two empty Council-owned properties on Terminus Road, on June 14. The Council quickly took them to court on July 2 and won possession after 28 days. However, in the mean time another four families had squatted houses on Terminus Road and the adjacent Railway Road. Before the Council moved to evict any of the families, on July 19 the Project moved all six families to a row of



empty houses at Wykeham Terrace, which had once housed Army married couples (there is a resonance here with the waves of squatting following both World Wars when the Vigilantes group took action to house returning servicemen and their families). The houses were due to be auctioned off on July 23, but the sale was cancelled and in August more families moved in, with other buildings owned by the Council on the same block also being squatted.

Following the adverse publicity incurred at Redbridge and other places in London, Brighton Council was presumably reluctant to evict the squatters by force, but was handed a gift when some squatters from Wykeham Terrace were arrested for the bombing of the nearby Army Recruitment Office on August 19. This action is listed on the Angry Brigade chronology (it is the only Brighton event listed over the course of their four year campaign) but also alleged to have been committed by an undercover agent, later named in the Voice as Steven Prior (Anonymous1, Voice issue 19) Whatever the truth of the matter, it was a disaster for the squatters and ructions quickly appeared amongst the broad coalition of political hues in the Rents Project. Three people were later jailed and all the families were eventually evicted by court order in November 1969.

These initial events had put the option of squatting back on the political agenda, but public actions in subsequent years appear to have dropped off with the backlash over the Wykeham Terrace arrests (of course it is impossible to state what was occurring with private residential squats). Moving into the 1970s, Steve Platt records in his chapter for *Squatting: The Real Story* that "in November 1971 the Cyrenians, a charity for the single homeless which had become exasperated with Brighton Council, squatted three houses". The second issue (April 1973) of the Brighton Voice states that the Mighell Street Commune was attempting to legalise a squat with the Council, but their eventual fate is not recorded. It is also recorded that Eugenia Griffin squatted in 1973 after becoming fed up of waiting for a council house. At that time, there were 1,200 people on the housing waiting list and 2,000 empty properties; squatting had spread to nearby towns such as Newhaven and Lewes. The battles which would establish the right to squat and the significance of squatters as actors in society were being fought, just as they had been in London slightly earlier.

By 1974, the number of empty properties in Brighton was estimated at 3,000 (Voice, issue 13). The Voice reports that three people from South Avenue in Queens Park were evicted without court order (Feb/March 1974). The same issue also records a squat on Vere Road

being violently evicted by Nicholas van Hoogstraten. The notorious Hoogstraten was the epitome of an uncaring landlord, who regularly sent thugs to intimidate tenants and attack squats. He was later imprisoned for authorising a grenade attack on an associate and linked to the murder of Mohammed Raja in 1999 (he was never convicted although a civil court awarded £6 million damages against him - which he swore he would not pay). Hoogstraten was later convicted over the Vere Road incident and fined £2,000 (Voice, issue 20).

Frustrated at the inability of the Council to house them despite the number of empty properties, the Flynn family took action and squatted 32 Buller Road. They then squatted at Terminus Road, where a possession order was granted to the Council and they successfully resisted eviction on May 31. The Flynnns (a family consisting of father, mother and four children) were later evicted but the action was claimed as a victory since Terminus Road was then renovated and the Flynnns finally got housed by the Council on Gloucester Road. At this time, Hotel Aquarius was squatted by a group of 30 young people, including students. These squatters later went on to win licensed squats, where they lived for several years on a brokered 'no rent' deals for derelict properties which they fixed up and maintained.

By 1975, an article in the Voice states “the squatting movement has hit Brighton and this time it's here in a really big way” (issue 23). The Brighton and Hove Squatters Association was set up with two objectives - to provide instant accommodation for homeless people in Brighton and to publicise the property/housing situation. However, as more and more squats were opened, in September 1975, a crucial contestation occurred. A squat at 2, Temple Gardens resisted six attempts at illegal eviction before a court order for possession was granted. In the subsequent eviction, three squatters were arrested for allegedly assaulting an unauthorised bailiff, who went to hospital, where he claimed he had received stitches, whilst the doctor who treated him said he had applied a sticking plaster. The owner, a Rolls Royce driving millionaire called Joseph Norton, had arrived with a group of thugs and assaulted the residents of the squat (seven adults and two children). The Voice opines that “as the week long trial dragged on it became obvious that the affair of 2 Temple Gardens was a side issue and that the men were really standing trial for being squatters” (issue 29). The three men (John Jordan, Paul Hayward and Peter McCabe) were each given 6 months suspended sentences for two years and fined either £25 or £50, despite another person, Tony Greenstein, standing up in court and admitting that it

was he who had struck the thug in self-defence.

Three men had been found guilty, but this flashpoint serves as an indication that squatters were now prepared to resist militantly and in addition to housing need, another motivation was emerging, namely the political will to occupy buildings simply because they were empty. As an anonymous article in the Voice states:

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Of course squatting is an attack on private property: it should be. Not an attack on the houses themselves or a destruction of walls, windows or floors, but a principled attack on the iron law of property which rules our society, making it lawful for some people to have two, three or twenty houses and others to have none at all. It may be the law but it is not justice. squatting is one way of bringing a little bit of justice into this ruthless society.

MORE PEOPLE SHOULD SQUAT (emphasis in original, issue 29).

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This new militancy, allied to the prior victories of the London Squatters Campaign, meant that the right to squat in Brighton had now been established. Legal means had been found to support squatters prepared to face up to the illegal tactics of bailiffs.

As with the case of London, the diverse squatters movement had formed out of various needs, primarily housing. The availability of empty property, coupled with the willingness of people to occupy it, had created fertile conditions for this movement to form. And it continued to grow, so much so that on the national scale, the criminalisation of squatting soon became an issue. Indeed, in 1976 a motion by Brighton Council calling on the Government to criminalise squatting was passed by 39 to 12. The Campaign Against the Criminal Trespass Law fought an ultimately successful struggle to protect squatters rights, although the Criminal Law Act 1977 did introduce some changes in the law. At this time, the Voice quotes Colin Ward as estimating that the number of squatters in the UK is between 40,000 and 50,000, the same figure as Platt gives (issue 36).

By the 1970s, squatters in Brighton had established the right to squat. They had highlighted the terrible conditions of many rented properties, they had intervened to house people failed by the Council, they had won licensed squats and they had housed themselves rent-free providing the possibility for them pursue other interests. The squatters formed a diverse movement of different class backgrounds, different to but with similarities in trajectory to the movement in London.

It seems it is appropriate to end this brief examination of the beginning of the modern English squatters movement with two quite similar quotations. The first is from Michael Elbro (Brighton's new Housing Manager), in 1978: "I think that squatting is a symptom of the problem, it's not a problem in itself, it is only so because of the laws of our land. As squatting becomes more vociferous then we need to sit up and think that there's a lot wrong with the housing situation as it is" (Voice issue 44). The second is from an undated communiqué from the Elgin Avenue squatters in London: "Squatting is not a 'problem' the problem is the housing crisis. Council and Government should be forced to provide decent housing for ALL" (emphasis in original, undated).

### Recent events - Brighton

Moving into the present day, our contention would be that political squatting continues to be a social movement affecting social and urban policies. In Brighton, not everyone feels this way. Councillor Maria Caulfield, the Cabinet member for Housing for Brighton Council commented in 2010 in a letter to the Argus (a local tabloid newspaper) that "Unfortunately, the romantic notion of the squatter who inhabits a property that would otherwise stand around empty, even makes improvements to the property and leaves for the next empty home without costing anyone anything, has long since disappeared" (Caulfield).

Yet others would disagree. Tony Greenstein, himself a squatter at the Aquarius Hotel in the early 1970s and subsequently resident at a licensed squat on Landsdowne Place in Hove (as well as a veteran of the Temple Gardens court case mentioned earlier), declared in a more recent Argus article that "The housing crisis today is twice as bad. There is a need, and there are a large number of available properties" (B. Parsons).

Also in this article, entitled 'Pressure mounting for licensed squats,' SNOB(AHA), or the Squatters Network of Brighton (And Hove Actually), the latest incarnation of a political mouthpiece for local squatters (formed to resist evictions, to aid co-ordination among squatters and to respond to inaccurate media stories about squatting), states that "To us, it seems morally wrong to leave properties empty and unused... So here's our suggestion – the squatters stay on short term leases, maintaining the building through use. Then they leave when the building really is going to be demolished or redeveloped" (B. Parsons).

The SNOB(AHA) statement also references a Freedom of Information request which shows that in the previous year, the Council had spent £161,000 in securing empty

properties (ie employing companies such as Sitex Orbis to close off houses with metal sheeting and alarmed systems, in order to discourage squatters and vandals). This figure does not include other costs incurred by leaving properties empty, such as renovation work and legal fees to evict squatters.

The squatters group has been applying pressure on the Council (now run without a majority by the Greens) to set up licensed squats along the same lines as those brokered in the 1970s but observes that Green councillors, whilst sympathetic to squatting, are too afraid of a right-wing backlash led by local Conservative Members of Parliament such as Mike Weathervane and Simon Kirby (Kemptown) to engage seriously with the idea. In email correspondence the squatters told me that they have a list of Council-owned properties which have been left empty for years and often squatted, such as Brookmead on Albion Street, the villa on Ditchling Road and two villas on Preston Road. Ironically, all of these named properties were in fact used previously as temporary housing by the Council (email from SNOB(AHA)).

A success story of sorts for the squatters was Ainsworth House, another Council-owned building previously used as sheltered housing, which had been left empty for three years whilst awaiting development. It was occupied by squatters in November 2011, who then resisted attempts at eviction before Christmas. The occupiers left peacefully in January and the plans to demolish the building and build eco-friendly flats began (the first Council housing to be built for thirty years). Despite a dominant narrative in the local media which declared that the squatters had delayed the renovations, it appears that the occupation of the building had actually brought a forgotten project back onto the political agenda and had encouraged the local Council to press forward with plans to work on it. When the building was first occupied, Stuart Gover, vice-chairman of the Brighton City Assembly, stated: "It's been an open invitation for squatters for years. The Greens are simply not doing what they have committed to do [...] They are showing no interest in pursuing the build at all" (Gardner).

Through its website and communications with local and mainstream press, SNOB(AHA) has also worked to counter what it perceives as lies by Mike Weatherley, who was one of the proponents of the criminalisation of squatting in residential buildings. Expanding upon this point, another activist website, [brighton.squat.net](http://brighton.squat.net) has published several stories proposing answers to Weatherley's repeated assertions that squatters are all middle-class lifestylists and that squatters have never improved a single building which they have

occupied (Anonymous4, Anonymous5).

Most damaging of all perhaps for Mike Weatherley was an article published by the activist newsletter SchNews (published weekly since its beginnings at the Courthouse squat in 1994), which sought to contest his statement, made on BBC Newsnight, that homelessness charities supported him in his pledge to criminalise squatting. Since all major homelessness charities (such as Shelter, Crisis and St. Mungos) had already made clear their opposition to the proposals, a SchNews journalist called Weatherley's office to enquire which groups he had been referring to and was told that Off the Fence, a local charity based in Hove, supported Weatherley. However, the journalist then called Off the Fence and spoke to its managing director, Paul Young, who told him:

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Mike Weatherley has never talked to me or the Trustees about squatting. One million empty houses in the UK is criminal. Anyone saying that Off the Fence's position is to criminalise squatting would be wrong. [...] In regards to squatting, the only criminal element is properties that are left empty, while people are freezing to death on the streets of this City (Anonymous6).

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In fact, in early 2012, squatters took action in response to a homeless shelter being closed down and opened a squat as the Autonomous Homeless Shelter, which in its six month lifespan housed in the region of sixty individuals, giving those rough sleepers who wanted one a roof over their heads and allowing some for whom the drug and alcohol free space provided an address and a respite from the street to gain temporary accommodation arrangements from the Council.

However, Weatherley continues to argue that squatters are middle class lifestylists, “talented, web-savvy, legally-minded” and professes that there is no link “whatsoever between the genuine homeless of my constituency – such as the rough sleepers on Church Road – and a typical squatter” (Weatherley).

Weatherley was recently chased off the University of Sussex campus when he attempted to give the speech from which the above quotations are given (he later returned to give it in secret to the Conservative Society and then published it on his website). Three people

have since been charged with affray, with one of them being a Sussex student who was known to Weatherley, having been arrested for showering his assistant Robert Nemeth with glitter at a previous protest against the criminalisation of squatting.

Political squatting in Brighton still clearly focuses on housing need, but also acts as means of protest regarding other issues in addition to protesting against criminalisation. For example, new supermarket developments are often resisted through site occupations as part of community struggles against the large supermarket chains such as Tescos, Sainsburys and Lidl. In 2002, a Mayday party followed by the Harvest Forestry squat on land below the station catalysed protests against the building of a Sainsburys and yuppy flats on what had previously been land owned by National Rail.

The Lewes Road Community Garden existed for just over one year (May 2009 until June 2010) before being evicted. Local residents had occupied a derelict lot previously used as a petrol station and put in various types of raised beds to grow vegetables and flowers. When eviction proceedings began and it became clear that developers wanted to build flats with a Tesco Metro supermarket underneath, the users of the popular garden became even more keen to defend it, seeing off bailiffs and bulldozers on more than one occasion until legal threats against named individuals led to the garden being relinquished.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, in 2011, the Sabotaj squat took occupation of a building at the Old Steine in central Brighton, where a local fruit and vegetable shop (Taj) had gone into receivership and Sainsburys had taken on the lease. At a quickly called meeting, one hundred people met in the former shop to discuss how to use the building. It became a centre for opposition to the 'clone town' effect in Brighton, whereby the same identical shops owned by same multinationals dominate high streets and squeeze out independent retailers. A petition of 1,400 names was presented to the council urging it to 'keep Brighton unique' and the alcohol license for the supermarket was refused. Local Green councillors were regular visitors to the occupation and indeed one was even able to take action to prevent the police completing an illegal eviction, since he was on the board of the Sussex Police Authority. A local magazine commented:

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With banner branding that would make most multinationals jealous, SaboTaj occupied the

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As of December 2012, the shopfront under the flats remains empty - possibly because of the Stokes Croft riot of April 2011 in which a new and opposed Tesco Metro was destroyed after the police raided a squat opposite searching for non-existent molotov cocktails.

much-loved ethnic supermarket, turning it into an art gallery, but the police arrived early one morning and it was all over. Despite Morrisons being just a few doors up, Kemptown had another new supermarket (The Source).

/BLOCKQUOTE

Another Kemptown project was the squatted vegetable shop, when people occupying a disused residential flat on St. James Street, very close to Sabotaj, decided to open the shop below as a donations-based fruit and vegetable shop. They went to the wholesale supplier early in the morning and bought produce, which they then gave away by donation. The shop was later illegally evicted but in its short lifetime (two months) gained public support and highlighted the lack of availability of fresh food for shoppers who preferred not to use supermarkets. The legacy of the project is a shopfront covered in metal sheets (the bailiffs smashed all the windows) which has graffiti on it saying “But what about the vegetables?” and a newsagent a few doors up which now sells fruit and vegetables.

Acknowledging the tradition of political squatting in Brighton, the 2012 Brighton Photo Biennial took as its theme 'Agents of Change: Photography and the Politics of Space.' In a text written for Guardian, the curator declares that “not unlike the occupations that stretched from London to New York last year, or the activities of UK Uncut, political squats use strategic forms of creativity to transform privatised space into a commons,” going on to state “we have defined political squats as empty buildings opened by squatters to the public as social centres, libraries, gardens and, in particular, places to make and show art” (Burbridge). The Biennial produced a colour pamphlet (spoofing a local property magazine) which discussed political squatting in Brighton from 1994 to the present.

Squatted social centres have provided short-lived interventions into public debate regarding pressing issues. The Courthouse and Old Redhill Motors centres were set up to contest the Criminal Justice Bill and the Prevention of Terrorism Bill respectively. More recently, the Churchill Square occupation allied itself with anti-cuts protests in 2011 and other buildings have been utilised as residential spaces before meetings of housing co-operative networks and demonstrations against arms manufacturers. In April 2012, the huge and long-term empty former Co-operative department store was occupied for an intersquat convergence by SNOB(AHA).

Thus, we can see that squatters in Brighton have affected social and urban policy in various ways, both by protesting and by taking affirmative action on political issues such



as supermarket expansion, use of space, state legislation and local Council housing policy. As mentioned earlier, squatters have also been active in challenging the new law which has criminalised squatting in residential buildings: SNOB(AHA) replied to the Government consultation, published statements attacking the proposed bill and organised two marches in protest. The law was brought in on September 1 and on September 3 three squatters were arrested at a building on London Road after a seven hour stand-off. They were charged with the new offence of squatting in residential building, obstructing the police and abstracting electricity. The latter charge has since been dropped and the others are expected to be heard in April 2013. This will be an important test case in terms of setting a precedent regarding how the new law will be applied in future.

### Recent events - London

In London, one man has already become the first person to be arrested and imprisoned under the new offence. Alex Haigh, 21, was arrested on September 2 when the police came to his squat because someone else had given the details as a bail address. Alongside two others (including the prior arrestee), Haigh was arrested and after pleading guilty was jailed for three months.

When the possibility of criminalising squatting was debated again, SQUASH (Squatters Action for Secure Homes) was reformed - it was initially set up in the mid-1990s to fight the threat to criminalise squatting then. As a campaigning group it published reports such as 'Criminalising the vulnerable' and 'Can we afford to criminalise squatting?', lobbied members of the Houses of Parliament and participated in the Government consultation on squatting. Ironically, whilst the Ministry of Justice response to the consultation (entitled 'Options for Dealing with Squatting') did engage with some arguments put forward by SQUASH and other groups opposing criminalisation, including SNOB(AHA), it appears to have discounted the huge majority of responses to the consultation since they were against criminalisation.<sup>7</sup>

The squatter groups also worked to counteract a moral panic which arose in the mainstream media about criminal, foreign squatters who targeted decent home-owners,

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The report states in a footnote: "In summarising the consultation responses in the following sections, we have taken a qualitative rather than quantitative approach because 1,990 responses (i.e. almost 90 per cent of the total) were received in support of a campaign organised by Squatters' Action for Secure Homes (SQUASH). While we recognise that the statistical weight of responses was therefore against taking any action to deal with squatting, it is important that the views of other individuals and organisations are reflected in the summary of responses - even if in percentage terms, they are minority views."

pouncing to occupy places when they popped out to get a pint of milk. Ironically, it was again Redbridge in London which has been at the centre of the storm, with the Evening Standard running stories about 'A community besieged by squatters' and a resident, Sarah Dixon, starting a petition to stop squatting in the neighbourhood (Blunden & Parsons). Another Standard article related the tale of Janice Mason, "whose childhood home was taken over by Moldovan squatters" and who asked "why should someone be able to go into your house and take it over?" (R. Parsons). It is interesting to note how a politician such as Mike Weatherley has mobilised such arguments in support of criminalisation but now refers to the "myth [...] that people's actual homes – where they live every day – are getting invaded [...] Such stories are rare and are not illustrative of the wider problem but they do happen."

Yet overall public opinion appears to have shifted from the reportedly broad support in the 1970s for people occupying some of the many empty properties in the borough to an altogether different perspective on squatters as criminal, foreign scum. A YouGov poll held in November 11 which asked "Do you think the law should be changed making squatting a criminal offence or should it be left as it currently is?" was answered 'yes' by 81%, 'no' by 13% and 'don't know' by 6% (Campbell). According to the local Detective Chief Superintendent and Chair of the Community Safety Partnership in Redbridge "squatting is linked to Anti-Social Behaviour and can cause a great deal of nuisance and distress to local residents" (Williams), whilst the Evening Standard reports that "organised gangs of Eastern Europeans have occupied and trashed strings of empty neighbouring properties. One resident taking on the squatters in Ilford told how she returned home from work one day to find up to 30 of them in the four-bedroom house next door" (Blunden & Parsons).

We can observe here what Critical Discourse Analysis would term a dominant ideological-discursive framework. This hegemonic discourse both informs and creates a stereotypical view of squatters (Dee). Steve Platt writes that negative discourses about squatters have been present in the media since the 1970s and that "homelessness, when it comes down to it, is a social problem, not an individual one. With the best will in the world, this presents a problem for the popular media, which is always better at telling an individual story rather than providing meaningful social analysis." He argues that "for those who deal in straightforward heroes and villains -- the deserving and undeserving -- there is no dilemma here. For those who would try to represent nuance and complexity, it is much more of a problem," yet it is also very useful in terms of repression for squatters to be typecast in the

role of 'undeserving' or 'bad.' And what Becker terms the “hierarchy of credibility” means that the words of politicians and the mainstream media carry undue weight.

In the debate surrounding criminalisation, the narrative of the 'bad' squatter drowned out all other narratives, even if the vegetable farming squatters of Grow Heathrow were often represented as the 'good' squatters. Unmentioned in this debate was London's strong tradition of squatted social centres: just a small selection of recent ones would include the Ramparts, Ratstar, Belgrade Road, OffMarket, the Bank of Ideas, Colorama, the Cheese Factory, House of Brag, Palestine Place and the Cuts Café. The first two lasted for years rather than months, which is quite unusual. OffMarket was a project which lasted for more than a year, but only by virtue of moving location several times, whereas the latter two projects were time-limited, in that they were declared from the very beginning to be lasting for two weeks. Long-term political projects were early social centres such as the 121 and Cooltan in Brixton, alongside land squats such as Pure Genius and environmental protest sites such as Wanstonia. More recently, there was the land squat at Kew Bridge and the Diggers occupation at Runnymede is ongoing. Connected with the Occupy camps there was first the Bank of Ideas and then the School of Ideas (illegally evicted the same night as the St. Pauls camp), followed by a homeless project in Holborn, the Hobo Hilton and the squatted community library in Friern Barnet.

But how many people are actually squatting? It is clear that there are no exact figures available. Squatters themselves are not interested in the question, for example the opinion of members of SNOB(AHA) was that knowing a precise number of squatters, even simply within the Brighton area, had no particular use for it as a group (email).

In 'Options for dealing with squatting', the Ministry of Justice stated that “there is no data held by central Government about the number of people who squat or their reasons for doing so” and then proceeded to estimate the number of squatters nationally at 20,000. A Freedom of Information request revealed that the estimate had been reached after considering that there had been 216 granted interim possession orders and 531 granted ordinary possession orders were granted against trespassers of all descriptions in UK courts in 2010, but the reasoning here is difficult to follow.

Coming from another angle, Kesia Reeve and different colleagues have written several papers for Crisis, which identify a link between homelessness and squatting (a link which would seem self-evident to most). In 'The Hidden Truth about Homelessness: Experiences of single homelessness in England,' 437 single homeless people were surveyed in 11

towns and cities across the UK; 142 claimed to have previously squatted (39%) (Batty & Reeve). In an earlier report, 'Life in the Margins,' 165 homeless people from three locations were surveyed (London, Craven and Sheffield) (Reeve with Coward). Of these, 68 people had previously squatted (55 men and 13 women).

However, it must be clearly stated that Reeve is demonstrating that some people who are homeless squat as a means of shelter, not that all squatters are homeless people in the sense of squatting through deprivation (although it is also true that all squatters are technically of no fixed abode and therefore legally defined as homeless). It must be remembered that there are no viable statistics generally. Indeed, there are not very many statistics about homeless people who squat. As Reeve herself comments: Very little is known about squatting as a homeless situation: Despite the relatively high incidence of squatting amongst the homeless population, there is virtually no evidence, awareness, or understanding about the nature and extent of squatting, nor about the situations, profile or experiences of homeless people who squat (Reeve with Coward).

## Conclusion

From its beginning as a movement in the late 1960s, political squatting has clearly made an impact upon the society from which it emerged, with squatters taking advantage of the huge amount of empty properties in London, Brighton and other cities to house themselves and others. As Bailey comments "what we had learned from all our campaigns was that direct action worked where individual complaints failed." Once a movement had been established, squatters used their rent-free existence as a springboard for many other projects, with a long tradition of self-organised venues, gardens, cafés and social centres which stretches into the present day. Squatting may well have been a lifestyle, but not in the pejorative sense intended by right-wing politicians, more a commitment which involved hard work in repairing buildings, solidarity in supporting other social struggles and co-operation with other squatters. The English squatters movement declined both in number and political importance in the 1980s, when many squats were legalised or formed into housing co-operatives, yet the legacy lives on in today's movement, such as it is. The unsuccessful attempts to criminalise squatting which resulted in legislation in 1977 and 1994 serve to indicate the force of the squatters movement, if only as something significant enough to necessitate attempted regulation by the state. The stronger collective memory of squatting heritage in places such as Berlin, Copenhagen and Amsterdam also

suggests that there must be reasons for the lack of this memory in the English context.

Most importantly, the pragmatic and legal right to squat continues to exist in England, despite squatting in residential buildings recently being made a criminal offence. If criminalisation was designed to stop squatting, it will assuredly not succeed, since when there are both empty buildings and enough people willing to occupy them, the lesson of history is that squatting will occur. A Shelter report released in December 2012 declares “Britain is now at the centre of a perfect storm of housing problems. High and rising rents, the crippling high costs of getting on the housing ladder and the lowest peacetime building figures since the 1920s have all combined with a prolonged economic downturn to increase the pressure on families” (Carlyon). When the Conservative party is threatening to cut housing benefit for everyone under 25 and Guardian journalists suggest 'Cathy Come Home's Lesson will soon be learned again,' then it seems rather more likely that squatting will return as a major issue to the political stage, *despite criminalisation* (Toynbee).

Squatting can be represented as the complex intersection of a multiplicity of factors, which include and are not limited to the need for a roof over one's head, anti-capitalist direct action, the desire to live autonomously and a moral attitude concerning use of empty space. Squatters occupy houses to live in and from there organise in a variety of political and cultural ways. As Reeve comments, “squatters in the 1960s and 1970s were as much concerned with 'material subsistence' as they were with developing alternative lifestyles, and the experiences of many present day squatters reveal the endurance of the 'struggle for one's daily bread'” (2005 ).

The English squatters movement arose in the 1970s and may well return to its former size again, since all preconditions for this to happen appear to have been met. Criminalisation then could be seen as a calculated attempt to prevent future squatting activity, yet whilst legal measures may defeat a social movement's cultural aims, they are unlikely to override material need. If people need houses they will take them. Squatters will continue to play a role in shaping English society in the years to come.

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