

Learning to learn

by Pat Moan

CONFESSIONS... Chapter 16 of a lay-about, hippie, anarchist, woman squatter

Moving into 29 Harecourt Road was like coming home.

I guess what it is with squatting is community – a textbook word, till you try it. A place where strange exotic tribes of natives live.

Now I live in Finsbury Park, Islington. A community. And boy, is it strange. Here there is life.

People don't just sleep here. They live here – work, play, sit on the front porch talking and singing, drinking beer.

Graffiti. Posters of past campaigns. Dossers loons, artists. Dogs, a goose.

There is conflict of course. We all know about that. But its the co-operation that really knocks me over.

I'm sick of reading and hearing all the time about squatting that it is a problem, a drag something interim till we 'solve' the problem

No More Crummy Jobs!

Squatting is the most fun I've ever had. No rent. Whoopee! No rent means you can give up full-time employment firstly due to needing less money and secondly due to having more fun not working.

Most jobs in our society either don't need

doing or could be done vastly more efficiently, that is, with less waste of time and resources.

And most people doing most of these jobs know it. Deep down, or maybe not even very deep, they know that they are wasting their lives – somehow this crummy job is not Life.

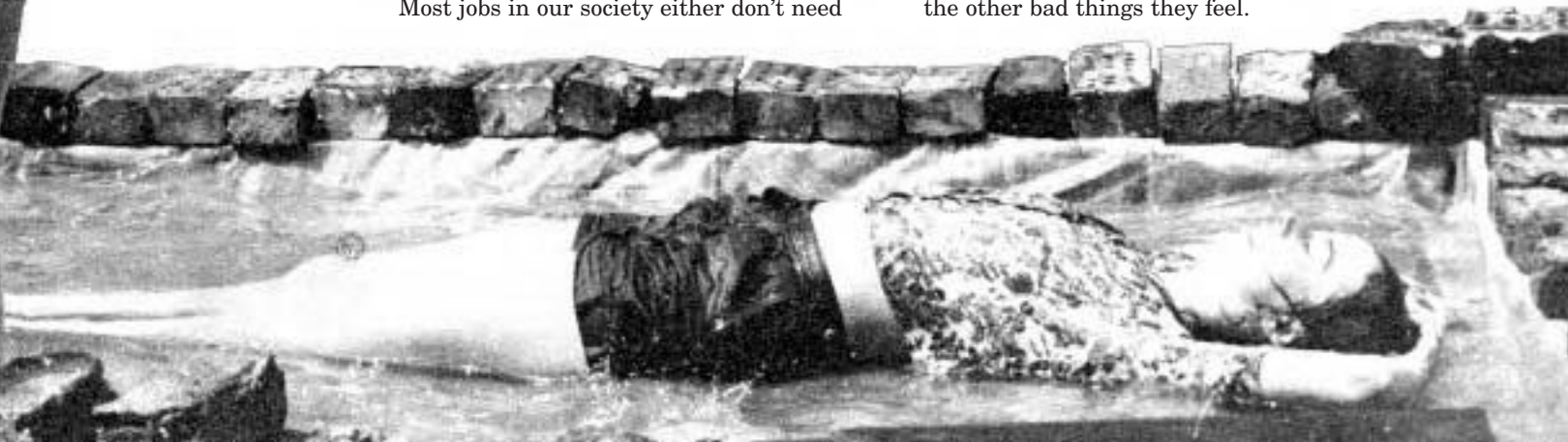
For example, factory workers spend most of their time engaged in the production of junk that is designed to fall apart. Besides which quite often the people making the stuff couldn't ever afford to buy it.

Wasted Lives

So vast numbers of factory workers, money collectors, bureaucrats, teachers, students, etc, are exhausted dulled, and demoralized by the meaningless way they spend their lives.

They become escapist. They learn to substitute consumption for action. They become Good Citizens. Buying cars, buying clothes, buying houses, buying . . .

Sometimes people try to fall 'in love' and/or get married and/or have babies in order to feel more useful and relieve the boredom When it doesnt work, they may add 'guilty' and 'bitter' to the other bad things they feel.



Eva Newnham



Taking Care of Me

As a squatter, I find my need for the glittering world of status possessions becoming less and less. Buying less and enjoying it more.

Because we spend less time at jobs we can spend more time taking care of our own needs which in turn saves a great deal of money. You couldn't work a 40-hour week and scrounge, mend motorcycles, build, paint, make your own music, clothes, jam, etc.

In fact, you're lucky if you can do more than collapse.

My daily life has been totally transformed. When you are no longer impaled on a 40-hour work week trying to pay the rent and indulging in expensive week-end, escapist diversion, what you are left with is time.

Time to do things, time to make things, time for yourself, time for others.

We have time to get down to the business of living.

By really living together in a group the monetary value that is placed on certain functions by a consumer society is replaced by our own values which

are based on *REAL* needs and *REAL* pleasures . . .

A tasty meal is one of the great pleasures of life and is recognised as such.

The ability to prepare it is appreciated as much as the ability to fix the radio.

The competitive and comparative approach is replaced by a co-operative one.

Learning to Learn

In this climate, skills are easily and joyously passed along. For one thing, if you don't share your skills



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Street party in Athelstane Road, June 1976

Above: The street 'spirit'.

Left and right: Street swimming pool.





'The Squatters Show' by the Persons Unknown street theatre group

it means you get stuck doing this one thing more than you want.

It feels good to be showing someone how to do something.

It does not feel so good to be doing something for someone who could be doing it themselves.

While a bit of plumbing for yourself is satisfying doing it as a job, as a hireling, it is a bore.

Squatters have given and taken free crash courses in plumbing and electricity as well as just showing friends how to do things . . . like juggling, music, printing, photography and mechanics.

This style of learning and teaching is fundamentally a desire to learn or pass on information and skills as opposed to a desire to either get or keep a job.

It is leading to the breakdown of mystique and obfuscation, which can no longer appear in the guise of real communication.

Death to Sex Roles

People in this situation do not feel threatened by other people's competence. And somewhere at the core of all this lies the dying phenomenon of sexual role-playing. Hallelujah!

We're not going away!
 Tuesday 20th June, 1976
 This morning there were 5 houses in Charteris Road. We lived there. Then came ten bailiffs and two hundred policemen. They had decided to evict us. Actually they had decided to evict us months ago and had told us they would evict us on March 26th. But they didn't do it then because we had too many people with us that day. It took them three months to work themselves up to do it, but finally they came. You ought to see our homes now. What a mess! Rooks, walls, water heater heaters, windows smashed; cookers, toilets, sinks, water ceiling's ripped out. Rubble, waste, destruction. Islington Council calls it "Rehabilitation".

Eleventeen of us were arrested on more or less trumped up charges. They accuse us of "threatening behaviour", "insulting language", "likely to cause a breach of the peace". But this is what they were doing. Some of us were dragged off for "obstructing a public highway" despite the fact that the police had cordoned off this highway. Yes, they even accused us of causing a housing shortage too.

This is what you pay them to do: to manipulate, to lie, to create shortages and surpluses to keep their power over you. Don't smile, you are not immune. Anytime they don't want you, they're going to give you a hard time. Maybe you know this already: maybe you're old, sick, or "unemployed" and have found that the "rights" they allow you just aren't enough to live on.

Anyway, we're all right. We're going to laugh our way through this farce and then go and open some more houses. We have already proved to anyone who will simply use their eyes that we use houses better than the council does. They have at least a thousand empty, rotting houses about the borough which they haven't enough money or sense to use. Isn't it obvious? The more you do for yourself, instead of getting tied up with corrupt, incompetent, power hungry bureaucrats, the better the housing scene, and every other scene will get. It's the only solution.

YOU CAN DO IT BETTER THAN THEY CAN: HELP YOURSELF!

Penne David



Maureen O'Connor

Differences become interesting instead of scary as men and women become friends. Ditto men and men and women and women.

We share a vision which involves a recognition of other people as fellow beings, each with a story to tell.

People ask questions as opposed to pretending they know something which they don't.

People answer questions straight without patronising or sneering at the questioner.

Last year, B S (before squatting) I felt isolated, wanting something, not knowing what – just what NOT. I wanted a community of peers, support,

like-minded people so as not to be always defending myself and my outlook.

I was ripe for squatting. When one is ripe, one creates opportunities.

The quality of my everyday life has never been better.

This is the revolution. It is on now. Not only is it bloodless and leaderless, it is fun.

(Written by Pat Moan and first published in *The Squatter* (see p. 185), Islington, London, 1976.)

Above: Athelstane Road after eviction.
 Below: Fighting eviction in Charteris Road.



Five years on

My horizon no longer shimmers with the promise of free-housing revolution. I really believed, then, that squatting was such a good idea that obviously, very soon, everyone would do it. I feel slightly foolish now, even though I *still* think squatting is a good idea and everyone should do it.

I miss the thrill of ripping off corrugated iron, the satisfaction of talking the gas man out of cutting off my supply, the fluidity between houses the general inventiveness and satisfaction of getting something for nothing. The effects still ripple through my life and are part of me now. The world was at my feet and for the first time in my life I really got into doing what I wanted to do, instead of what I was supposed to do. I think men generally have a broader range of opportunities so I doubt if they experience this freedom as intensely as women.

Squatting has been a tremendous influence on the lives of many women. And vice-versa. Free Space in which grew, and still grow, women's houses, women's communities, refuges for battered women and women's centres. Not having to pay rent freed women to start up presses, art places, bookshops – none of which would have happened if we'd had to pay rent. A wave of women plumbers, electricians, carpenters, mechanics, activists, musicians and artists came out of the squatting boom.

Since 1975 I have been amazed over and over by the dynamic women of the squatting movement: intimidating bailiffs, shaming police and embarrassing politicians in a direct and forceful way which most men are incapable of because they are so emotionally contained. One day in Finsbury Park the bailiffs evicted a woman and her six children. A group of us rallied in the street and an Irish woman neighbour gave those cops such a talking-to that half an hour later they were helping to move the furniture back into the house from which it had just been taken.

We had a lot of little victories like that which made up for the fear and insecurity. Things that made us mad, spurred us on, got us high. As women, we really started to feel our power, individually as well as collectively. There was a general challenging stance in the whole atmosphere. It was illegal (I thought). Stealing houses (they said). It was taking a risk, breaking the law and once you'd done it and started thinking about why houses were empty, it made you think about a lot

of things. You'd crossed a line, you'd hit the bottom and it wasn't so bad. In fact it was very liberating leading on to the next question: what about all these other stupid laws, conventions and attitudes which people hold sacred?

Brenda: *'Since the neighbours were all gossiping about us anyway I felt I could do what I wanted. I just cared less what people thought.'*

We kept finding out that we weren't powerless and they weren't omnipotent. Possibilities bloomed before my eyes. The whole area of skill-sharing opened up a wealth of possibilities to women. I felt very encouraged by things going wrong for men, like when Pete's lovingly constructed flower boxes, finished and varnished, sprang apart in the first rain. It's more encouraging, when you're learning, to see people try and fail rather than simply succeed. You feel there's hope for you.

Pat: *'I never used to saw until I started squatting. I'm sure I'd never picked one up.'*

Christine: *'No, I never either. I used to just fight with a saw. Now I'm quite a good saw-er. No, I am, I'm really good.'*

Pat: *'I saw Mo sawing and thought if she can do it, I can do it. She showed me how to start it off. I think up to that point I'd just felt you were born knowing or not knowing. I realised someone could actually teach you something like that. I remember Pete, on the other hand, coming along while I was sawing and saying, "You're not doing it straight. shall I do it for you?" by which time he was actually trying to take the saw out of my hand. I fought him for it. I felt he was showing off under the pretext of being helpful.'*

Christine: *'Oh yeah, he really fancies himself quite a saw-er.'* (Laughter)

It became apparent too, that a lot of times men really didn't want you to know how to do something that they did. As I was having really positive experiences of women sharing knowledge with me I was able to see, for the first time, that just because a man agreed to show you how to do something it didn't mean he would necessarily show you in a way that would be helpful. For example, instead of showing you how to play a simple chord on the guitar like E, he shows you

a difficult one like F barre. All of which meant that if I didn't get the hang of something straight away I no longer thought, 'Oh I'm useless and can't do anything right', but began to think more critically about who was showing me and what their trip was.

For us women, the more skilled and confident we became, the angrier we got about being ignored, particularly by certain men fancying themselves as Leaders, Experts or Lady Killers. While I was working on the first and last issue of *The Squatter*, which was largely produced by me and Al Rees, a friend of his from the left rolled up to help out at the end. He only talked to Al, he only looked at Al and he only asked Al questions. It was like I was invisible. And I thought well that's really IT. If you work with a man on anything, then it is always seen that he did it and you helped him.

So then I started living with women. I really needed to know that we could get it all together and be recognised that we could get it all together. If there were men around most of them just had this way of not letting you get around to anything. Like when Penny was going to put the toilet in, she went on a squatters plumbing course and while she was still thinking about it, Michael whipped it in. Of course, we were glad to have the toilet



Mike Goldwater 1979



Union Place Collective

done and Penny felt she couldn't complain. But it didn't do much for her confidence.

There was a lot of shame involved in not knowing. I mean if you believed in being competent – but weren't, and felt embarrassed or awkward about asking. If you didn't know how to change a fuse a man would take it as further evidence of your general ineptitude whereas a woman would show you how. And when you began to succeed instead of fail, asking became easier so it was a kind of habit you developed. As a child I remember that whenever I asked my father what was some tool or other, his stock reply was 'It's to make little girls ask questions.'

It became more important as time went on, not only for myself but for 'myself-as-a-woman' that I put in the slog and kept at things until I could do them. I had to break a habit of giving up easily. I wanted to be able to learn from women. I wanted never to feel ashamed of not knowing. I am prepared to learn from men but I'm not prepared to be squashed and I do know the difference.

Christine: *'It was a whole sort of reawakening. A sense of freedom like I had when I was a kid. Suddenly I had it all there again. There was anything you could do and it was all right! It was just amazing. Ever since then when I've moved out of squatting communities I've found the people really stodgy and boring. They just haven't gone through all that shedding of values that goes on when you squat. And the whole energy current was great.'*

Kathy: *'The houses were. things to do in themselves and it was really creative, too.'*

Christine: *'Oh yeah, it was really DO-power,*

instead of just sitting around talking.'
Brenda: *'I'd been on the fringe of squatting for a long time before I squatted. I experienced it as being a place for freaks to crash and screw ... disorganised and I certainly didn't want to do it... sleeping in dirty sleeping bags on the floor ... being really dirty and untogether. But those places weren't households, they were very transient.'*

Even the cosy squats tended to be pretty messy, and were a lot of work and a guaranteed cure to being fastidious. Most of them needed major work. So it was *big dirty* work we went in for, knocking down walls and building platform beds rather than worrying about clean floors and sparkling glasses. The whole lowering of standards on the housekeeping front was a big release for women. And because the houses were actually being thrown away by society, we had a lot of freedom to practice, to bodge and to play with paints and colours.



Pat Moan

Some squatted houses were more of a *no-man's* land than others, like around Broadway Market in Hackney where the majority were all-women houses and the women ran the Broadway Market Squatters Association.



Tony Sleep 1980

Ponk: *'The women helped me get into a house. My brother and male friend didn't turn up until it was all over – a typical pattern in Broadway Market, I was to discover.'*

Pat: *'What? Women doing the breaking in?'*

Ponk: *'Yeah. Wasn't it like that all over?'*

Pat: *'Oh no. It must have been like that because you were all women there and talked to the women who turned up, not the men.'*

Ponk: *'Yes. I suppose we just ignored them. I never really thought about that. Meeting those women really changed my life. For me, it's really all been about women.'*

Kathy: *'If I hadn't discovered squatting and, more important, squatting with women I would never have had the opportunity to take on things that had, at one time, seemed impossible. It started out with practical things and became a whole attitude of mind.'*

For me too, squatting has been about women, about power, about independence and breaking a deadening pattern of passivity. •

Squatters' paper published in Islington, London, 1976.

