



TOM BURROWS ON SQUATTING

EDITED BY ROSEMARY DONEGAN

I have been using squatting as a subject for photographic and sculpture presentations since 1971. My interest began in December 1971, when my self-built squatter home on the mudflats of Vancouver was burnt by civic authorities, which I consider to have been an act of arson. This systematic destruction of squatter self-built homes has eliminated housing for an estimated 20,000 people in the Vancouver area since 1940.

Since the trauma of watching my studio-home and its contents erased, I have been exploring squatting as an element of the housing system. Squatters most often occupy an area when social and economic mobility is more important than security of tenure. This is reflected in the age-grouping and the social-economic status of squatters. To squat is to act within the theatre of politics.

The issues are large and my research has taken me as far as squatting communities in Africa, India and Southeast Asia. I had difficulty in doing individual research in third world countries, due to having to relate to the filtering policies of bureaucratic housing agencies because of my lack of knowledge of regional customs and languages. I have found that my most relevant research has been within Western European communities, specifically London, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Paris, Berlin and Rome, because of the relative ease of networking on a grass roots level in Western Europe. This work — which focuses on Vancouver, Western Europe and the third world — was presented in a photo-text exhibition called *Skwat Doc* in 1982.

SQUATTING AND THE PRESS

In western culture the centralized press manipulate and censor issues surrounding squatting. England is a good example. In London throughout the 1970s the press dramatized the middle class plight that 'they couldn't go salmon-fishing in Scotland for fear they would come home to find themselves replaced by squatters.' In reality this rarely occurred and was very easily remedied by the police and the courts, even before the Criminal Trespass Law was passed in 1977, which eroded squatter's rights that had existed for over 300 years.

There was *no* mention in the press of the fact that there was a severe housing crisis in Greater London, while simultaneously there were 100,000 empty flats, due to an archaic and rigid centralized housing system, coupled with a tax incentive system geared to major property developers.

▼ VANCOUVER 1958

"Now me, little b-----, I ain't ever been good' for anything. Never work. Drink canned heat. Steal. You want me leave floathouse, go live next door you? Ha! Maybe you save your old beer bottles for me, eh? so I can sell 'em to junk-man, get canned heat."

He laughed and laughed. Then he kicked the door open for me

Interview with a Vancouver squatter from the *Vancouver Sun*.

THE SQUATTER 6p

Inside: ★ confessions! OF A LAY-ABOUT HIPPIY SQUATTER building barricades Big Transport Big City Guide



To squat is to challenge authority!
To squat is to challenge property!
Don't apologize.
It is your right to house yourself.
We must create our own culture. It is OUR city, OUR world, OUR lives.
These are our houses.

BEWARE OF AUTHORITY.
it robs you of your own power.

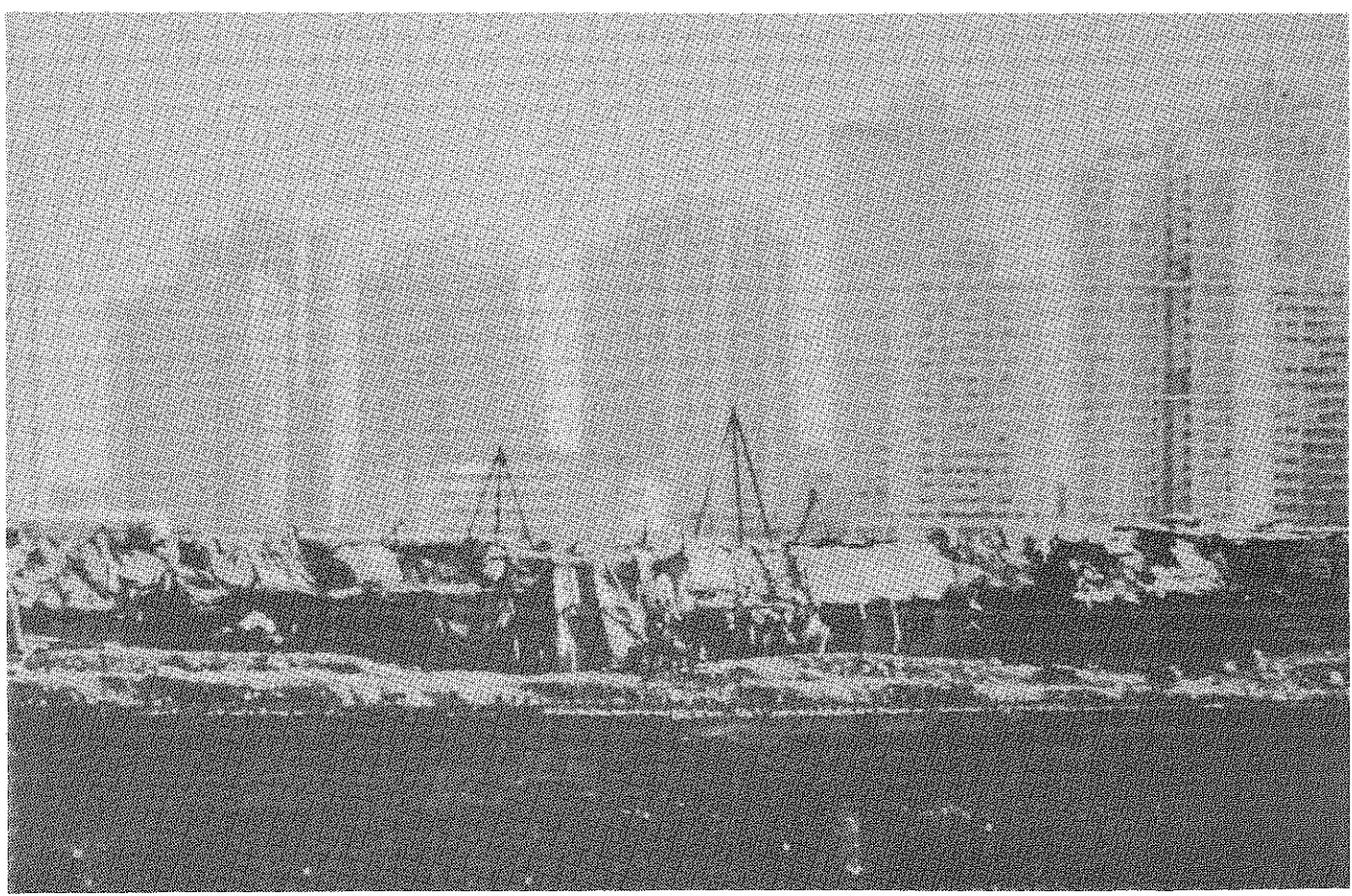
BEWARE OF DOUBLESPEAK.
authority tells you it is doing what it is in fact PREVENTING. just like the council says it is providing housing when in fact it is trying to prevent us from housing ourselves. so SCHOOLING prevents us from EDUCATING ourselves, the NHS prevents us from HEALING ourselves, and JOBS prevent us from WORKING productively and co-operatively. GOVERNMENT creates confusion, chaos and LAWS. the law prevents justice. government prevents us from creating harmony in our lives.

BEWARE OF POLITICIANS.
politicians tell lies. use you. don't be fooled by them. licensed squatting is a means for controlling you, for absorbing you into the system and robbing you of your own power. that is, your independence, your conviction that you have a right to be here.

IT IS YOUR HOUSE - KEEP IT.

▲ LONDON 1976
Squatters' paper published in Islington, London.

▼ LONDON 1977
Eviction at Branchly Road, London.



**SQUATTING:
10TH**

At the UN Habitat Conference in 1976 it was conservatively estimated that squatting supplies about one-tenth of the world's urban dwellings. In some third world countries at least one-half of the urban population is housed through squatting. In many Western European communities urban squatting has flourished since the late 1960s. The squatting population of Greater London in the mid-70s has been estimated at between 30,000 and 50,000 people.

Squatter shanties by a sewage canal on the edge of Bombay.

▲ BOMBAY

▼ WEST BERLIN 1980

Squatted Kreuzberg tenement, which had become a showcase cooperative self-help building in 1984.



INSTANDBESETZER MOVEMENT

In the first quarter of 1980, an estimated 4,000 squatters moved into over 250 derelict tenement buildings in the Kreuzberg area of West Berlin. They organized to occupy and repair these buildings rather than see them torn down and the neighbourhoods dispersed, resulting in a physical and social vacuum. For this reason, they called their movement 'Instandbesetzer', which translates as 'squatters who repair'. In September 1984, when I returned to Berlin to attend a conference on aspects of self-help housing and to hang the exhibition *Skwat Doc*, less than one-half of the squatters had managed to retain their dwellings. There had been a lot of open and often brutal confrontations with the police and the state. A number of households had been forcibly evicted.

The houses that remained, except for one or two exceptions, had entered into agreements with the state to become legalized self-help collectives. The recent brutality of the police had made continued squatting impossible — they either signed a contract or hit the streets. The terms of their contracts were very rigorous as to the amount of work that the inhabitants had to do on their buildings in a defined period of time. Many people complained that the legalized squatters who had accepted these contracts were virtual slaves to the reconstruction of their buildings with no time for political activity beyond the confines of their walls.

However, the original movement of 4,000 had secured self-determined housing for a group of nearly 2,000 people — something no other western urban centre has achieved.



▲ AMSTERDAM 1970s

Squatter riots have occurred almost like civic festivals since the early 1970s.

INSTANDBESETZER GRAFITTI

One of the most consistent and public statements about the Kreuzberg area and the Instandbesetzer movement is the local graffiti which permeates the entire district and speaks the politics and emotions of the neighbourhood.

the symbol of the squatters who repair
both the architecture and
the community fabric

Occupied — that is enough

Too bad cement doesn't burn

Unrest in the deep freezer

You have the power
but we have the night

Power is always without Love
Love is never without Power

Taking a house is better than waiting to
be given one

It is better that our youth squat houses
than foreign countries

Be realistic — demand the impossible

It is better to squat and repair a house
than to own a house and let it
fall into ruin

Under the paving stone — the beach

WEST BERLIN-SOUTH BRONX TRANSFER

On my return from Berlin in October 1984, I undertook to transfer the graffiti images of the Kreuzberg area to an abandoned South Bronx tenement. As part of the 'Sculpture of Dreams, Sculpture of Concrete' series coordinated by Fashion Moda, a South Bronx storefront gallery.

The reason I chose the South Bronx was the similarity of architecture and class structure to that of the Kreuzberg area of Berlin. Initially the South Bronx presented itself to me like a war zone. The past two decades had seen a process of severe urban rot. Well-constructed buildings were left to fall into ruin because they couldn't generate enough capital from predominantly black and Puerto Rican low income inhabitants. The landlord claimed to be unable to pay the minimal taxes levied on their property, so they abandoned it. The inhabitants, unable to comprehend custodianship of property that they didn't privately own, allowed the communal infrastructure of their buildings to fill with garbage and fall into ruin. The more recent high-rise welfare housing that surrounds the greater urban crater of the South Bronx is quickly following this process of urban dweller alienation.

There was a lot of already existing graffiti on the walls of the South Bronx. I was occasionally asked to lend one of my spray cans to a local teenager so they could paint their signature on the wall where it wouldn't interfere with my work. Part of the Bronx graffiti ethic was that one didn't pay for a spray can. For this reason they were kept locked under the counter at the paint stores. I personally didn't adhere to the ethic, for a variety of reasons, and bought my tools. But the fact that I'd lend my spray cans made for an easy way for the teenagers to get their signatures up on the wall. Apparently you had to get it up about one thousand times before you were really there. Possibly it was secretly motivated by a desire to be recognized as an artist and escape the ghetto. A select few of these graffiti artists had been promoted to transfer their imagery onto canvas and enter the art gallery market. Coincidentally, West Germany has become the most active market for contemporary gallery art and that's where a

lot of the graffiti-ghetto work is sold.

The existing South Bronx graffiti was of a different nature than the Kreuzberg-Instandbesetzer messages. It was very advanced in calligraphic style but more related to defining the machismo and turf of the graffiti gang than to the political nature of housing or the local neighbourhood.

Half-way through my project of painting the Berlin imagery on the walls of the Bronx tenement, I was busted by the local police. A typical vulgar police confrontation which turned comic for me when one of the police jumped on a spray can, which burst, covering his pants with lemon yellow.

The men that ran a small welding shop next to the tenement witnessed the police bust; they said the police were just having a bad day when they confronted me or else they wouldn't have bothered, there was so much graffiti anyway. They thought what I was doing was amusing, even more so when the police got involved. They wanted more of it. I was told that I could store my equipment in their shop and borrow their ladders, as well as hide in their shop if a police car appeared. Soon other people from the neighbourhood set up a watch network to let me know if any police cars were approaching. Another man knew enough German to correct a spelling error that I made.

At one stage, I was confronted by a Latino woman in her thirties who demanded to know what I was doing. When I explained it to her she left. She later returned to tell me to keep up the work, as she and a group of people were actually thinking of taking over the building as urban homesteaders. They thought the graffiti project might help their cause.

The text-images were reconstructed as close as possible to the original German graffiti and translations were posted beside the work in both English and Spanish. The work was entitled the *West Berlin-South Bronx Transfer*.

I attempted to transfer the political content of the West Berlin graffiti to the South Bronx using an established local medium. It was content that didn't exist in any other media in the Bronx. I used graffiti itself as a vessel to transfer the content. West Berlin-South Bronx.



▲ SOUTH BRONX 1984

SQUATTER PROFILE

Caroline and Nick were two of the most active organizers of the Tolmers Square squat in central London. At the time they were both students of architecture and planning at the University of London. After almost a decade of struggle with one of the most capitalistic property developers who had held the lease, the squat was redeveloped by the Local Council with some planning input by the squatters.

By this time, Nick and Caroline had graduated to the professional world. With their accumulated income, plus the practical knowledge they had gained of the material structure of older multi-dwelling buildings in Tolmers Square, they were able to realize the potential of an East End London Institute for Seamen that was put on the market by the Local Council. For a minimum of capital and with a maximum of well-planned labour and materials they developed a five apartment co-op building. Incidentally, the co-op is next to the Museum of Labour History in the East End. The building now includes a functioning swimming pool in the basement that was once used to teach merchant seamen how to swim.