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Thoughts on Squatting & Social Centers

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to move beyond fringe subcultural groups buildings must be held and won through community support.

Some notes on the accessibility of Squatting

Taking over an empty building and living/using those buildings is not as simple as it may sound-especially for those with commitments beyond themselves, eg. the majority of people. Therefore the only way to gain any scope at all with this tactic is to build up organisations and networks of support for those who are involved directly in this activity. This is a tall order, especially in conservative Ireland. Many people view occupation as a dirty phenomenon which is way beyond their horizons. This perception must be changed through positive public projects and actions-Such as social/solidarity spaces.

Over the previous year myself and a small number of comrades have been involved in housing activism in Dublin, specifically in relation using squatting or using occupation as a tactic. This is meant to be a short piece on some of the lessons learnt to inform activists who wish to get involved in this sort activity.

At the start of our career as squatter/housing activists over a year ago occupying buildings seemed like the primary logical option available to us. Not only was it an available and sensible form of direct action, which informed by our Social Anarchist politics was invariably the best and most effective tactic to use, it was also an easy way to alleviate the housing crisis.

It goes without saying that physical spaces and building counter power institutions(along with organisations) are necessary for the creation of a movement which can challenge the State Capitalist complex. This is much easier said than done. The State does not allow ideological or physical opposition to its hegemony to grow beyond fringe groups without a struggle. It will clamp down on any opposition it perceives as been a real or potential threat with brute force. So how do we create points of struggle and organising AND overcome or bypass the States' brute force.

This is a personal account meant to highlight some of the future challenges of continuing this type of activism and possibilities for overcoming our isolation as an ideological force.

Creating Physical Counter Power

Social/Solidarity Centres

One obvious way to engage and spread ideas is to create public spaces where ideas flow and hegemonic practices are challenged and debated. Social centres or Solidarity centres have been successful on the continent as one way of providing alternative institutions to the power of the state.

However with very limited resources and capital how do we do this — one way is that we seize the empty, unused buildings we need and put them to use.

Together we started off with an ambitious and large project — The Barricade Inn — which was a squatted Anarchist Social Centre on 77 Parnell St. With over 50 rooms to clear out in a former hotel the workload was intense but after 2 months and a lot of help we had the project open to the public. This space provided a base/home for us to work from and build links with other housing activists. It was an indispensable asset to us.

The Barricade Inn was a crash course in squatting and acclimating to the low level stress that comes with the constant niggling fear of eviction. As a base it was propaganda in of itself. Its existence highlighted the empty building around the city that could easily be put to effective use and served as a meeting place for activists. The lesson from this, we need a central location in an occupied building to build from — properly run a social centre or solidarity centre can serve as an extremely useful hub for activism and political growth — this is one thing that any new activists could focus their attention on — creating a new city centre location hub of radical housing politics. Structured and run with previous lessons and examples in mind political dividend can be maximised while stress minimised.

The Barricade Inn and the Bolt Hostel, which sprung from it also highlight the weakness of occupation as a tactic — the ever looming threat of an injunction — a high court order ordering the eviction by Garda raid of any occupied building. There are ways to help mitigate this issue.

A building that is in an extremely precarious legal or ownership situation will help stave off the threat of eviction — so choosing the location should be done carefully, a long term empty which appears not to be checked on regularly by any owner should be picked. Relatively small in size so maintenance/repairs is easy enough and one that is easily fortified.

However the likely-hood is there is only so long you can hold off court proceedings through pre-emptive precautions — eventually an eviction will be attempted. This is where the tactic of occupation has failed so far to be a success — in resisting these evictions. To successfully resist an eviction the project must have tangible local support in the form of demonstrations and sit-down protests to physically stop the forces of the state from imposing its arbitrary will.

This can only be built up over time with local communities and we failed to do this with the Barricade Inn and the Bolt Hostel (at least to the point where people came out to actively support these projects). From the beginning of any new project community outreach and support must be drummed up. Open days, parties for the community, etc are needed. The public must be informed that the project is not a threat to them — indeed it is the opposite.

In Ireland where occupations are not the norm it is understandable that a local community would be hesitant to support an unknown quantity — this is natural but must be overcome for occupied spaces to have any sort of longevity. It is only through community support that occupied space can survive.

These spaces must orientate towards the local community. It must be consciously non-insular and outward looking to avoid the downward spiral into exclusivity which would be a death nail for any prospects of survival.

After much work has been done in regards to community involvement the spaces must be occupied permanently, even in the case of an injunction. Without permanent occupation in the face of an injunction the spaces are lost already. Although there has been some cases of occupation continuing beyond the imposition of an injunction they have not been organised or sustained efforts. This must happen, along with organised protests against an actual eviction, or occupation and squatting as a tactic will never take off and become the force it is on the continent for social change. If we wish