



“Squatting is Still Legal, Necessary and Free”:¹ A Brief Intervention in the Corporate City

Paul Chatterton

Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies, University of Newcastle
upon Tyne, UK; e-mail: paul.chatterton@ncl.ac.uk

Squatting is a solution to homelessness, empty properties and speculation. It provides homes for those who can't get public housing and who can't afford extortionate rents. Squatting creates space for much-needed community projects. Squatting means taking control instead of being pushed around by bureaucrats and property owners. Squatting is still legal, necessary and free.

(Advisory Service for Squatters 1996:1)

What follows is an account of a brief intervention in the contemporary urban landscape in an English city, Newcastle upon Tyne. It is an account of a group of people who squatted a building as a response to the increasing dominance of corporate organisations and the declining accountability of local authorities in cities.

Corporate City ...

Over the last 20 years, most cities have become fixated on the use of culture, leisure and entertainment as tools for rejuvenation. While British cities are not overwhelmed by corporate entertainment and leisure to the same extent as their North American counterparts (through an abundance of malls, multiplexes, marinas, casinos, chain bars and restaurants), large parts of where we spend our free time in cities are now largely defined, directed and owned by corporate capital and the machinations of an increasingly small group of local elites, property developers, place entrepreneurs and leisure corporations. For example, 70% of beer sales in the UK are controlled by three brewers, while the top ten pub operators own 50% of all pubs. The story is similar in the UK nightclub sector, with Luminar Leisure, recent

purchasers of Rank and Northern Leisure, owning 10% of all night-clubs in the UK.

Commentators on urban transformations over the last few decades, such as John Hannigan, Sharon Zukin and Mike Davis, have pointed to some of the implications of such developments. For example, rather than being rooted in the specificities of place, such corporate entertainment infrastructures create nonplace “corporate playscapes” in cities dedicated to servicing a highly mobile professional service class. Moreover, the increasing corporatisation, purification and privatisation of city centres and their consumption spaces raise concerns for issues of inclusion, diversity and equality. The casualties of this turn towards the corporate entertainment city are the less “desirable” denizens of urban life—the homeless, the skaters, the goths and punks, the kids hanging out—those, in general, whose do not have consumerism as their main reason for participation in the city.

This shift in contemporary urban life continues to squeeze out small-scale, independent arts, cultural and entertainment activities that cannot survive in face of rising city centre property values. In this context, large corporate operators gain advantage over their smaller counterparts, as they have access to large sums of capital to buy and renovate city centre property, are backed by vast legal, administrative and marketing resources, and can negotiate bulk-buying discounts with suppliers to undercut small operators.

Eclectic City ...

It is in this context that a group of us in Newcastle squatted a derelict building in the city centre. There had been a desire to open a squat for a number of months, and it was felt that something should be done in the city in solidarity with the demonstrations against the meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Prague on 26 September 2000. An opportunity presented itself through a disused building, a former arts and community venue, which had been earmarked for demolition as part of a proposed development called Electric City, which was to include a 4000-seat multiplex cinema, bowling alley, nightclub, shops, casino and car park. We occupied the building towards the end of October 2000, driven initially by a desire to provide a number of free services and events that were lacking in the city centre, such as a recycling point, an environmental resource centre and library, a drop-in centre, a café and performance space for local musicians and artists.

In particular, we felt that the city centre was becoming dominated by profit-driven, off-the-shelf leisure and entertainment developments, which many local people could not afford to use and which offered little variety. Moreover, the idea that the city needed another multiplex cinema, especially considering that there were a number of other

proposed multiplexes, seemed absurd to many local people. At this time, there were also concerns about the lack of public accountability from the local authority, as it had already agreed to a number of large-scale, megabuck schemes with national developers and leisure operators in preference to developing or subsidising smaller-scale schemes.

The squat that was established was christened “Eclectic City”, in part to contrast with the name of the proposed development, Electric City, but also to highlight the need to use a greater diversity of ideas and methods to develop the city centre. Over the course of the first week, preparations were made to open the building to the public. A rota was drawn up to ensure that the building was permanently occupied, and a copy of Section 6 of the Criminal Law Act (UK Parliament 1977), which gave residents some protection from eviction, was pinned on the front door. Mutually agreed-upon house rules were also drawn up to establish how the building was to be used (Figure 1). Eclectic City was opened to the public a week into the occupation and a number of events were held, including a showcase evening for local bands, a cabaret night and a free café and resource centre (Figure 2). As the building had no running water, electricity or gas, we provided heat, light and music from candles, camping stoves and batteries powered by renewable energy from bicycles (Figure 2).

Reaction to the squat included a mixture of intrigue and support. The police only came once, to check on health and safety, and there was only one confrontation, when one police constable accused a young mother of being an unfit parent for bringing her child to the squat. Certain police officers even expressed a preference for this type of venture in comparison to larger, corporate entertainment venues, which put more demands on police resources. The local and regional media were generally supportive, as it provided material for them to depict a David and Goliath battle between local people and nonlocal insensitive corporate developers (Henderson 2000). As a result of the favourable media coverage, a number of local businesses and members of the public brought gifts of various kinds including food, candles and cooking equipment. A number of homeless people turned up after a week and were given room to stay. Many members of the group initially felt uneasy about their presence and felt that they were not experienced enough to shelter homeless people. Nonetheless, the new residents slowly began to help with the day-to-day running of the squat and became part of the group.

Two weeks after opening, a summons to the High Court in London was served from the owners of the building to “Persons Unknown” that gave three days to prepare a defence. While most people agreed that there was no realistic chance of putting forward a successful defence, the group thought that there might be an opportunity to



Figure 1: House rules. Source: author

negotiate a temporary use of the building with the owners through the granting of a temporary licence or an “order by consent”. This was especially the case since the proposals for Electric City had only just been referred to the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions for approval and there was little prospect of the developers moving on site for several months. At the High Court, efforts to negotiate a temporary use of the building and highlight a number of technical faults with the owner’s witness statement were unsuccessful. The eviction took place the following week. To the media’s delight, by



Figure 2: Café at Eclectic City and bike-powered sound system. Source: author

the day of the eviction some of the group had made their way into an adjacent derelict building, which was also earmarked for demolition to make way for Electric City. Banners were unfurled reading “Homeless Need or Big Business Greed?” and “Squat or Rot? ... Squat the

Lot!” (McAteer 2000). While we were also eventually evicted from this building, the experience had inspired a wide group with the idea that the dozens of empty and decaying buildings in the city should be put back into use to provide space and resources for a host of groups who currently have little say in the regeneration of Newcastle.

Squatting Is Still Legal, Necessary and Free ...

Every city has its dead zones, derelict areas, voids and wastelands (Doron 2000). However, such negative connotations overlook that squatting these forgotten spaces can transform them into places of living, creation and performance. In the three weeks in which Eclectic City was open, a disused building was transformed into a bustling place offering a free café, a resource centre, a performance space for musicians, poets, artists and photographers, shelter for several homeless people and space for local skaters. Several hundred people passed through Eclectic City in this brief time, highlighting the demand for places of play, work, meeting or just being, outside the corporate entertainment infrastructure.

Many dead zones in our cities are in a state of suspension waiting for the latest banal hotchpotch plan for a multiplex, casino, fun-pub, restaurant or edutainment centre to emerge from a developer and be fed to an eager, cash-strapped local authority. George Monbiot (1998:182) has pointed out the limitations of the current development process and its lack of accountability: “If ordinary people don’t like a local authority decision to approve a development, there’s nothing whatsoever they can do about it ... The results of this democratic deficit are visible all over our cities”.

In this climate of lack of accountability from the local state and the banality of schemes being imposed upon cities, squatting and reclaiming parts of the city are eminently sensible and increasingly widespread options. When most developments in the contemporary city point towards sterility and sameness, squatting values diversity and disruption and represents a desire for serendipity, unpredictability and openness. Squatting celebrates the power of the local, the immediate and the act or deed. It refuses to be caught by the bureaucracy of the urban planning system and the rules that currently stifle and regulate play, leisure and entertainment in cities. Squatting may be one of the few remaining resources that allow cities to retain their soul, history and connection with people rather than profit. It illuminates a collective and creative use of urban space that sketches out possibilities for radical social change.

Endnotes

¹ Advisory Service for Squatters (1996:1).

References

- Advisory Service for Squatters (1996) *Squatter's Handbook*, 10th ed. ASA: London
- Doron G M (2000) The dead zone and their architectural transgression. *City* 4(2): 247–263
- Henderson T (2000) Squatters take over doomed building. *The Journal* 17 October:6
- McAteer O (2000) One step ahead. *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* 1 January:11
- Monbiot G (1998) Reclaim the fields and the country lanes! The land is ours campaign. In G McKay (ed) *DIY Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain* (pp 174–186). London: Verso
- UK Parliament (1977) *Criminal Law Act*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Other Sources

Further information can be found at:

- Squatting Archive, HTML file: <URL: <http://alt.venus.co.uk/weed/squatting/welcome.htm#links>>
- Squat!Net, HTML file: <URL: <http://www.squat.net/>>
- Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS), HTML file: <URL: <http://www.squat.freereserve.co.uk/>>