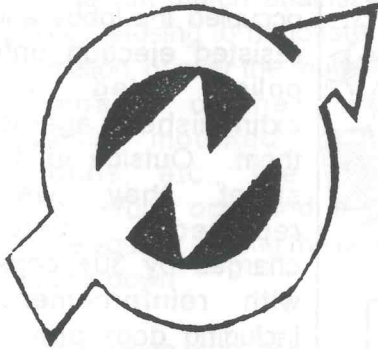


TAKING IT BACK



Squatting is an up front way of seizing resources (ie. property) for the benefit of the community. Its history in this country runs from the Diggers' occupation of common land during the English Revolution to the mass working class occupation of M.o.D. property after 1945.

Hostility to squatting (from the media, etc.) is not surprising since it directly challenges the capitalist system of property. It is treated with loathing by both right and left wings of the party political system. The state intends to make squatting a criminal offence. New legislation will form part of the Criminal Justice Act, although there will need to be secondary legislation to change the Magistrates Court Act before it can start to be enforced.

There are tens of thousands of people squatting in this country. The majority are not drongos, but working class people who by simple and effective direct action are taking back what is rightfully ours. The criminalisation of squatting will provide a major

flash point in the escalating conflict with the state.

OXFORD ACTION

In recent months, prompted by the approach of the Criminal Justice Bill, people in Oxford launched a direct action campaign involving the occupation of empty properties. Class struggle anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, including the Oxford Wobblies, played a significant role in this. We would like to share with others the story of our actions, and our own reflection of their value.

Oxford has a pressing need for accommodation: rents are pushed through the roof by commuters, rich students and the privileged elite of the university. For young and unemployed people there are few cheap recreational facilities, especially for music or film. Yet there are currently estimated to be over 900 commercial and residential buildings empty in the Oxford, 900 empty shells the majority of which could be used by the community. This is the reality of capitalism in our workplaces and communities - perfectly good resources squandered because the rich can't make a fat profit out of them.

OCCUPATION

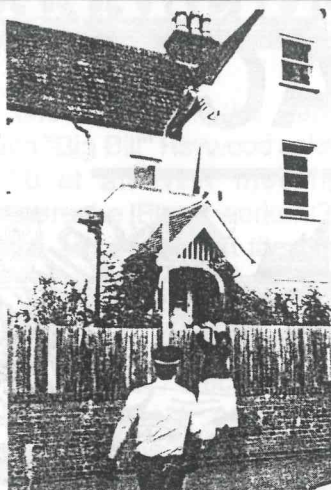
Plans were made to occupy Oxford's oldest cinema, the Penultimate Picture Palace, which had closed six to eight



months earlier, and a disused nurses home in East Avenue, (with 12 bedrooms plus communal rooms) which had been empty for several years, and vandalised by local kids. It was hoped to stage a week long cultural protest against the Criminal Justice Bill in the cinema with free films and music, while the nurses home would provide longer term residential and community resource space.

On the night of Sunday 31st July East Avenue House was legally entered and 20 - 30 people swiftly moved in to secure it. Police arrived to be politely and firmly told that this residential squat was covered by Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act 1977. They left. Work began immediately on reconnecting essential services, cleaning, etc. and continued the next morning, with support from many local estate residents.

continued...



**WE NEED HOMES - WHAT DO WE GET?
POLICE BRUTALITY!**



See with 'The Truncheon' in action against a peaceful protest at St Aldates.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

PEACEFUL PROTEST MARCH

Saturday 6th August

Assemble March: Way / Cowley Green 1.00pm
Via East Avenue House, St Aldates to Bonn Square
Bring banners, drums and respect for the community
We need everyone to be there!
Benefit gig in the evening; proceeds to bust fund for those arrested

WE WON'T LET THE TRUNCHEON RULE OUR LIVES!

Later that night, with 9 people still in custody, about 40 others gathered at the station to demand their release. They occupied the lobby and resisted ejection until police used fire extinguishers against them. Outside in the street they were repeatedly baton charged by 30+ cops, with reinforcements including dogs arriving rapidly. Most protestors were from the East Oxford area and had to retreat through the city harrassed by the pigs. 8 were nicked and charged with Affray.

WAR ZONE

The next day, 7 people entered the cinema, only to meet the guardians of private property in the shape of Thames Valley Police. 6 were arrested for "criminal damage" (the usual pretext), and released without charge hours later once the building had been re-secured.

Worse was to follow when the filth arrived at East Avenue House in force, claiming reports of a break-in. Cops in riot gear smashed their way in, arresting everyone inside. All but one were released hours later without charge. All this was witnessed by a large crowd of local residents and supporters, three of whom were nicked when a couple of police cars had their tyres slashed. One bystander was assaulted by cops when she tried to photograph them.

AFTERMATH

By the end of the night, with 23 arrested, 17 still in custody and many injured it looked like the scum in blue had successfully crushed the action. But they'd also seriously angered a good chunk of the local community and had sparked off one of the biggest public order incidents in the city centre for years. Because they underestimated the organisation and political motivation of these particular squatters, they were caught out by the sudden and massive media interest, finding

8 people are facing affray charges; two assault / obstructing police and 1 criminal damage. The less serious cases will be tried on November 25th, the affray cases probably early next year. Any contributions to the August 1st Defence Fund gratefully received - contact Oxford Freedom Network, c/o OSA Box A, 111 Magdalen Rd., Oxford OX4 1RQ for details

themselves having to publically account for their actions.

The following Saturday over 200 local people formed an angry and defiant march against the police, refusing to negotiate for permission, or over the route and destination of the march. Against mounted police, cordons, etc., the crowd successfully occupied a city centre square, forcing the police to back down.

At this stage, the actions had put homelessness, empty buildings, inadequate community resources and the role of the police at the top of the agenda. For once press and media reports presented squatting in a positive light. Large numbers of local people united in response to what was seen as an act of unprovoked police aggression against their community.

ON WITH THE SHOW

Nor was this the end, for on Saturday 3rd September the old cinema was successfully re-occupied and renamed Section 6 Cinema. This time the police stayed well away, sensing the uproar that would result if they tried a quick forcible eviction. This occupation lasted 4 weeks - one attempt at eviction was successfully resisted by people barricaded inside - before the squatters themselves decided to leave.

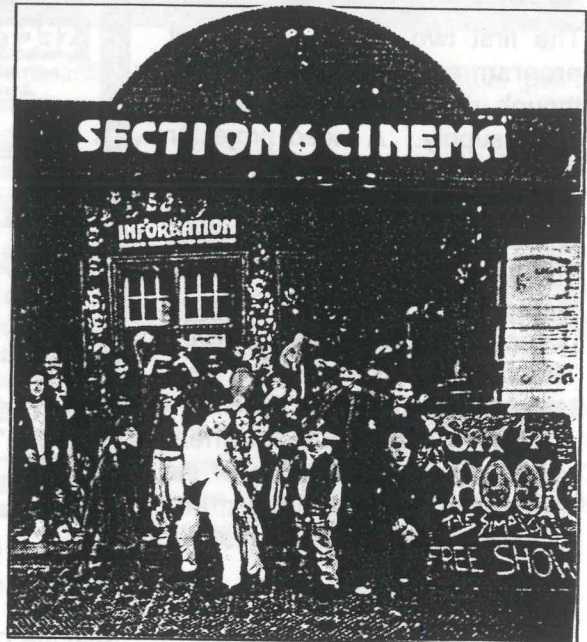
So for 28 days the building was a liberated zone in the heart of East Oxford. Although unsuited to residential accommodation, 8 young homeless people used the upstairs projection room as a temporary home. The large

ground floor hall was opened as a free community venue.

MAKING IT WORK

Those with experience of squatting were well aware of potential problems. Though the common purpose of a free community space united everyone, some clear differences emerged.

Many wanted to use the space for late night dance parties, which was fair enough, but it meant more work for those clearing up afterwards and led to complaints from a neighbouring old peoples' home. Anti-social elements were attracted and the question of whether the place should be open as a general doss house for people off the streets led to some tension. This was mostly between some users and what might be loosely termed the anarcho-syndicalist element, who argued that the space just wasn't suitable as night shelter accommodation and there simply weren't enough people willing or available to put the work in to run one. Neither were we willing to stand back and watch drongos or thieving wreck all the hard work. As a result, some called us authoritarian, "hey that's not anarchy, man". It was also difficult to hold collective meetings in the cinema, due to the presence of pissed/drugged up people and because many were unused to or opposed to this method of reaching decisions.



On the whole, though, the place ran reasonably well. A daily lunchtime cleaning slot was set up to sweep, Hoover and mop out the toilets. Rubbish removal was sorted. Things that needed fixing were fixed.

While many occasional users never lifted a finger to help, others turned up with tools, materials etc. and quietly got on with whatever needed doing. A good example of the autonomous capacity of the working class to maintain its own services etc. The term working class is used deliberately, whatever the sociological background of the various people involved. The fact was they provided the labour and skill needed without the coercion of wage slavery. They worked for the collective benefit not for the profit of a few.

NECESSARY ENTERTAINMENT

The first two weeks saw a full programme of films - all free, though donations were never in short supply. A video projector was borrowed and videos hired from local outlets. This itself was an act of defiance: with no license and no copyright paid - but as a local paper put it, "defying the law is second nature to these people". The anarchists / syndicalists were largely responsible for holding a Saturday children's matinee, attracting a wider section of the community and giving many parents a much needed break.

We also screened "In the Name of the Father" (exposing the role of the British state in the case of the Guildford Four etc.), with an excellent set by an Irish band afterwards. We staged one of the cinema's last events, the "Come What May Cabaret" which again drew an audience that extended beyond the confines of any single sub-cultural group. Many said that events like the kid's cinema made all the other hassles and pressure worthwhile. Even by its physical presence the cinema served as a good vehicle for propaganda. Anti-CJB., I.W.W., and C.N.T. posters were pasted outside.

TIME TO GO

At a final meeting in the cinema, however, we decided to pull out for a number of reasons. Time and energy spent over 4 weeks had delayed other projects and work. Much had been achieved by proving our ability and willingness to resist eviction.

But, with the possession order issued, people had drifted away, clearly worried by the determination of others to resist eviction. The burden of keeping the place going fell onto fewer shoulders, more so when some of the sleepers found more permanent accommodation,

SECTION 6 CINEMA

Don't believe what you read in the press...
Section 6 Cinema is still occupied

TONIGHT
(Thursday 29th September)

We present for your entertainment and delight

THE COME WHAT MAY CABARET

a less than organized hotchpotch with

J.J. - Stand Up Comic

Live Acoustic Set

Fire Juggling!

Assorted Singers / Instrumentalists
(Bring your own hit for a spot / jam)

• Whatever else we can think up between now & then...

9.00pm onwards

Free (of course)

DIRECT ACTION AGAINST THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL

making it difficult to maintain a 24 hour presence.

Also the projector equipment had to be returned and people became cautious about donating equipment in case of a raid / eviction. Having to hire out equipment proved a burden, so it became difficult to maintain a regular programme.

Because of these factors, the danger of anti-social elements taking over the place increased, with the media waiting to destroy everything we had set out to achieve. So the barricades were set up for the last time, leaving a concealed route in should people need to return.

COMMUNITY PRESSURE

Our interest in the cinema has not ended. We challenged the owners, Donnington Hospital Trust, to prove their claim that they'd let the building to someone who would run it as a cinema, (citing us as responsible for preventing the building coming back into permanent use), which they have failed to do. They know that if essential repairs are not carried out, action will be taken. There is now a broad community interest in the building's future, and if the owners leave it to rot or try to lease it as anything other than recreational / cultural space, they're in for a shock!

Despite the problems we come out of this experience feeling that good and useful work was done, especially in terms of young / unemployed people organising on a spontaneous basis. Whilst far from being a revolutionary situation, pushing forward the boundaries through such actions is a small but important step towards reclaiming our communities and our lives for ourselves.

DIRECT ACTION GETS THE GOODS!

- 1) Occupying empty property / land challenges the inequality of capitalist property and creates, by direct action, a space for the community to organise itself autonomously along different lines.
- 2) As a form of direct action against capitalism, responsible squatting deserves the support of all those engaged in class struggle.
- 3) A wide base of community support is essential - make sure the place genuinely benefits the community rather than just one small group. Best of all is strong working class support, because as all syndicalists know, it's this class which keeps things ticking in a concrete sense.
- 4) Such actions work best - however unappealing it seems - in the public eye - ie. use the media. This provides invaluable propaganda and creates more problems for the police.
- 5) Successful community occupations provide a concrete example of anarcho-syndicalism at work, without the need for spouting of political theory. The best way to break down barriers and people's suspicion of obsessive or crazed extremists is to work together on practical day to day issues and needs. There's more mutual respect gained in an hour's work cleaning the floor or fixing the door than in weeks of "political" discussion.
- 6) Running our own facilities means dealing with a wide range of social problems - what do we do about people pushing hard drugs, thieving, etc. Only armchair revolutionaries can ignore such issues. By confronting these face to face people learn that freedom can't exist without collective responsibility. It is exactly these sort of problems which Syndicalists and Anarchists must confront if we are serious about building a new world within the ruins of the old.