

# FIGHT FOR THE CITY



**Housing Struggles, Social Cleansing  
and Working Class Resistance**

**London Anarchist Communists**



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# THE FIGHT FOR THE CITY

## Introduction

OVER HALF OF the world's population live in cities. This is expected to rise to 75% by 2050. The move to the cities first occurred in Europe with industrialisation. It was a relatively slow process compared to the pace of change in the developing world. For example, London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1880 whereas China added more city-dwellers in the 1980s than did all of Europe, including Russia, in the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century (Davis: 2007). And cities are constantly changing, transformed by the need for capitalism to find new sources of profit. Capitalism has continually strived to ensure that all aspects of work involve the creation of surplus value. Now, capital is bringing all aspects of life into the capitalist orbit - making where we live and what we do when we are not at work, part of this value creation system. This means the control of all space, not just where we work.

Britain and other western countries have seen a massive increase in the cost of housing, increase in evictions and homelessness, whole council estates torn down and sold off to private developers, overcrowding in squalid accommodation, city centres privatised and transformed into sanitised shopping malls, business centres and tourist destinations, attacks on the poor - cuts in benefit, the bedroom tax, low wages, fewer green and open spaces

and more sky scrapers, increased pollution, police violence, and increased surveillance.

Meanwhile, developing countries have seen rapid urbanisation as rural dwellers are forced into the cities to make a living, no concern to provide any housing for the new arrivals, massive growth in slums and shanty towns, slum clearances on a regular basis when it suits the needs of capital, demolition of traditional urban communities to make way for corporate architecture and gated communities.

All of these things have one cause - the transformation of cities all over the world from places of homes, neighbourhoods, and social networks to places where capital can make money. We are witnessing social cleansing on a mass scale as cities are turned into investment opportunities and playgrounds for the increasing number of the super-rich, both home-grown and foreign, with local and national politicians firmly behind them. Yet at the same time, capital has need of workers, so they can't push us too far outside of the city. So the working class and the poor are channelled into enclaves of sub-standard, overcrowded housing or slums and shanty towns in the developing world. Meanwhile, the well-off hide in their gated communities and their security-protected luxury tower blocks. We are witnessing nothing less than the complete takeover of the city by capital and the state, reshaping the city for high-value business, including tourism and the culture industry, such as universities and the areas that surround them.

This process has been going on for several decades. There have been pockets of resistance as individuals and groups fight back: against workfare, benefits cuts, the bedroom tax, hospital closures, estate evictions, luxury developments, police violence, and racism. However, the attack continues, seemingly unstoppable. But recently more and more people are realising what is happening, and they are beginning to link up struggles and are winning some important victories against property developers, landlords, and government. The future of our cities now hangs in the balance. It is up to us to fight for the kind of city we want to live in. This puts us in direct opposition to wealthy investors, property developers and construction companies, financial institutions and corporations, estate agents and landlords as well as politicians, both local and national, their servants in the police. In other words, it is a fight against global capitalism and the state; a fight for anarchist communism.

This article will examine both the causes of the attack on our cities and what we need to do to win the battle. It will focus mainly on London, which has its own peculiar situation as the centre of finance capital, but you will be able to find many similarities with other cities in Britain and the rest of the world. It is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the issue of housing, the way in which capital is transforming homes into investment opportunities and the consequences of this for the working class in the city. The second part will examine the general privatisation and control of all space in the city, turning every part of the city into a place for capital and excluding all who don't produce profits or challenge the system in any way. The third part looks at resistance and alternatives - what the working class is doing to fight for the city.

## PART ONE

### SOCIAL CLEANSING AND SOCIAL WARFARE

#### Regeneration: The Working Class Evicted

ONE OF THE most significant signs of what is happening to our cities is the forcing out of the working class from areas of the city that are the target for money-making ventures. In London and many other cities, the centre and the immediate periphery are considered 'prime' property. This means that the working class is being pushed further and further out. It may go under the name of regeneration but what is happening is effectively social cleansing. It is at its most obvious in the slum clearances that occur regularly in the cities of the developing world, for example, the demolition of Zhejiang Village, the poorest area of Beijing, in 1995. It was a two-month operation involving 5,000 armed police and party cadres. In the end 9,917 homes were destroyed, 1,645



'illegal' businesses were shut down and 18, 621 'illegal' residents were deported. This might seem an extreme example, but there are certain similarities with Britain, with whole estates demolished and their residents 'decanted' - no one knowing exactly where they went. This social cleansing is a consequence of both market forces and deliberate government policy. In

Britain, there has traditionally been a mixture of people in different parts of the city, including the centre. This was because of the building of council housing on a massive scale in the 1930s and then after World War II. It wasn't just the poor who lived in council homes, but many from the wider working class and even the middle class. Now, there is a move to create areas of the city that are exclusively for business, tourism, culture industries, and the super-rich.

### **Decimation of Social Housing**

COUNCIL HOUSING WAS decimated with Thatcher's right to buy policy in the 1980s, which took millions of homes out of the public sector. Once the damage had been done, both physically and ideologically, the next governments, both Conservative and Labour, continued to sell off its housing stock. With the economy in more or less constant crisis, governments sought ways of making the working class pay by finding ways of making cuts that would leave the rich untouched. Selling off housing stock to housing associations was a main way of doing this for local councils which were being squeezed by central government cuts. By 2008, 170 councils had no housing stock left. Scotland has almost none left. By 2012 there were only 1.7 million council homes, but 2.4 million in housing associations.

Transferring the stock to housing associations was the first step to full privatisation. Housing associations are now in the process of going into 'partnership' with private developers, which usually means selling off a part of their stock to private developers in order to raise funds for the property that remains. The New Era Estate in Shoreditch, London, fought and won against their so-called social landlord who was planning on selling off the estate to Westbrook, an American property developer. However, this is only one victory and there are countless other examples, often not fully publicised, of this kind of sell off on the part of social landlords. Councils are also quite happy to sell off their stock and evict tenants. The Fred John Towers in Leytonstone, London is currently fighting against their local authority who wants to sell one of the towers to private developers and move out the rest for 6 years whilst they renovate the other tower. The Aylesbury Estate in south London and the Carpenters Estate near the Olympic Park, both recently occupied by housing protesters, have been subject to gradual neglect and eviction of residents, with the aim of knocking the estates down and selling them off.

Another key policy introduced by Tony Blair was Pathfinder. This

programme was designed to 'create a housing market' in so-called deprived areas across northern Britain. This means that it wanted to increase the demand for housing which would be seen in rising house prices. The fact that people are quite happy living where they are and don't need or want a housing market seems to have escaped the politicians. For them, as always, it is about making money. Anna Minton in her book *Ground Control* documents the effects of this policy in detail. Whole terraces of houses, a mixture of council, social and private, were allowed to run down, encouraging the council and social tenants to leave. Housing associations were known to pay tenants to go elsewhere. The end result was a few people left in the streets, giving the government the excuse to demolish all the houses and sell them off to private developers. Whole communities were decimated as a result. The new developments would be more attractive in theory and therefore there would be increased demand for them. Needless to say, the original residents would not be able to afford to buy any of the new homes.

With the right to buy, many of those being threatened with eviction owned their own homes. Ironically, the 'home owner democracy' counted for little when the state wanted to get its hands on their homes. The main weapon used was compulsory purchase. A new law was passed that enable the government to put out a Compulsory Purchase Order it was necessary for the *economic* benefit of the public. So if money was to be made, which supposedly would 'trickle down' to the public, then a CPO was justified.

These practices of evicting whole estates and streets show the contempt that governments, 'social' landlords, and developers have for ordinary people. They don't consider that, for individuals and families, the flats and houses that they are being moved from are their homes, part of a neighbourhood, and in some cases, a close community. To think that it doesn't matter as long as people have been moved somewhere, indicates either a conscious or unconscious desire to sabotage working class communities.

## **Rising House Prices and Rents**

ANOTHER FACTOR CONTRIBUTING to social cleansing, in London in particular, is the rise in house prices and rents. To understand why this is happening we need to take a step back and analyse the relationship of the housing market to capitalism. Capitalists are forever searching for new ways to make money. They may have made money out of production or resource extraction, eg the oil, but in some ways actually using the money made to produce something

useful may be too hard and too slow. And they certainly don't want to use their money to help alleviate world poverty. Whatever the reason, the main way that people make money is through the financial system, either investing in stocks or other speculative investments. With uncertainty around the stock market, property has increasingly been seen as a safe investment that would guarantee quick and lucrative returns. This has been the case even for the middle classes who have taken advantage of buy-to-let mortgages as an alternative to relying on a pension. As a result, the demand for property, not homes, has shot up and therefore with a limited supply, so have the prices both to buy and to rent.

The government has fuelled the rise in prices through their own policies. And there is a reason for this - the whole economy depends on rising house prices. This might seem odd, but given that Britain has very little manufacturing industry left to provide jobs and that most people are now worse off financially than they were a decade ago, there has to be a way of getting them to spend money. This is a fundamental contradiction of capitalism - they squeeze workers at the point of production, paying them as little as possible, but then want those same workers to be consumers! They have found the perfect solution - encourage them to take out a mortgage so they think they are home owners, keep house prices rising and they'll think they are better off than they are. Capitalism then makes sure that credit is easily available to keep them spending and getting them further in debt. This is what caused the crisis in 2008. People started to default on their loans. However, the government bailed out the banks and soon it was business as usual as house prices rose. Though it is harder to get a mortgage than before, people are still encouraged to take one on even if it means more debt. However, even the middle classes are beginning to suffer, and increasingly, people who are not already on the property ladder are forced into rental accommodation. This increase in demand has pushed rents up as well as house prices in general.

## **The Super-Rich and the Housing Market**

LINKED TO THE rise in house prices in London is the influx of the world's rich. In 2009, after the financial crisis had passed, there were 115 *billionaires* in China, 101 in Russia, 55 in India, in addition to 413 in the US and 32 in Britain. The incredible amount of wealth accumulated by some individuals is due largely to a transfer of wealth from the mass of the population. One per cent



of the population now own 50% of the world's wealth. This was seen most blatantly in Russia, as the resources once owned by the State were gradually bought up at knock-down prices by a few individuals. The Russian oligarchs came with suitcases full of roubles to London. Now it is the turn of the Chinese. The privatisation that took place in China has meant that some individuals have made big money through a combination of corruption and ruthless exploitation of their workforce, all enforced by the state.

These people need somewhere to put their money. They are not interested in putting it into something to help raise living standards of the world's poor or even into producing a product. Apart from spending large amounts of their wealth on lavish lifestyles, they want their money to be safe and to make more money. London offers the ideal opportunity.

London has always been a world financial centre. It is a place for the rich to invest their money, allowing the banks to do what they want with it, as long as they make more money. The role of the financial sector in the British economy has increased in the last few decades. London's deregulated financial system means that investors can get away with practices they wouldn't be able to elsewhere. It is closely associated with the off-shore banking network in places like Jersey and Guernsey. The taxation system favours the rich, with very low taxes on income and is also very favourable to foreign investors. They may be making money as a result of their investments, but if they can show that these investments are based elsewhere or that they are not permanent residents in Britain, they have to pay little or no tax. And, in case they are liable for tax, London has a booming tax 'avoidance' industry.

Britain's role as head of an empire has also played a role in attracting the world's wealthy to London. The life style of the English aristocracy seems to be one that is sought after by many. Most of the world's wealthiest people, both corporate executives and celebrities, have at least one property in Britain, usually in London, where they can come and play at being a lord or lady. The Russian oligarchs, arriving in force in the late 1990s, have managed to revitalise the yachting industry and increase sales in the luxury goods shops, not to mention the increased demand for private school places and nannies and butlers.

Politicians such as Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone before him went to great lengths to attract the rich to London. The justification for this is

that there is a housing shortage and that they cannot afford to build new social housing because of the austerity measures. (They of course refuse to consider actually taxing all the wealth that has flooded into London, making the banks pay for their mistakes or cutting down on their war expenditure.) The only way they say we can get new housing is by attracting private sector investment. Therefore, they have offered up London on a plate to the super-rich and global corporations. Developers are having a field day, with new housing developments even in previously “undesirable” areas. Most of them are then being sold to foreign investors, hoping to make a killing out of the rising prices and soaring rents. There is a minimal amount of affordable housing which is actually not affordable, but 80 per cent of the market rents, so none of these developments are within the reach of the average Londoner and certainly not the poorest. They may rent some of the units out to the lawyers, accountants, bankers, other well-off professionals, and even tourists, but many of the units will remain empty, now known as ‘buy-to-sit’. There are whole streets in Chelsea and Kensington that have no lights on at night. It is estimated that 20 per cent of this borough consists of empty properties.

Therefore, the demand for cheaper housing by everyone else, including councils for their large homeless populations, is higher than supply. As a result private landlords step in and charge the maximum they can get away with, cut back on repairs and improvements, and/or squash more people into the property than it can reasonably hold. If anyone is made homeless, the council is quick to try and move them out of the central London boroughs or out of London completely. Housing benefit levels are too low to be able to rent properties in most parts of London.

Therefore, social cleansing is a consequence of shortage social housing, rising house prices and rents, all of which are caused by the need of capital to make money out of the city.

## **Apartheid in the City**

*“It is important to grasp that we dealing here with a fundamental reorganisation of metropolitan space, involving a drastic diminution of the intersections between the lives of the rich and poor.”*

*Planet of Slums: 119*

IT IS NOT just a question of moving the working class further out from the city centre. Many of the well-off do not want to live in the centre in a high rise

flat. They may have one for work, but if they have a family they are more likely to move to the leafy suburbs. This is already the case in the US where there has been a massive exodus of the upper and middle classes from downtown. In Britain, there still is a tendency for the well-off to prefer a more centrally located house, but we are still witnessing moves outside of London to a large house or mansion in Surrey. So it is not just a question of moving the working class out of the centre but of making sure that the working class, especially the 'undeserving poor', do not 'contaminate' other social classes. Many local councils support regeneration by saying they want a better 'mix' of residents. However, this is only so they can get the better-off residents into the area. This 'mix' is deceptive. The new developments are often versions of gated communities. This idea started in the US but has taken off in other parts of the world. These gated communities separate off the rich and the middle class from the 'dangerous' masses. These could be city centre developments with high level security systems or they may be special communities in the suburbs, which are linked to the centre by special transport systems.

New residential 'towers' are springing up in key areas of London. Some are along the Thames in central London whilst others are in and around Canary Wharf, Liverpool St, and Stratford. In theory every development is meant to have some 'affordable' housing or make some contribution to the community, such as a health centre. Developers are increasingly finding ways of avoiding having to provide any affordable, and certainly not social, housing. They will often pay the council a sum of money as a contribution to their social housing fund. They then can promote their development as 'completely private' to their potential clients, assuring them that they won't have to mix with the riff-raff! Meanwhile, the council doesn't use the money for any social housing. If the developers do end up providing some cheaper housing, they will put in separate entrances ('poor doors'), the subject of an on-going campaign at 1 Commercial St in Aldgate, London.

In some of the developing countries, in which the extremes of rich and poor are much greater and therefore more frightening for the rich, gated communities are the norm. In *Planet of the Slums*, Mike Davis documents the rise of what he calls 'off-worlds' - a term taken from the film *Blade Runner*. Whole suburbs are built which completely isolate the well-off from the mass of the population. These are often modelled after places in southern California. Cairo has Beverly Hills, Beijing has Orange County, and Hong Kong has

Palm Springs. These may be actual places in southern California, but for the rich of the developing world they are brand names which are symbolic of wealth, status, and exclusivity. They are surrounded by high fences and tight security. They are connected to the financial and business centres by super highways that provide a safe corridor between their suburban mansion and their place of work, though many of these places are now incorporating business headquarters as well. According to Jeremy Seabrook, quoted in Davis, 'the Third World bourgeoisie cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to a superterrestrial topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an exclusive and golden nowhere' (p.120).



Therefore, the rich are separated not just from the rest of the population but also from the reality of the country itself. There are similarities with the foreign investors in London. The Russian oligarchs may ape the life-style of the British upper classes but they have no interest in Britain or its people. They live a life of luxury on their yacht or Chelsea mansion with the wives shopping at Harrods, but that is as far as the connection goes (apart from bribing UK politicians!). The planned development at the Royal Albert Docks is another case in point. Boris Johnson sold the whole area to a Chinese company without any opportunity for British companies to even bid. The aim is to establish an 'East Asian enclave' in Newham, one of the poorest boroughs of London. This will be another Canary Wharf where East Asian executives will be able to conduct their business without even having to mix with their British counterparts! It is similar to what the Europeans did in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century with their special enclaves in places like Shanghai.

## **Labour Force**

IT IS NOT possible to exclude the working masses completely. After all, who will do the cleaning? Who will do the lowly office jobs and staff the restaurants? In the developing countries the problem is solved by having people live in special accommodation near their work. So maids will sleep in the garden shed or the basement of the exclusive suburbs, and rural migrant workers will stay in factory dormitories. These workers have no right of residence and even if they did, they wouldn't be able to afford the prices. Or, the

workers will live in the slums, shanty towns that they set up themselves in order to be near work. They are safe as long as the rich are protected from these slums in their high security suburbs or until the land they are on is wanted for yet another money-making opportunity.

In Britain, workers have two choices. They can live close to their work in sub-standard and over-crowded conditions, paying at least half their salary in rent, or they can move further out and spend more money and time commuting. The point here is that capital does not bear any of the cost of this - it is the workers' time and money that is being spent getting to work. And, if the workers decide to live closer, capital also wins by making huge profits on the rent paid.

## **Resistance**

PEOPLE ARE FIGHTING back. There have been a number of campaigns against all aspects of the attack on working class housing in the city. The Pathfinder project produced campaigns that went on for years, such as the Derker Community Action Group in Oldham or Elizabeth Pascoe's fight in North Liverpool (see Anna Minton's *Ground Control* for more detail). In London, the residents left on the Carpenters Estate in Stratford, East London managed to fight off the plans of the University of London to take over the estate and build a branch of the university. Campaigners in a West Hendon estate in North London have managed to keep their homes for years, despite the constant threat of eviction. New Era estate in Shoreditch, London, mounted one of the most successful campaigns. They managed to 'persuade' the US development company Westbrook to abandon attempts to turn the property into up-scale private flats and now the estate is to be turned over to a social housing association. Currently new campaigns are springing up around London, such as the Aylesbury Estate in south London. Even though squatting residential properties is now a criminal offence, they are using occupation as a tool in the struggle, physically taking over empty flats.

Campaigns are also fighting individual evictions and against private landlords. Focus E15, which ran a successful campaign to get 29 single mothers rehoused in the local area rather than being sent out of London, continues to fight individual cases and also organised a militant protest at the British Credit Awards (aka the 'Bailiff's Ball'). Solidarity Networks are also being set up (eg in Glasgow and Bristol), a way of supporting individuals who are facing any housing problem such as losing a deposit or landlord refusal to do

repairs. Private renter groups are also being organised, tackling issues such as rent rises.

The struggles have had different degrees of success. What are the common ingredients? Campaigns that focus on one individual landlord or situation tend to do well. This is partially because it is possible for the landlord, or council, to give in on one case more easily than a campaign that is fighting evictions or other problems on the level of the whole estate. However, these campaigns also have had victories because of the tactics used: direct action - taking the fight directly to the landlord or council. Focus E15 has been relentless in its attack on Newham council and the mayor, Robin Wales, recently winning a case against him for verbal abuse of two of the young mothers at the heart of the campaign. They also mounted an occupation of Carpenters Estate and have been making links with and encouraging other campaigns in the area. Though a political organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Group, has been involved in the campaign from the beginning and their paper is frequently to be seen on all events, their message is that it must be those directly involved, the residents themselves, who take charge of the campaign. Those who come along to the stall or one of the actions are there to support and not take over or substitute themselves for the estate residents or individuals facing eviction.

The lack of support from residents is one of the key weaknesses of some of the other campaigns. The Aylesbury occupation came about as a result of the March for Homes with some activists, many from the squatting movement, thinking about what action they could take to make the struggle more effective than a march from A to B. They were aware of the need to get residents on their side and there are some directly involved in the occupation. They say that there is 'passive' support for the occupation but the campaign would be much stronger if it was based on the residents themselves with support from the occupiers, rather than the occupiers trying to get support after they have already occupied and are then busy trying to maintain the occupation and fight off the police. However, the estate itself has been in the process of being 'decanted' for some time so that in many ways it is difficult to build up support. That is the problem with fighting whole estate evictions. Often the process is gradual, and if the residents themselves aren't organised and ready to fight, the estate is almost empty before housing activists find out about what is going on. This doesn't mean that these occupations are not worth doing - they are a good way of raising awareness of what

is going on and provide a focal point for struggles in the local area - it is just that to actually win, the residents need to still be living there and wanting to fight.

The New Era campaign demonstrates a combination of successful tactics. The residents started organising themselves many months before local activists became involved to support. This meant that they were already well-organised and united and could be at the centre of their campaign. There was no need to win over the residents because they were already fighting. The other tactic is the way in which they took the struggle direct to the developer. They made links with Westbrook tenants in America which embarrassed Westbrook. In the end, a big property developer like Westbrook didn't want the hassle and pulled out.

Another positive feature of the growing housing struggle is the fact that many of the campaigns are beginning to make links. The Radical Housing Network in London brings together several local campaigns as a way of giving each other support, as well as organising united action against common enemies. For example, they organised a successful protest outside the international property developers fair MIPIM last October and a week of action ending with a protest against Boris Johnson and his budget in February.

## **Against State and Capital**

THE MAIN THRUST of most campaigns is either to focus on the individual landlord or make demands on government, local or national, for more social housing and against social cleansing. Some campaigners such as those in the Socialist Party or the Green Party put energy into elections - arguing that voting for them is going to solve the problems. Others see hope in a Labour victory. Even when the campaign has no faith whatsoever in the political parties and focuses on building up the campaign itself, the target still tends to be the council, demanding that the council build more council or social housing. Whilst more genuinely affordable housing is part of what is needed, these campaigns fail to see the larger picture.

As shown in this pamphlet, the problems are much larger than the council refusing to build more council houses and selling off their properties to private developers. In fact, it may not even be necessary to build more homes, which will only use up more land that could be used for open public space such as parks. It is more a matter of redistribution of the empty proper-

ties that are there, for example the takeover of the empty mansions, and the transformation of all the empty office blocks into housing. In addition, we shouldn't be uncritical of both council and social housing. Council housing in its early years was about the provision of housing for the 'deserving' poor and itself involved social cleansing of the 'slums'. In addition, just because housing is owned by the state does not make it in itself desirable. The state can also be a bad landlord, which is why so many tenants did not put up much of a fight when council housing was sold off to residents or transferred to social landlords. Though many people have good memories of the sense of communities on council estates, it depended very much on which estate. However, the sale to social landlords, the housing associations, has proved to be a disaster. Though councils themselves have sold off property to private developers, it is much more likely to happen under a so-called social landlord. These landlords have had money cut by central government which has exacerbated the tendency for them to transform themselves into private corporations, putting rents up, selling off properties, and/or going into 'partnership' with private developers. What counts more than the type of tenure, is the degree of organisation of tenants and residents. It is probably easier to organise if the landlord is the council, which is the main reason why it is still a worthy demand. However, the focus of all campaigns must be to strengthen the self-organisation of the tenants and residents themselves, no matter who the landlord is.

Though we still need to target councils and make demands, we must begin to widen the scope of the campaign and fight both the developers and the native and foreign investors who are buying up properties. As long as cities are held hostage to capital and the need to make money out of the city, any council is going to face strong pressure to accept the logic of private investment. Not only are their funds limited by central government itself, but the power of companies and individuals worth millions must be a great temptation for the politicians. In other words, the fight is against global capitalism itself and the State which facilitates the takeover of the city.



# PART TWO

## NO PLACE TO RUN

### Control of Space by Capital and the State

THIS PART EXAMINES how capital, with the State's support, is seeking to control all aspects of city life such that every inch of ground is a source of profit for someone. We are already exploited at work. Wages are as low as the bosses can get away with in order to maximise their profits. But we are exploited in other ways. Increasingly, all aspects of our non-working lives involve the spending of our wages on things that make profits for others: landlords, banks, and all the companies providing the goods and services that we buy. It wouldn't matter if it was an equal exchange so that we worked 40 hours a week in exchange for goods and services that also took 40 hours a week to produce. But it doesn't work that way; at every stage, whether in the act of producing or consuming, more surplus is creamed off our wages, creating profits and wealth for a few. The fight for the city is therefore a class struggle - a struggle against those who want to squeeze everything they can from us, to the point that individuals are nothing but a 'resource' or a Lego brick.

### The Smart City

IT MAY SOUND like something out of a science fiction novel, but the concept of the 'smart' city is one of the latest new ideas from companies like IBM and Cisco. Songdo in North Korea is a city built according to this concept. Using sophisticated technology, the whole city can be run by an impersonal 'brain'. All buildings are climate controlled and have computerised access. Traffic, waste, accidents, electricity, etc., are all monitored centrally. Electronic sensors allow the city's brain to respond to the movement of residents. The buzz words are efficiency, optimisation, predictability, convenience and safety. Everything 'works' as long as people are doing what they are meant to do - go to work, come home, shop and engage in some leisure activities that are acceptable- and that most likely cost money. If there is an accident or something unexpected happens, then the 'brain' can dispatch the relevant 'services of order'. Is this the future?



## **Private, Public and the Commons**

THE UK MAY not have gone this far yet in the engineering of the city but there are a number of trends that indicate we are going in that direction. We are used to cities as places where people freely wander, meet up with people, have a rest on a bench and read, play games, explore new places, gather to protest and a host of other activities which may or may not involve spending money. The spaces where we do this are often referred to as 'public'. However, we can also distinguish between what is public and what might be called the 'Commons'. Public spaces are still regulated by the State, which is meant to represent the public. The Commons refers to areas which are more autonomous, which different groups of people may take over at different times and use the space for their own ends. The history of land has been the history of the gradual diminishing of anything that we would refer to as common land. The State has introduced a range of measures over the years to the extent that what we do on any piece of land is carefully regulated, even if it is considered public space. Nevertheless, public land, is meant to be land used by the public and therefore should have free access and greater freedom of use than private land. Unfortunately, even public space is now passing into private hands. And, public space itself is being increasingly regulated and controlled. This makes the distinction between the 'Commons' and the 'public' even sharper.

## **The Walled City**

WHEN WE THINK of a city in the Middle Ages we think of one enclosed by walls. Inside those walls is the seat of political power (the castle) and all the commercial activity. It is also where the well-off live. Outside the city walls are the peasants and the poor. If they want to come into the city, they have to line up outside the city gates and ask permission from the guards. Only if they have 'business' inside, are they allowed in. Our cities are becoming increasingly like these walled cities. Key public parts of the city are being handed over to private companies. Manhattan in New York has been turned into one vast gated community. Similar things are happening in Britain. There may not be one big wall, but a number of enclaves that are owned by private interests. Similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when London was divided up between various members of the aristocracy, not only London, but also Liverpool and Manchester, are being divided up amongst various private developers, whose main aim is to make money out of the property. It is hard to know how much of our cities is in private hands; Britain does not have a proper record of who owns what, unlike in other countries. The Forestry

Commission and local authorities are still the biggest landowners as far as we can tell. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century corporations have increased their share. Moreover, sale of local authority land is a major plank of government policy, so we can expect the share of land owned by corporations to dramatically increase.

The financial areas of London, Canary Wharf and Broadgate, were some of the first places to become privately owned. As their tentacles spread out, more and more space is being swallowed up. Canary Wharf is now owned by the Qatar Sovereign Wealth Fund, led by Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Saud al-Thani. It already owns other London landmarks such as the Shard skyscraper and Harrods department store. Canary Wharf is worth billions to the owners, mainly for office rentals but increasingly for luxury residential towers.

Shopping centres are another example of privatised space. The new Australian-owned Westfield Shopping Mall in Stratford is the biggest in Europe. Liverpool 1, full of up-scale shops catering for well-off suburbanites, dominates the centre, covering 34 streets. Manchester city centre has also been turned over to a private company. The centre has now been transferred into a giant shopping complex and luxury apartments. The Free Trade Hall, an important part of different stages of the city's history, is now part of a hotel chain. This trend came about under Labour legislation that introduced Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). This meant that a private company could take over the running of an area with the sole purpose of making it as profitable as possible for businesses. The company who has control will tax local businesses and use the revenue to create a 'trading environment'. This policy was copied from the US and implemented uncritically in Britain.

The gated residential community is another example of an internal wall in the city. The Bow Quarter in East London in what was once the Bryant May match factory (site of the famous 'match girl' strike) was the first one, opened in 1988. However, we are seeing not just gated residential areas, but whole towns created within the city. One example is the Shard in London. Its architect called it a 'vertical city' because of the mixture of different uses. Eight thousand people work there but there are also flats and restaurants. Westferry Circus in Canary Wharf, set to be Britain's second tallest building, has a gym, a library, shops and even a play area for children. Kingdom Tower in Saudi Arabia will have 35,000 people and will be three times the height of the Shard. These developments, as well as being exclusive, are

completely inward-looking and cut off from the community. Shopkeepers near the Shard have commented that no one from the Shard shops locally. There is a direct corridor from London Bridge station to the Shard. Workers will come off the train and go straight into the Shard, and then back again at the end of the day.

## Consequences

THE GROWING PRIVATISATION of space in the city has a number of serious consequences, both for what happens on the private space itself and the general attitude towards public space. The first obvious consequence is the fact that as these spaces are private, they have the right to exclude who they want from their 'property'. Like with the 'Smart City', technology in the form of CCTV cameras are used to ensure that the only people who are in a private space are those that belong there, which effectively means that you can only be there if you work there or if you are spending money. Manchester gained the title of ASBO capital of the UK because of all the people it was excluding from the city centre. This is because the main aim of the BIDs is to make the space 'safe and clean'. In the US, BIDs have meant the exclusion of the homeless from city centres. In New York, where the BID concept was first introduced, there have been stories of BID employees beating up the homeless. This attitude towards the homeless is now spreading in Britain. Walking around Liverpool city centre, there are no homeless to be seen in the Liverpool 1 area. It is like crossing an invisible line - on one side there are still signs of the homeless begging and then all of a sudden there are none.

The latest initiative designed to protect the so-called majority against an undesirable minority is the new Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO). This shows that measures to control and exclude are not confined to private property. This was part of a patchwork of measures that came from the *Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act* which became law last year. Because the spaces are officially 'public' they cannot exclude people but they can ban certain forms of behaviour. Councils can decide what behaviours they will ban depending on local circumstances. Some examples include:

- Making it a crime to have an open alcohol container in Cambridge;
- A ban on the consumption of alcohol and legal highs in public spaces in the city centre by Lincoln Council;
- Making it a crime to beg for money in certain areas of Poole, Dorset;
- Hackney's attempt to ban begging and sleeping rough (the inclusion of

rough sleepers has now been withdrawn after a big campaign);

- Other proposals include, use of amplified music, busking, pigeon feeding and the sale of lucky charms.

The law is so broad that councils could ban just about anything. This means that even so-called public space is now being taken over. The aim is supposedly to improve the quality of life of the majority but the end result is the building of another wall that has far-reaching implications for not only the poor, the young and the vulnerable but for political activity.

## **Protesters Unwanted**

WHETHER IT BE a privatised shopping mall or a closely regulated public space, it is becoming increasingly difficult to engage in any public protest. One example was when the Occupy movement wanted to protest against the financial activities of the City of London. They found that protests were illegal throughout the area, by decree of the Corporation of London, the local authority responsible for the 'Square Mile'. They ended up camping outside St Paul's which is just outside, and even then the government made it clear that they wanted them removed for upsetting the tourists who are a major source of income for companies. So even though the City has supposed 'public' spaces, they are privately managed and therefore access can be controlled, making it impossible to organise any protest against those who caused the austerity we are now facing. The same goes for Canary Wharf and Broadgate. When a group of activists wanted to organise a protest in Canary Wharf, they were contacted by an advertising company which told them that the space was an 'experimental advertising space' and the daily rate was £4,750. It is clear that space is being used as a place to make money and not as an open space where people can exercise any rights we have to protest.

Street stalls are one of the main ways that people get a chance to talk, share, and exchange ideas, publicise campaigns and give out or sell publications that challenge the system. However, it has become increasingly difficult to do so. Any political group who has tried to set up a stall in Liverpool 1, Manchester city centre or by Stratford Westfield will know what it is like. They will soon be approached by security guards and asked to leave, told it is private property and that they have no right to be there. With the new PSPOs, so-called public spaces could also be forbidden. One could easily imagine local authorities, fed up with protests and pickets aimed at their own

policies, deciding that any stalls were detracting from the quality of life for the majority (eg Robin Wales in Newham, London, who can't be too happy about the weekly stall organised by the Focus E15 campaign!).

## **Transformation of Parks**

PARKS HAVE ALWAYS been a place for people to gather. All sorts of people come to walk, picnic or just sit, getting away from all the other places that are dominated by traffic or consumption. However, this is also changing. The new Olympic 'Park' is one example of a new style of park. There is hardly any space to actually sit and have a picnic on grass and the 'wild' parts are confined to a narrow strip along the channelled and controlled river. Most of the park is taken up with huge sport facilities (eg the West Ham stadium) and cafes. And, the easiest way of getting to the park is through Westfield shopping centre. Most of the space that the Olympics once occupied is being turned into offices and apartment blocks - none within reach of the average local. But the tendency to use parks as a money-maker is not confined to this one example. With the cuts in government funding those who run the parks are looking for ways to make money. A report just published called Rethinking Parks, produced by Nesta, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund (<http://www.nesta.org.uk/project/rethinking-parks>) aims to find 'new business models' for the nation's parks in order to 'create a more sustainable future'. Due to drastic cuts in funding from national government, more and more parks are looking to such a model. The report suggests various 'income-generating' models.

- Generating income through:
  - Concessions and events
  - Taxation
  - Eco-system development
  - Commercial development

We have already seen our parks turned into venues for high-priced music festivals and fun-fairs. But this model is being extended to a range of activities. For example, Hackney is proposing the idea of 'pop-up meeting spaces' which will be offered to local businesses.

Parks have also been used as places for people to gather in assemblies or political rallies. It is still possible to do this as long as the gatherings are not too big. However, with the trend in control of public spaces, it is like-

ly that there will be attempts to limit such gatherings. Instead, priority will be given to those who will pay money for the use of the park. And of course, everyone will be affected if park authorities decide to 'tax' people or even charge people for the use of the park. One way this is happening already is by charging for the use of toilet facilities.

## Tourism

WE HAVE ALL been tourists somewhere so it may seem unfair to criticise tourists for what is happening to our cities. However, the massive growth in tourism is having a significant effect on places all over the world. People travelling to places because they are remote ensure that the place is no longer remote, affecting the culture of many once-isolated tribes. People travel to the world's most famous cities because of their history and culture. But with so many coming, the place itself is no longer a repository of that history and culture but takes on a new identity as a place where there are tourists and no one else. For example, tourists rushed to see Prague and other beautiful cities of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall. These cities were interesting because they had been 'untouched'. But it didn't take long for those places to become something else. The centre of Prague was essentially bought up by foreigners and has become the mecca for stag and hen parties, with drunken tourists making fools of themselves in what was one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. The locals who used to flock to the centre, now remain in the outer neighbourhoods, only venturing into the centre if they have visitors who want to be shown around.

The same thing is happening to British cities. London is rapidly changing its character. What is happening to Soho is a case in point. The originally bars and music venues are being shut down to make way for both Cross-rail and the creation of a shinier new Soho, one that will have completely lost the bohemian atmosphere that people come to Soho for. There will soon be new hotels, restaurants and clubs, claiming to be keeping the old traditions but in fact being a lifeless copy of the original. This is what excessive tourism means - the changing of a place into something that has lost its character that was developed from centuries of people interacting in a specific place. That character cannot be artificially engineered - but that is in fact what developers want to do. The aim of course is to make a place into something that can be *consumed* and therefore be a source of profit.

In order for a city to make money out of its history and culture, it has

to package it in such a way that it creates symbolic capital. In other words, it is seen as having something special that attracts people in order to experience whatever it is that is seen as special. Some cities such as London and New York have always been places that people have wanted to visit. However, other cities, such as Liverpool and Manchester, have had to work at it. Liverpool has transformed itself in the past decade, with the new, shiny city centre. Derelict areas are now shopping centres or 'heritage' sites, such as the Liverpool Docks. Tourists wander the area, visiting the museums and sometimes catching glimpses through a hole in the ground, of the actual docks themselves. Quiggins, a cultural icon was demolished, as part of the Liverpool 1 development, obviously not enough of one to attract the tourists. But the city repackaged their sordid history of involvement in the slave trade and created a museum of slavery. There is nothing wrong with having such a museum to reveal the horrors of that period but it is the way the target audience seems to be the tourists. Slavery thus becomes part of Liverpool's symbolic capital - another way for the city to profit from the traffic in human beings.

Films have also had a role in remaking a place. Notting Hill Gate and the Portobello market was largely a market for Londoners but is now a major stop on the tourist itinerary since the release of the popular film. One example of the extent that a place can be made into something to be consumed is what happened to the 'blue door' that was meant to be the house of the main character. The actual owner of the house was constantly pestered by people knocking on his door and wanting to take photos. In the end, he took up the offer of an American tourist and sold his door for an incredibly high price. The tourist can now look at the door whenever they want and the owner of the house has solved his problem, making sure his new door was any colour but blue! A more extreme example of the commodification of aspects of city life is the film *City of God* which was filmed in Rio's shanty towns. There are now tours of slums, both in Rio but also in the slums of Mumbai in India. Even poverty is something that someone can make money out of, selling the city to the tourists.

### **What do we want the future of cities to be?**

THIS IS A difficult question. Cities are constantly changing, different groups of people come and go and with the movement of people comes changes in culture and in the character of the city. There have been many attempts to con-



trol what happens in the city. The whole concept of city ‘planning’ is about this. Many of the initiatives appear to have been for good reasons. We cannot argue with trying to make a place more pleasant to live in, to improve the environment, to have a functioning transport system and to make sure everyone has a place to live. However, something is also lost when there is too much planning. The idea of the completely sanitised and perfectly engineered city would be one that has lost its soul. In addition, planning might appear to be about what is best for everyone, but in fact it is not a neutral tool, but one that is firmly in the hands of the ruling class. In 19th century Paris, Haussman demolished whole neighbourhoods and drove through huge boulevards, the aim being to make it easier to control a restive population. Planning therefore is one of the many tools used as a way of increasing the surplus that can be extracted from the city by making it a place money-making can safely take place, without the interference of the potentially rebellious and discontented masses. Therefore, however we answer the above question, the future of the city must come from us, the working class. The future of the city is therefore a key component of the class struggle.

## **PART THREE**

### **THE CITY IS OURS!**

THE LAST TWO parts have shown that the city is a target of capital, which seeks out ways of making money at a time when other ways are not so lucrative, nor so easy. In addition, the State, both at a national and local level, does everything it can to facilitate this process. Land is being privatised and sold off to developers in return for more money in the coffers and sometimes a few ‘affordable’ homes built. In addition, both the new private owners and the



State have introduced increasingly authoritarian measures to ensure that all space is closely monitored and controlled in order to ensure that money-making can go on unhindered by activities or people who may get in the way. However, these processes have not happened without resistance. Slogans such as

‘reclaim the city’ and ‘the right to the city’ can be heard all over the world. At the moment, there are individual struggles focused on a particular part of city life, eg housing, use of public space or food growing. However, all these struggles are inherently anti-capitalist and anti-State. They may not be located in the workplace and the protagonists may not often be industrial workers, but the struggles all challenge capitalism’s need to accumulate more and more money and the State’s role in supporting this.

This part looks at the numerous ways that people are resisting capital and the State’s attempts to use space for their own interests. We will also ask the question: how can we link these struggles in order to build a united urban social movement that also includes the workplace struggles?

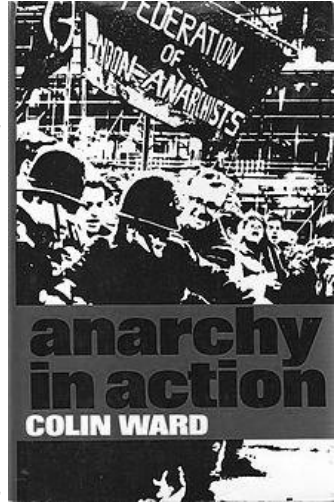
## **1. Taking Control of Housing**

HOUSING, AS A fundamental human need, has naturally been a focus of struggle. The struggles have been largely defensive: against evictions carried out by both private and ‘social’ landlords and against the general attack on social housing as exemplified by the Housing Bill now going through Parliament. These struggles are immensely important. People need to be defended on a day-to-day basis and social housing, both from the council and social landlords, is preferable to the privatisation of housing. However, both types of social housing are not self-managed by the residents. The properties can be sold off, rents increased, repairs not done without the residents having any involvement in decisions. Colin Ward, the most important anarchist thinker on housing, was very critical of the way the State introduced and controlled housing for the working class. His main point is that housing should be under ‘dweller-control’.

Ward analyses the history of housing prior to the introduction of council housing. There were many movements in which people used mutual aid and self-help to provide themselves with housing outside of State control. Most of the world’s population lives in houses built by themselves, their parents or their grand-parents. Markets supply only 20% of new housing stock according to ILO research, with most people building their own homes and creating their own neighbourhoods. In Cairo, one million people have taken over the ‘City of the Dead’ and made homes for themselves in the tombs of sultans and emirs.

In Britain, Ward has uncovered a number of examples of DIY housing in the early part of the century. For example, workers in Oxford squatted

land near the quarries where they worked and built their own homes which lasted many years. The Plotlands movement that lasted from the early 1900s to the 1940s was another example of dweller-control. Land came on the market for a variety of reasons including bankrupt farms and death duties on landed estates. The owners wanted to make some money so they divided the land up and sold it off in small parcels at cheap prices to people who wanted to build their own home. These usually started as holiday homes for urban workers, a movement which picked up when the Holiday With Pay Act was passed in 1938. However, the owners extended and developed their initial build and often ended up moving to their 'plot' permanently. It all came to an end, though, in 1947 with the Town and Country Planning Act. The more privileged resented having these chaotic developments and to this day it is very difficult to build your own home as you need to build a fully-serviced, finished house from the start for which you had received planning permission in advance.



So we went from a situation where the working class had to fend for themselves, and came up with imaginative and practical ways of housing themselves, to a State-controlled system whereby housing was provided by the State for the working class. It is considered blasphemous to criticise council housing. However, Ward's point is that we can do better than State housing. His is a critique of authoritarian socialists whose main strategy is to take control of the State and then paternalistically tell the working class what to do. There was no sense of 'dweller-control' and instead of using the working class experience of self-help, mutual aid and solidarity, the State treated people as passive recipients of their policies. The whole process of building council housing could be seen as a form of slum clearance. The terraced streets were replaced with large blocks. People were not consulted on what they wanted but were expected to be grateful for what was provided.

Nevertheless we cannot deny that council housing provided great benefits for working class people and it must be defended. But at the same time, we need to look at anarchist ways of people talking control of their own housing needs that go beyond both private and State landlords.

“Everyone today is so completely dependent upon the housing supply system, whether renting in the public sector or buying in the private sector, that we find it hard to believe that people can house themselves” (Ward: 1990:69).

## Squatting and Occupations

SQUATTING HAS ALWAYS been a way of people housing themselves. This is because of the system of private property that excludes the majority from access to land. The recent history of squatting in Britain begins in 1945 with ex-servicemen, returning from the war to find empty houses but no place for them to live. The movement started in Brighton and other seaside towns. A Vigilante Campaign installed families in unoccupied houses. In addition, there was a country-wide movement to occupy ex-army and air force bases. James Fielding moved into the officers’ mess at Scunthorpe on an unoccupied anti-aircraft camp and other families followed. The example was taken up in other places in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire and a Squatters Protection Society was formed. By 1946, over a thousand camps in England and Wales had been occupied by 39,535 people. Local authorities were forced to provide utilities such as electricity and water. However, on Sept 14, 1946 the great ‘socialist’ minister, Bevan, instructed local authorities to cut off gas and electricity. People rallied against this and the local authorities often refused to implement the orders. Meanwhile, the new communities were a model of self-help and mutual aid with families organising communal cooking and child-care.

The squatting movement grew to occupy other places as well - houses, shops and hotels. In London, people occupied luxury flats in Kensington and Marylebone. Gradually, the self-organised housing movement ground to a halt, partly as a result of pressure and attacks from central government but also because council housing was put forward as an alternative. Pragmatic squatting continued in a quiet way but it was not a full-blown social movement.

Squatting as a social issue took off again in the late sixties. Ron Bailey and Jim Radford were angry at the failure of councils to comply with their statutory duty to house the homeless, when



there were large amounts of council homes which had been waiting for years to be demolished. Families occupied these homes and local councils responded violently. Council employees deliberately smashed up interiors so squatters couldn't live there. Councils eventually backed down in the face of a growing movement of support and handed over empty properties to housing co-ops.

The current housing crisis has also seen the re-emergence of squatting. However, the State, always hostile to squatting, has made it more difficult for people to squat, passing the Criminal Law Act of 1977, the Criminal Justice Act of 1994 and recently the 2012 law that made it a criminal offence to squat residential properties. This will put a lot of people off squatting, despite a desperate need for housing. However, for many, squatting is the solution to the housing crisis. Government statistics show that there are 200,000 long-term empty homes (over six months) and 600,000 total empty homes in England ([www.emptyhomes.com](http://www.emptyhomes.com)). Increasingly squatting is being supported as a solution to the housing crisis by not-so-radical elements. A Guardian writer: "Bring back squatting. Repeal the silly law 2012 law criminalising it in residential properties. Occupy all those buy-to-leave homes, and the squillion empty premises being hogged and sat on by supermarket chains so that no one else can use them" (Michele Hanson: April 13, 2015). In Manchester, Gary Neville, a former Manchester United player told homeless squatters in the former stock exchange he owns that they could stay for the winter and he would help them find homes once the work was done turning the building into a hotel.

Occupying properties has also been used as a way of stopping evictions. Sweets Way in Barnett, London was an inspirational campaign where residents, supported by housing activists, refused to leave their homes, fending off the efforts of the developers for many months. Though it was not successful in the end, the campaign has encouraged others to resist being moved from their homes, showing that it is possible to at least delay the process. A comment from one of the residents says it all:

'We do live in ugly world indeed. Since February we were fighting outrageous behaviour of Barnet Homes towards hard working people of the amazing community of Sweets Way. We fight to save much needed homes and the future of neighbourhood. My kids met beautiful people who committed their lives to changing the world, very inspirational people. So what I will teach my kids is very

simple – helping others and making changes for better in this world is risky, and you might end up with criminal record or in jail, but making changes is much needed in this world and standing for those in need is essential. The system we live in is design to bully weak and support greed. So dear children, follow your heart, not the rules of the broken system.’ (<https://sweetswayresists.wordpress.com/>).

Occupations have also been used to highlight the fact that there are empty homes that could be used to house people. In Sept 2014, activists from Focus E15 and supporters occupied one of the empty low-rise blocks on the Carpenters Estate in Newham, London. The council has been gradually moving people out of this working class estate, which is adjacent to Stratford and therefore prime real estate. It now (*at the time of writing*) stands mostly empty but people fight on. The occupation lasted only a short time but it showed that the flats could easily be lived in. They continue to campaign under the slogan ‘no to social cleansing’ and ‘repopulate the Carpenters Estate’. (<http://focuse15.org/>)

We need to look back at the early post-war squatters for inspiration on how to make squatting a more effective way of actually housing people. The fact that so many ordinary people occupied empty properties, without any help from ‘activists’ and housed themselves for many years is something we need to encourage. However, this is difficult as so many people are not used to taking action for themselves. Individuals and families need to be prepared to organise together to occupy places like the Carpenters Estate for the long-term, just as the servicemen and their families did in 1945. Instead, people wait passively for the State to provide them with a home. However, in the current climate, this is less and less likely to happen. People have to be prepared to ‘house themselves’ and the housing movement needs to provide support and solidarity.

## **Inspiration from Abroad**

THERE ARE MANY examples from around the world to show the way forward. In Spain, the serious housing problems have prompted radical solutions. People had been encouraged to take out mortgages to the extent that 80% of Spaniards had mortgages. With the economic crisis and people losing their jobs, many were unable to keep up payments. Between 2007 and 2013 there were 420,000 foreclosures and 220,000 evictions. Meanwhile, 20% of Spain’s total housing - 5.6 million homes - remain unoccupied. The Platform for

Mortgage Affected People (PAH) has resisted evictions and housed families in unoccupied buildings. They have developed into a mass movement with support from a range of people. For example, the Assembly of Locksmith Professionals in Pamplona unanimously decided in December 2012 to refuse to change locks on houses under foreclosure proceedings. Firefighters in Catalonia and A Coruña have refused to assist evictions.

One example of a PAH action that took place in 2013 is the 16 families who took over living in an abandoned, brand-new block of flats in the Catalan town of Salt. This example shows that squatting is about much more than getting a roof over your head. One resident comments:

‘It started out with just needing somewhere to live, but now we’re taking control of what we eat, what we do in our free time, how we relate to each other’.

([libcom.org/blog/salt-earth-pah-occupied-flat-block-cataluñ-foot-door-something-new-involuntarily-homeless-1](http://libcom.org/blog/salt-earth-pah-occupied-flat-block-cataluñ-foot-door-something-new-involuntarily-homeless-1))

In Caracas, Venezuela a half-built 52-storey tower in the centre of the city provided a home for thousands residents for 8 years. The building had been left empty by a Venezuelan tycoon after the banking crisis. It was first occupied in 2007 and eventually became home to 1200 residents. The occupants transformed the abandoned block into a community with grocery shops, tattoo parlours, internet cafes and a hair salon.

Both these are examples of ‘dweller-control’ and should be a source of ideas and inspiration to the housing movement and all those who are homeless, facing eviction or stuck in high-rent, unsatisfactory property. And it is not just about a roof over your head, but about creating a community that is self-organised and outside the control of private capital and the State. If we could develop such a movement in Britain, then we wouldn’t be so reliant on begging the State to provide more social housing.

## **Self-Build**

COLIN WARD puts forward self-build as an anarchist alternative to private and State housing. However, there are limited examples of this and it is difficult to know to what extent this is a feasible or even desirable option. We saw that Plotlands was an example but this was limited in scope. More recently, there have been some examples and the idea is now being promoted as a way of providing more homes by the Greater London Authority.

One of the first more recent examples is a scheme in Lewisham, London, in 1976. Walter Segal, a German-born architect, wanted to promote a self-build scheme for families on the council waiting list, using pockets of unused land. Despite bureaucratic delays, the project is a success. People remarked on the communal atmosphere and how people helped each other. The housing professionals also enjoyed the experience, finding that there was amazing creativity amongst the residents. They made countless small variations and innovations. The street of 13 half-timbered houses are still there and receives many visitors every year. Another project was the Zenzele self-build initiative in Bristol, where unemployed young people built their own homes.

A number of agencies now seem to be promoting the self-build concept across the country. The Greater London Authority in London has set up a register for individuals and community groups who may be interested in undertaking a self-build project. This is the result of the Self-Build and Custom House Building Act 2015. One becomes suspicious of any initiative coming from this government. Ward said that the traditional left labelled the Lewisham project 'petit-bourgeois' and 'little capitalist'. He goes on to argue that the Left has let the Conservatives appropriate the anarchist principles of self-help and freedom of choice. Nevertheless, in the current situation it is difficult to know how to respond to the openings for self-build. From an anarchist perspective, we need to look carefully at each project and see the extent to which there is dweller-control and self-organisation. And we need to ensure that the government does not use this as an excuse to get rid of the social housing that there is. Still, it is an example of people housing themselves and many positive things could come out of projects like this - as with squatting and occupations - if people are working together and helping each other then it is a step towards the creation of an anarchist society. We can't just wait for the revolution to somehow magically create the perfect society, but can literally build the new society in the shell of the old.

## **Housing Co-operatives**

HOUSING CO-OPERATIVES ARE another alternative solution that could facilitate dweller-control. In other countries, co-operatives are much more widespread. In Norway, for example, they provide homes for 14% of the population ([www.cds.coop/housing](http://www.cds.coop/housing)) whereas in Britain the percentage is 0.6%. Co-operatives aren't necessarily distinct from squatting or self-build. You could



have a squat that is run as a co-operative, where everyone participates in decision-making. A co-operative could undertake a self-build project for several individuals and/or families. However, the difference is that co-ops would have more security than a squat and would be based on collective ownership or collective management of something which was owned by another body - normally the State.

It is not just a question of getting a home, but of your control over that home. One of the issues with council housing is the fact that tenants do not play a major role. They have been excluded from the plans for their homes and once given the home they have little say in how it is managed. Obviously with private landlords, they have even less of a say. This is why people think that owning their own home is the ideal. People want security and the freedom to do what they want with their home and it seems the only option. However, private ownership is now beyond the means of most working class people, especially young people. And, having seen what happened in Spain, you don't actually own your home but are living somewhere that is effectively owned by the banks. Ultimately, we need to address the whole issue of who owns the land. Earlier in this pamphlet we addressed the question of "the commons." But in the current situation, where land is either privately or publically owned, we need to consider how to maximise the control that people have over their homes. But you don't necessarily need to own the home yourself in order to be able to have dweller-control. Housing co-operatives can take many forms and are compatible with both squatting and self-build.

There are different types of co-ops and one issue is the extent to which they are actually run by the tenants. There is also the question of ownership and who has ultimate control. One housing co-operative that has been going since the 80s is Bonnington Square in Vauxhall, London. The Inner London Education Authority acquired a large number of properties with the purpose of demolishing the properties and building a school. However, they were left empty and a group of people decided to bring the properties back to use on a temporary basis. They formed a housing co-operative and negotiated with the ILEA. The end result was that the properties were leased to South London Family Housing Association and the management was handed over to the co-op. The co-op did up the properties and opened a café and community garden. The plans for the school were dropped and now the co-operative has a degree of security. Within the properties there are different

types of tenure including tenants, shared owners and owners.

The problem of course is that the actual landowner has ultimate power over the fate of the homes. If the landowner is the ILEA, which is now defunct, who did the deed transfer to? If the owner is ultimately the State, then there is no guarantee that the land will not be sold off. This is what happened to the Tower Hamlets Users of Short-life Housing (TUSH). This co-op was set up 35-years ago when the council had neither the money nor the will to renovate seven derelict properties. The original members began renovating and maintaining them and lived there and got involved in community work and campaigns. The council eventually gave them licenses to live there. Last autumn (*at the time of writing*) the council decided to move everyone out and take back possession. One of the residents had been there for 30 years. It is unclear what the council will do with the properties but if past behaviour is anything to go by they are most likely planning on selling them off to private developers.

Other co-operatives have found more security by buying the properties. This is what Radical Routes did when they bought a property in Birmingham in 1986. Radical Routes has now made setting up of co-operatives, both housing and work, a key part of a revolutionary political strategy.

‘We are working towards taking control over our housing, our education and work through setting up housing and workers co-ops, and co-operating as a network. Through gaining collective control over these areas we aim to reduce reliance on exploitative structures and build secure bases from which to challenge the system and encourage others to do so’. ([www.radicalroutes.org.uk](http://www.radicalroutes.org.uk))

The London Housing Co-operative Group was recently set up by people who are part of the Coin St Housing Co-operative and neighbourhood centre. It seems a unique experience of local people taking control of a prime area of central London under the control of the residents. Eight housing co-ops have been established since 1977 when the campaign was launched. From their website:

‘Thirty years ago the South Bank area of London was bleak, unattractive, had few shops and restaurants, had a dying residential community and a weak local economy. Local residents mounted an extraordinary campaign leading to the purchase of 13 acres of derelict land, since developed into a thriving neighbourhood.’

Of course there are questions to be asked about the extent to which it is still under dweller control. Looking at their website, the structure seems to be based on top-down decision-making. Given the value of the land they control, it will be interesting to see how they continue to reflect the original aims of the campaign.

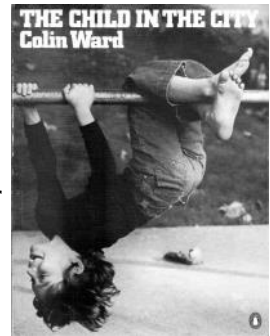
([www.coinst.org](http://www.coinst.org), [www.andrewbibby.com/socialenterprise/coin-street.html](http://www.andrewbibby.com/socialenterprise/coin-street.html))

Housing co-ops are certainly an idea that the radical housing movement should explore as part of solving immediate housing needs, promoting dweller-control, and creating an alternative vision of housing provision.

## 2. Taking Control of Public Space

### Taking Control of Cultural and Social Space

COLIN WARD, in his book *A Child in the City* argues that there is a continual and consistent struggle between the urban working class and the dominant culture for space in the city. The book documents the importance for children of being able to explore freely and create their own pathways through the city. Traditionally children would be outside on the street, in derelict buildings and brown-field sites exploring, discovering and imagining. Though he focuses on children, the lessons for all of us can be drawn. Everyone should be able to make the city their own and this can only be done if we have freedom to explore and discovery all parts of the city. This has become increasingly difficult. For children the increase in traffic has been a major problem for their use of the street. But it is a problem for all of us as we are squashed onto crowded pavements. Cars rule the city, mainly because they are transporting people to work or to shops. There is no space for play or for idle ramblings. And, the takeover of more and more space by private capital has also reduced the scope for our free movement through the city. But people are rebelling!



### Urban Exploration

ONE OF THE most daring and imaginative ways of fighting back against our exclusion from the city is 'place-hacking' or 'urban exploration'. Groups of people are actively seeking out the places that have been forbidden to us -

the tops of skyscrapers, underground tunnels and empty buildings. Bradley Garrett, a University of Oxford academic, got involved with a group of 'urban explorers' as a part of a research project. His book on his experience (*Explore Everything: 2014. Verso*) makes fascinating reading. He did not just stand back and observe but became a full, and some would say way too enthusiastic, participant. He admits that the members of the group would not explicitly share his analysis of the implications of what they were doing but the feelings expressed by some, eg 'I have to connect with the city' say a lot. Garrett sees urban exploration as both a celebration and a protest. They uncover places authorities want to keep hidden, they are 'taking back rights to the city from which we have been wrongfully restricted'. It is a protest against the 'security-entertainment complex'. At the same time it gives the explorer an amazing sense of freedom and control of the environment. Imagine what it would be like to stand on top of the Shard without arriving there by approved means or discovering the hidden bunkers under the city! The city becomes 'transparent and within reach of those who feel excluded from its production and its maintenance'.

You don't have to go such extremes; this kind of urban exploration is not for the faint-hearted. Parkour, though still physically demanding, has become increasingly popular. It is defined as physical training by using parts of the built environment; it involves jumping, climbing, running and swinging. For a group of women in Glasgow, it is explicitly about reclaiming urban areas as women. According to one participant:

'The reclamation of public space as a woman is very central to my understanding of parkour, and my love for it. Practicing parkour has opened up access to new areas of Glasgow that I would have never gone to before. Several of these areas may even be classed as 'dodgy' or 'unsafe', but parkour gave me a reason to enter them, and allowed me to form positive bonds to those areas. Practising parkour in the evening and night time also serves as a way to fight back against fear that, as a woman, I have been trained to feel.

'Parkour lets us create new emotional bonds to space. We begin to see the city in a new light as our parkour vision develops, allowing us to view our surroundings in a new way. For all practitioners, this allows us to reclaim our city space, using it as our playground, rather than being boxed in



or herded by the architecture. I have strong emotional attachments and many happy memories in my training spots. Parkour allows a female practitioner, through new positive experiences in city spaces, the chance to create new emotions towards these spaces, which can replace the old ones of fear.'

([www.glasgowparkourgirls.wordpress.com](http://www.glasgowparkourgirls.wordpress.com))

## **Skateboarders Occupy**

OTHER YOUTH SUBCULTURES are finding the need to reclaim space in order to engage in their activities. Skateboarders are an excellent of example. Last summer, in Greenwich, London, a group of skaters took over an old car wash and turned it into a skate park. They lasted for several months, hosting workshops, art activities and performances as well as skateboarding. It was described as a 'skate summer camp in the middle of London'. Unfortunately, the developers were able to get them evicted in order for them to proceed with yet another unaffordable housing development. A spokesperson for the collective commented:

'We've had a fantastic summer here, it really goes to show what an alternative community plan can achieve. We can't understand how planning permission can be given for such high-density developments that squeeze out the children. This is happening all over the borough.'

A more long-lived example is the evening/night time occupation of the shopping centre opposite Westfield in Stratford, East London. While Westfield and the Olympic Park are symbols of the worst that is happening to London with high rise luxury flats and the corporate takeover of all available space, walking through the original mall is refreshing. It has become a place for young people to 'hang out', with a lively scene of skateboarders, rollerbladers and street dancers. The space is used by a variety of people, from teenagers to thirty-somethings, both male and female. There is a welcoming atmosphere. One female user commented: 'What I like about the place is that we're one big community, just having fun. We all end up knowing each other. And it's a great place to learn. People don't judge so harshly as they might in a proper skate park'. The police don't hassle them. Perhaps there are too many of them committed to using this space, and the space has been used like this for at least 5 years.

This growing movement for taking back public space is one of the

most positive developments of recent years in our fight for the city, showing the power of direct collective action. As Garrett said, 'If you ask people to have access to these spaces, you won't get it or if you do get it you are going to have to pay. And so we've got ourselves into this situation where we don't have any choice but to trespass if we want to participate in our cities.' ([www.channel4.com/news/public-space-occupy-private-land-place-hacker](http://www.channel4.com/news/public-space-occupy-private-land-place-hacker))

## Space and Political Action

POLITICAL MOVEMENTS NEED places to organise and take action, for example social centres. Despite the growth of social media and internet activism, effective political action involves physical spaces. We organise protests outside Parliament and Downing Street, local government offices, embassies, shops, corporate headquarters, estate agents etc. We need to be able to physically confront our class enemies. We also need space to communicate with other members of our class. At work, we need to be able to hold meetings and to socialise with workmates in order to discuss issues. In the community, we need to be in the places where people live their lives. And, we need space to organise ourselves - where we can gather together to discuss ideas, plan actions and socialise. However, this political space is being eroded.



Occupy is an important recent political movement that highlighted the importance of public space as a base for political protest and activity. The point of these protests was not explicitly about space but nevertheless had the occupation of a particular space as a key part of the movement. The movement began in Wall St, New York, the physical and symbolic centre of global capitalism. For nine weeks, people occupied Zuccotti Park (Liberty Plaza). This physical place was the site of the daily assemblies and the base from which other activities were organised. The protesters had originally wanted to occupy Chase Plaza, the location of the charging bull, the Wall St icon. However, as this is public property, permits were required for a protest so the police barricaded the area. So ironically, it was easier to occupy private land which is owned by Brookfield Office Properties, which is big property owner in Manhattan, including the World Financial Centre. Obviously Brookfield was not keen on people being on their land; there are park rules

banning tents, sleeping bags and other structures. Therefore, the Occupy Movement, though aimed at the general problems created by global capitalism and the financial system, also led the way in reclaiming public space for public protest. In Britain, protesters were unable to occupy land in the City itself and ended up in front of St Paul's cathedral. Nevertheless, a space that is dominated by tourists was reclaimed for the purpose of public protest.

The reaction of the authorities to this world-wide movement showed how the State and capital use the monopoly of space to restrict challenging political activity. We already experience the constraints of demonstrations where we are forced to march from A to B in a narrow corridor, hemmed in by the police or by march 'stewards' who do the police's job for them. Increasingly, there are less and less places for people to come together in large groups, whether it be to organise political activity or just to socialise. It is of course ok to have officially-organised events, but the more political, autonomous events are becoming harder to organise. Britain seems to lack the large squares or piazzas of continental Europe and therefore we are forced to 'trespass' in order to be able to organise public assemblies.

Political activists have also challenged the way councils have attacked the homeless. This has often involved the occupation of public space as a way of both providing accommodation for the homeless and staging visible protests against council policies. In Nottingham, activists organised a homeless camp by occupying empty land in the city centre. From a Statement issued in January 2016:

'The services the council claim to work so well, do not work as well as what you are lead to believe. This is where we come in, we are secure, we offered tents to homeless people. Their friends can visit during the day but at night it is a policy that we only have homeless and activists on camp. The camp is 'staffed' 24 hours a day meaning that staff members are always on watch and protecting our camp. As we speak we have our own CCTV systems being put in to place and will be monitored by our staff from our caravan HQ. We shall be getting a medical caravan that will act as place for our residents to speak privately with their social workers or counsellors. Even as an emergency shelter for those who

are really ill and need it like a bed in a hospital. We will build a kitchen, a communal space with log burner and start building small rooms for a bed and storage space for their stuff.'

The police, on orders from the local council cracked down and many were arrested. However, similar activities are taking place around the country.

(<http://streetskitchen.co.uk/>)

## **'Camover'**

ONE WAY OF protesting against the control of public space is seen in the innovative 'game' played in Berlin called 'camover'. According to the Guardian,

'The game is real-life Grand Theft Auto for those tired of being watched by the authorities in Berlin; points are awarded for the number of cameras destroyed and bonus scores are given for particularly imaginative modes of destruction. The rules of Camover are simple: mobilise a crew and think of a name that starts with "command", "brigade" or "cell", followed by the moniker of a historical figure (Van der Lubbe, a Dutch bricklayer convicted of setting fire to the Reichstag in 1933, is one name being used). Then destroy as many CCTV cameras as you can.'

The game was for a fixed time, organised to coincide with the European Police Congress in February 2013 but the idea has been an inspiration to people elsewhere who are sick of the way space is being controlled and monitored by the police.

A less spectacular but equally important political activity is the setting up of political stalls in public places, normally somewhere that people go to shop. People have traditionally met and socialised as part of the process of providing themselves with needed goods. Socrates used to deliberately spend time in the market, called the 'agora' and was the centre of public life, where he would confront the main leaders of the day and ask them difficult questions. The purpose of our stalls is to interact with other people in our communities, to discuss issues and to raise awareness of what is going on. In the past, it has been easy enough to set up a stall. However, there are signs that it is becoming more difficult. Friends of Queens Market in east London has been doing regular stalls at the market for years. But earlier this year they were told that they weren't allowed to hold stalls there. They have



held their ground and the stalls continue.

Stratford, by the Olympic Park, has been the site of a few confrontations. During the run-up to the Olympics, private security cracked down on the stalls organised by political groups on the concourse outside the station. They seemed happy to allow religious groups to have a large and noisy presence but our stall was immediately pounced on. People instead gravitated to Stratford High St. For the past two years the Focus E15 campaign (set up to stop the evictions of young mothers in the Focus hostel and now campaigning against evictions and social cleansing in general) has held a weekly stall in the High St. This has provided a focal point for organising. People facing eviction know they can come to the stall and ask for help and the open mike provides a platform to communicate about the latest attack on working class housing. However, in December,



‘with 40 minutes left to go, a Newham Law Enforcement officer, accompanied by several police, confronted the campaigners, in what was obviously a pre-planned operation. Having already told the SWP stall to remove their table, the police and law enforcement demanded that we pack up immediately or else they would seize our table, banner and sound system, quoting the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (regarding the sound system) and the London Local Authorities and Transport for London Act 2003 (regarding the banner and table). However, we were determined that they would not close down our street presence and demanded that our table should be allowed to stay. It was not obstructing anyone and the shopping street is very wide.’ (from the website: <http://focuse15.org/>).

The next week, a call-out was made to other campaigns and political groups. Many groups and campaigns responded, sending a message to Newham Council that we won’t let them silence political activity.

## **Conclusion**

THIS ARTICLE HAS shown the extent and the variety of resistance, with people using a number of strategies and tactics to campaign for their place in the city, whether it be for housing or political and social space. There is an urgent need, however, to link all these struggles together into a united move-

ment. All the different campaigns and actions are the basis on which such a movement is built, but we must aim for nothing less than the takeover of the city.

One of the fundamental issues that are common to all the campaigns is that we do not have control of land. Everything we are fighting for - homes, community gardens, parks and open space, community, social and political space - is all on physical ground. In order to win our fight for the city, we have to start from the premise that the city, and the land it is built on, is ours. We don't just want access to land that we need to negotiate or beg to use. This is why the idea of the 'commons' is relevant. Land should not be in private ownership nor should it be under State control. Instead, it needs to be either owned by us all or by no one, with everyone having access to what they need. Therefore, a fundamental part of the fight for the city will be a fight for land justice, including redistribution, access and control. For more information about building a land movement see [www.landjustice.uk](http://www.landjustice.uk) and [www.whoownsengland.org](http://www.whoownsengland.org).

Campaigning around land ownership is basically a challenge to private property, the basis of capitalism. What we are fighting for is for the working class to take effective control of land and what is built on that land, including homes, workplaces and all other spaces. In addition, we should gain the benefits from land, shared out between all rather than stolen by a few. The fight for the city also challenges the State. Public ownership may seem to be better than private ownership but the problem is that 'public' does not mean that we actually have an effective control over how the land is used nor do we share in the benefits that comes from the land. Decisions are made by politicians and government departments that are in no way responsive to our needs. The working class, therefore needs to take direct control of all the land and land-based assets.

## References and Further Reading

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# Anarchist Communist Group

The Anarchist Communist Group (ACG) is a revolutionary class struggle organisation, set up in February 2018 by former members of the Anarchist Federation in Great Britain. As the Preamble to our Aims & Principles says:

We are a revolutionary anarchist communist organisation made up of local groups and individuals who seek a complete transformation of society, and the creation of anarchist communism. This will mean the working class overthrowing capitalism, abolishing the State, getting rid of exploitation, hierarchies and oppressions, and halting the destruction of the environment. To contribute to the building of a revolutionary anarchist movement we believe it is important to be organised. We are committed to building an effective national and international organisation that has a collective identity and works towards the common goal of anarchist communism, whilst at the same time working together with other working class organisations and in grass roots campaigns. We do not see ourselves as the leaders of a revolutionary movement but part of a wider movement for revolutionary change. In addition, we strive to base all our current actions on the principles that will be the basis of the future society: mutual aid, solidarity, collective responsibility, individual freedom and autonomy, free association and federalism.

In terms of activity, we see things similarly to how Solidarity group said it fifty years ago:

Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others – even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.

It is still early days for our new organisation but we aim to be actively involved in a number of areas, including workplace organising and solidarity, housing struggles, land justice and the fight against Universal Credit.

We publish pamphlets and produce the street paper, *Jackdaw*.

If you are considering joining the ACG, then to see where we are coming from in terms of ideas and politics, we suggest you look first at our *Aims & Principles* as well as the *In The Tradition* pamphlet, which can be found on our website:

**[www.anarchistcommunism.org](http://www.anarchistcommunism.org)**

Then if you think the ACG is politically the right place for you, then simply drop us a line at: **[info@anarchistcommunism.org](mailto:info@anarchistcommunism.org)**

“Campaigning around land ownership is basically a challenge to private property, the basis of capitalism. What we are fighting for is for the working class to take effective control of land and what is built on that land, including homes, workplaces and all other spaces.”

*London ACG*



Stormy Petrel