

# Squatting, trespass, and direct housing action: A report on 'Making Space'

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## **Abstract**

A report from 'Making Space' – an exhibition of squatting, trespass, and direct housing action which took place in Sheffield as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences, 5-10 November 2018. This Radical Housing Journal 'update' reflects on the political role of archiving and exhibitions, whilst highlighting the main aim of 'Making Space' in unsettling the way in which we have become accustomed to think about property, ownership, and entitlement. In addition to plans for future online publications, 'Making Space' is also available to travel, so please get in contact if you are interested in hosting the exhibition.

## **Keywords**

squatting, trespass, housing, protest, exhibition

Squatting and trespass embody the limits of how housing and property are distributed, built upon millennia of enclosures. As such, 'Making Space' (an exhibition of squatting, trespass, and direct housing action) began with the Magna Carta, the foundations of Anglo-Liberal property law, and their translation into domestic and colonial rule. Open for one week at the Union St Co-op Café in Sheffield, as part of the ESRC (Economic & Social Research Council) Festival of Social Sciences 2018, 'Making Space' saw hundreds of people learn about and discuss such a inheritance, whilst networking with different campaign groups (including tenants' union 'Acorn', Assist asylum seeker support, and the Sheffield Tree campaign) as well as Reclaim the Power (a UK-based direct action network fighting for social, environmental and economic justice who happened to have a national convergence over that weekend).

The exhibition was collated using activist archives from the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS), Bishopsgate Institute, 56a Infoshop, the Black Cultural Archives, as well as online sources such as the Reclaim the Streets online archive (see reference list for a link to the complete list of exhibition sources). There was also support from the London-based collective 'Resistance Exhibition' who have been holding regular workshops inviting campaigners to bring their collections (leaflets, posters, letters, newspaper clippings, photos, video...) for digitisation, whilst sharing archiving techniques and skills. Archives seem to have taken on a particular importance for activists recently, suggesting (to borrow the Resistance Exhibition slogan) that to 'be part of the future' you have to 'learn from the past'. Such activities are seen as holding the potential to reorientate accepted narratives of history, for instance around housing and property, and subsequently open up possibilities for alternatives in the present. One of the aims of 'Making Space' was therefore to use these archives to 'unsettle' the ways in which we have become accustomed to think about ownership, entitlement, and the accepted limits of what we can or cannot do with property. In the context of the current UK housing crisis, in which at least 216,000 houses are long-term empty whilst rough sleeping and homelessness increases year-on-year (Empty Homes Agency 2019; Gov.UK 2019), returning to histories of squatting, trespass, and direct housing action, allows us to frame property differently.

### Figure 1

Graffiti at the exhibition  
Source: Author



Each of the movements featured in the exhibition were often-overlooked events from UK housing history in which property norms were directly contested. From the Diggers of 1649 who squatted and cultivated unused land in Surrey; to the Chartists and Suffragettes who challenged the link between property and the franchise. From the pre-war Landgrabbers who followed in the steps of the Diggers and farmed urban wasteland; to the Glasgow rent strikes in 1915 where women saw off the bailiffs and forced the government to introduce rent controls (in place until 1988). From the inter-war Plotlanders who, despite buying land, were labelled 'squatters' by the upper classes who saw their self-builds as 'blights' on the landscape; to the 1932 Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout in which hundreds of workers from

Manchester and Sheffield fought-off gamekeepers and paved the way for national parks and the ‘right to roam’ open countryside.

These historic actions embodied the limits of property, and highlight how squatting and trespass have existed for as long as there has been ownership. Yet it wasn’t until after WW2 that what might be recognised as ‘the first wave’ of national squatting action took place in the UK. In response to the post-war housing crisis - a continuation of pre-war urban overcrowding, compacted by demobilisation, a baby boom, and the blitz – the summer of 1946 saw 40,000+ people from all over the country squat empty military camps. This spontaneous action was widely celebrated, even by the right wing media (including *The Daily Mail*) who saw this as a continuation of ‘blitz spirit’. But such positivity towards squatting was short-lived, with the Communist-led squats of luxury Kensington flats that September seen, by contrast, as one-step too far. The limits of legitimate property-use are thus revealed: when people want to squat derelict, cold, nissen huts, this is celebrated as initiative; when they want to squat empty luxury flats, this is a fundamental threat to private property. This was a contradiction which also played out after the Grenfell fire of 2017, when calls from Jeremy Corbyn to requisition empty luxury flats in Kensington in order to temporarily house survivors were dismissed as out of the question (see Burgum 2018).

**Figure 2**

‘Making Space’ exhibition,  
ESRC Festival of Social  
Sciences, Nov 2018.  
Source: Sheffield Public  
Engagement & Impact



Following the occupation of homeless hostels in the mid-1960s, ‘the second wave’ of organised squatting campaigns in the UK turned to empty houses which had been compulsorily purchased by the state as part of slum-clearance schemes. The London Squatters campaign (established in 1968/9) argued that, in the middle of a housing crisis, these buildings should be put to use, and they set about squatting them on behalf of homeless families. This action set a legal precedent for so-called ‘squatters rights’ which allowed squatters to remain in a building until a court order had been secured by the owner. From this loophole, squatting took off in the 1970s: from those simply securing housing for themselves and others, to those challenging speculation (such as the occupation of Centrepoint which, built in 1963, was still empty in 1976 and, despite its repurposing into luxury flats, still can’t attract buyers today (The Guardian 2018)).

**Figure 3**

'Making Space' exhibition,  
ESRC Festival of Social  
Sciences, Nov 2018.  
Source: Sheffield Public  
Engagement & Impact



Other campaigns saw squatting more as a means to others ends, using this tactic in order to establish spaces for information sharing and campaign organisation. This included the Black Panthers who were the first to squat the renowned 121 Railton Road in 1972 (which remained a squatted social centre until 1999) and the Gay Liberation Front (who set up a centre and community on the same road). Squatting was also used to establish refuges, such as women fleeing domestic abuse, or the Bengali community of East London escaping National Front violence. Around this time, squatting also developed its own subcultures, making possible much of the culture we enjoy and count amongst our heritage today. Without having to work just to pay extortionate rents, squats across London gave artists and musicians the time and space to experiment, leading to music as diverse as The Clash, Sex Pistols, Eurythmics, Boomtown Rats, Boy George, Depeche Mode, My Bloody Valentine, Stereolab, Crass, and the Levellers.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the context for squatting and trespass began to change in two principal ways. New laws in 1977 and 1994 made it easier for authorities to evict squatters and faster for owners to get court orders, whilst the neoliberal revolution under Margaret Thatcher saw the state withdraw from housing responsibilities, permanently changing the landscape of housing actions. Whereas before, squatters could take the moral high ground on houses being kept empty by the state, they now risked acting against traditions and legal protections of ownership entitlement and sovereignty in the UK, by being forced to make claims against private ownership (although many, of course, continued to be willing to fight this, or continued to squat out of necessity). Another shift in perspective was a turn towards the global and a diversification of causes through new information and communication technologies, focusing on issues such as nuclear war (with perhaps the most famous land-squat of this period being Greenham Common women's peace camp), environmentalism, and the effects of global capitalism on politics and culture. Actions such as eco-villages, free festivals, and raves sought to create autonomous spaces away from profit-driven interests, whilst others squatted buildings and woodland as part of the anti-roads movement.

Throughout the 1990s, Reclaim the Streets widened the anti-roads protests to resist the general colonisation of public spaces by the car and consumerism, eventually morphing into the Global Justice Movement, the 2003 march against war in Iraq, and later the Occupy movement.

Throughout the exhibition, each event in the timeline was connected and compared to housing and property conflicts today. In a bid to avoid melancholia, it was important that these histories were explicitly framed as directly relevant to the struggles, campaigns, and direct actions that continue to take place around buildings and space now. 'Making Space' therefore ended with an obligatory info-table, as well as 12 posters of contemporary UK actions, including: post-crash resistance and anti-cuts campaigns; Streets Kitchen who are currently using squatting to house rough sleepers and highlight the homelessness crisis; estate occupations against regeneration schemes (such as Focus E15, Sweetsway, Aylesbury, and Old Tidemill gardens); environmental actions such as Grow Heathrow; actions for reclaiming the city (such as Slutwalk or Reclaim the Night); artistic and cultural squatting (including raves, Temporary Autonomous Art (TAA), street art and UrbEx); anti-racist, anti-fascist, and refugee solidarity actions (such as Black Lives Matter and End Deportations); as well as student occupations defending public education.

And even these are only the most public examples of squatting and trespass. Many more people continue to shelter in buildings they don't own or sleep in vehicles and tents on land they shouldn't be on. Whether 'under the radar' or through both informal and formal arrangements with property owners (such as exploitative property guardianships), the current situation of direct housing action in the UK is one squeezed by the law, stereotyping, and negative propaganda which depicts the homeless, squatters, activists, and nomadic communities as being fundamentally scroungers and criminals. But despite this reputation, these groups have never been about 'getting something for nothing'. On the contrary, what the long history of squatting and trespass actually demonstrates is the uncanny ability of these communities to take a piece of wasteland or neglected property and turn 'nothing into something'.

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A Complete List of the Exhibition Resources can be found online:

<https://squattinglondon.wordpress.com/2018/12/11/report-making-space-exhibition-sheffield/>