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## SQUATTED SOCIAL CENTRES IN LONDON: TEMPORARY NODES OF RESISTANCE TO CAPITALISM

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### Abstract

This article assesses squatted social centres in London as a means to understand the cycles, contexts and institutionalisation processes of the local squatters movement. This diffuse social movement had its heyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s when there were 30,000 squatters and still exists today despite squatting in residential buildings being criminalised in 2012. Analysis is based on a database of 245 social centres, which are examined in terms of duration, time period, type of building and location. Important centres are briefly profiled and important factors affecting the squatters movement are examined, in particular institutionalisation, gentrification and criminalisation.

### Keywords

Social centres; urban squatting; squatters movement; London; social movements

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In this article, I intend to analyse the contexts, cycles and institutionalisation processes of the Political squatters movement in London. Since squatting is the unauthorised occupation of derelict space, all squatting actions are political and anti-capitalist in their inherent critique of private property rights, but I do not focus here on private residential squats, of which there have undoubtedly been thousands in the last decades. Instead, I study squatted social centres, the temporary nodes in which the squatters movement meets and organises: temporary because as we shall see these places do not often last long temporally, even if their influences reverberate; nodes since each occupied building is a link in a chain of antagonistic struggle against dominant power structures. These public manifestations of the squatters movement have existed in different forms since the late 1960s, with the contemporary version being a multi-purpose, often anarchist space connected to the transnational alter-globalisation network.

My work is based on the existing literature, which tends to focus on specific areas or projects (see Bailey, 1973; Cook, 2013; Dee, 2013, 2014c; Delarue, 1990; Finchett-Maddock, 2014; Glynn, 2005; Kearns, 1979; Kinghan, 1977; Meltzer, 1996; Needle Collective, 2014; Reeve, unpublished, 2015; Wakefield and Grrrt, 2003; Wates, 1976; Wates and Wolmar, 1980). In order to give a more city-wide analysis, I produced a database of 245 London-based projects (Dee, 2014a). There will have been many more social centres than I have been able to profile. However, the database has now formed the basis for a map of squatted social centres in London which contains the option to add places and thus over time there is the possibility that other contributors will make the map more complete (Anonymous, 2015).

Compared to other European cities where there were squatters movements in the 1980s of a similar size, such as Amsterdam, Berlin and Copenhagen, squatters in London do not seem to have created much historical documentation about themselves. It remains unclear whether this resulted from simple disinterest or from archives getting lost over time. The movement I am personally familiar with from the late 1990s onwards was always resolutely disorganised and disparate with many different strands and political affiliations (although never right wing).

In terms of previous studies, the only similar project to this one was a document entitled 'Squatters in London' which was published by Shelter, reporting the results of a study commissioned by the Department of the Environment. Kinghan interviewed 160 squatters from 295 properties which were thought to be squatted (having been selected at random from lists of squats held by borough councils and the Greater London Council) (1977: 9). He was therefore studying residential squatting in the main. Otherwise, standard reference texts include Ron Bailey's account of how the squatters movement began in East London (1973) and 'Squatting the Real Story', edited by Nick Wates and Christian Wolmar (1980). Focusing on specific projects or areas, Matt Cook writes about "gay times" in squatted Brixton (2013), Jean Delarue records the history of a homelessness project (1990), Sarah Glynn mentions Bengali squatters in the East End (2005), Albert Meltzer recalls the 121 Centre (1996), Kesia Reeve wrote her unpublished PhD on several squatted zones and Nick Wates discusses Tolmers Square (1976). An additional useful text is 'Not for Rent! Conversations with Creative Activists in the UK' by Stacey Wakefield and Grrrt (2003).

The article takes the following format. First I briefly discuss my methodology in constructing the database, next I present the data analysis in terms of location, type of building occupied, time period and duration. I also define what I mean by the term social centre. Then I assess the cycles, contexts (focusing upon two important factors namely criminalisation and gentrification) and institutionalisation processes of the squatters movement. Last, I draw some tentative conclusions based on the database and other sources.

## Methodology

In order to find information for the database, I used a range of sources which are listed in the bibliography. I also spoke to squatters past and present, drew on my own experiences of squatting in London and spent several days at the 56a Infoshop in South London, which has a large countercultural archive. The International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam also proved surprisingly helpful, since the well-organised Amsterdam squatters collected information about what was going on in other cities across Europe (for example the Staatsarchief collection held more copies of the South London squatters newspaper *Crowbar* than 56a).

Regarding internet-based research, the ease of finding information differed by decade, since many projects from the 1970s now have histories online in which people reminisce about their youthful experiences. The 1980s and early 1990s were in general quite undocumented, whereas from the late 1990s onwards, with the spread of the internet, projects tended to have a website, a practice which has become standard moving into the present era. However, it is also worth noting that many early websites are now defunct and not archived anywhere.

Further, whilst I have made efforts to be as comprehensive as possible in constructing this database, it would be impossible to compile a list of all the projects which existed. This is in some ways frustrating but also useful, since this database can make no claim to be definitive or hegemonic (nor should it). Obviously, the majority of squats are residential and silent, whereas the projects profiled here had a public presence in most cases demonstrated by events which were welcome to all. This database has already found an activist use as it served as a source for the London Squats Archive (Anonymous, 2013), a map made for the *Made Possible by Squatting* exhibition and as mentioned above also another map of social centre projects (Anonymous, 2015). The database itself can be found online (Dee, 2014a).

## Database Analysis

The Greater London administrative area contains the City of London and 32 boroughs (12 inner, 20 outer). In total more than 8 million people currently live in this zone. A.M. Prichard commented in 1981 that “most large areas of population [in the UK] have seen some squatting, but London has probably provided an overall majority of instances” (1981: 12).

The total number of profiled social centres in the database was 245, over the time period from the late 1960s until the end of 2013 (an arbitrary end point for the research). There were many other projects for which I could not find out enough information, meaning that perhaps I found a flyer for a party with no address, just a phone number, or mention of a social centre in passing with no details of location or time period. Further, it is clear that in a city the size of London in which so many people both are and have been squatting, there will have been many other projects that are not profiled here. This may be because they were short-lived, or refused to document themselves, or they were in a part of London which kept itself separate to the movement as a whole. In any case, the database can only be seen as a partial contribution to a history of squatting in London.

### *What is a social centre?*

Social centres are radical left-wing spaces, often anarchist, which host a range of events open to the public such as gigs, talks, workshops, films and parties. To give some examples, there might be a 'free shop' where clothes and other items can be donated or taken away for free, a bicycle repair workshop run on donations, a talk by a visiting activist about a campaign or a

book, a workshop on sexual consent, a film about Russian anarchists who emigrated to America or a gig with punk bands.

The centres follow in the tradition of the occupied free spaces from which the anti-globalisation movement began to organise in the late 1990s, as inspired by the CSOAs of Italy and Spain (see Wright, 2000), as well as other influences such as the punk autonomy clubs of the 1980s and the strong tradition of working mens clubs. These new spaces are loosely connected via the UK Social Centre Network. Chatterton and Hodkinson see social centres as part of the “broader ‘autonomous movement’” (2006: 310). They thus play an “an important role in re-thinking and re-making ‘citizenship’ by bringing people together in spaces whose very *raison d’être* is to question and confront the rampant individualism of everyday life” (2006: 311).

In terms of what I have taken to be a social centre, the meaning is quite clear regarding recent projects which often explicitly self-define as a social centre or similar, for example House of Brag, Ratstar, Bank of Ideas, Ramparts, 195 Mare Street, Social Centre Plus, Hackney Social Centre, Rebel Dog, Peckham Social Centre, Library Street, Institute for Autonomy, Grand Banks, Radical Dairy, Use Your Loaf and Belgrade Road. Most of these have websites listed in the database.

Since (as we shall see in more detail below) many of these projects are short term in duration, normally getting evicted within the space of a few months, a recent development has been to occupy places for a set time period, of one day to four weeks. Such a tactic fits well to certain types of squat, such as art events (Temporary Autonomous Arts, Cultures of Resistance), convergence spaces and single issue protest squats (Anti-Cuts Cafe, Palestine Place). When the building is not evicted within the expected time period, it can then take an another usage, as with the Cultures of Persistence exhibition which followed on from Culture of Resistance or indeed the building may become a residential squat. Some collectives such as Offmarket and House of Brag have maintained an identity across different locations, whilst other groups such as 195 Mare Street and Rampart attempted to do this but were worn down by several fast evictions over a short time period.

Parties and fundraisers also take place in squatted locations for example Reclaim the Future. London also has a thriving squat party scene, in which large office blocks or warehouses are occupied for underground dance parties, normally on industrial estates. These have been occurring every weekend since the mid 1990s and appear to be tolerated by the police, since they are only stopped occasionally. It simply was not possible to document squat party locations in the database since the sheer numbers would make it an impossible task, although in some instances (such as the Camden Parkway cinema, Atherden Road in Hackney Wick or the Kings Cross Serious Road trip building) it would be plausible to claim that they became social centres of sorts, since they hosted parties for weeks at a time.

Frequent evictions mean that not many projects last for more than a year and thus the ones which do become hugely influential for the squatting movement in the sense of becoming alternative institutions, for example Cooltan Arts, 121, Spike Surplus Scheme, Rampart and 56a. Of course short-lived projects can also still affect the people who participate and visit them, as Anita Lacey comments: “These autonomous spaces are defined by varying degrees of temporality, and yet the goals of the activists who create and sustain these spaces confirm that these social centres are moments of subversion, in that they challenge capital and the dominant modes of being, of communicating and organising” (2005: 293). In this way, I define social centres as temporary nodes of resistance to capitalism.

As we go back in time, this concept of the social centre becomes harder to apply, but almost all the places documented in the database are/were occupied with a radical political intention

and can be separated from private residential squats by the fact that they do/did events and publicised them. Thus I stretch the social centre meaning to a broad sense in which projects with a public and often political function can be included. Just as with more recent projects, there was an anti-capitalist edge in terms of making the gigs and cafes cheap or free. Influential early examples of this type would be the Eel Pie Island commune (1969 – 1971) and the 144 Piccadilly occupation (1969). Following in the tradition of so-called autonomy centres, rented as punk venues, and blending with the anarchist movement, in the 1980s there were occupations such as Centro Iberico and Rosebery Anarchy Centre. In the former, set up by exiled Spanish anarchists including Miguel Garcia, there was practice space for bands such as Throbbing Gristle and a venue where anarchopunk bands such as Crass played.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were squatted areas such as Elgin Avenue, Frestonia, Tolmers Village, Bonnington Square, Huntley Street, St. Agnes Place and Prince of Wales Crescent. These were mainly residential squats, but since they often included more than 100 people, squats with a public function also occurred, some of which would effectively have functioned as social centres (unfortunately, finding precise data about these projects for the database tended to be rather difficult). The Needle Collective write that “All these free zones contained social spaces such as bakeries, cafés, and bars. They produced their own newsletters and organized street festivals” (2014). Kesia Reeve's unpublished PhD thesis examines three such zones in detail namely Elgin, Tolmers and five streets in Finsbury Park, which she revisits in later work (Reeve, unpublished & 2015).

To give some examples from the projects listed above:

Bonnington Square was a derelict square with gardens in Vauxhall, just across the Thames from the Houses of Parliament which despite being scheduled for demolition was almost completely squatted in the 1980s. The squatters set up the Bonnington Cafe (which is still in existence) and also a nightclub, a bar and a wholefoods shop. The squatters then formed a housing co-operative which negotiated rent with Lambeth Council and eventually bought many of the properties. The gardens have been renovated and are free to visit today.

Described as a sister project by Bonnington Square, Frestonia was an occupied zone in West London which took the unusual step of seceding from the UK and requesting UN peace-keeping troops. There was an art gallery, a theatre, a cinema and a rehearsal space used by bands such as the Clash. Now famous residents included Heathcote Williams and David Rappaport. Eventually the residents formed a housing co-operative which still exists today, including some of the original occupiers.

The local community at Tolmers Square and its environs in Euston would have been completely destroyed were it not for squatters allied with tenants who struggled for years to adapt the renovation plans. Ultimately, the Georgian terraced houses were knocked down, yet as Nick Wates comments: “If it had not been for the campaigning, the office block would have been almost 3 times as large, there would have been far less and/or lower quality housing, many of the small streets with a wide range of thriving businesses would have been completely flattened and replaced with slabs of housing” (1984). Wates was himself a squatter there and his book 'The Battle for Tolmers Square' states that between 1973 and 1975 49 houses were squatted involving 180 people (1976: 161). Without giving precise details, Wates mentions that these houses, as well as being primarily residential also provided: a community house with a storage room, bakery, wholefood store and workshop,

a poster workshop for artists, a maintenance workshop, a motorbike repair workshop, a fruit and vegetable co-operative, a bookshop, an advice centre, a printing press and a disco (1976: 164-178). Wates is at pains to emphasise how “extremely dilapidated” the houses were and so in terms of living there “only people who were determined, politically motivated, or absolutely desperate were prepared to take on the task” (1976: 161). Indeed some houses had already been declared unfit for human habitation by Camden Medical Officer of Health as long before as 1967 (1976: 170).

As a closing note, it may seem that such a large areas of prime real estate would not be left empty today when property prices in London are so high. Yet this sometimes does still occur, as with the huge and controversial redevelopment plans centred around the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle and indeed the National Temperance Hospital just up Drummond Street from Tolmers Square, which has been empty since 1990. Whereas in the 1970s, buildings were simply rendered uninhabitable by destroying everything inside them, now companies often employ security guards to keep their buildings empty. However, it is worth mentioning that at the time of final edits in 2015, part of the Aylesbury estate (near to the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle) was squatted as a protest against its redevelopment.

### ***Owned/rented spaces***

As an additional remark, two owned places and one rented are included in the database since although they are not squatted, they are part of the radical movement and therefore worthy of inclusion.

Firstly, Freedom Press is an anarchist publishing house established in 1886 by among others Charlotte Wilson and Peter Kropotkin. Whilst the printing has been outsourced to Aldgate Press, the building still contains a bookshop, meeting rooms and office space for groups including the Advisory Service for Squatters, London Coalition Against Poverty and Corporate Watch. It has twice been attacked by neo-Nazis: in 1993 it was attacked and firebombed by Combat 18 and in 2013 it was again firebombed (no-one has claimed responsibility but it is believed to be the work of fascists).

Secondly (and physically located very close to Freedom) is LARC, the London Action Resource Centre, a legally owned social centre bought in 1999 by members of Reclaim the Streets to provide a long term space from which to organise.

Thirdly, the Pogo Cafe was set up in 2004 as a means to raise money for the planned Emmaz Social Centre. Unfortunately the vegan cafe never generated enough money to move the larger project forward. In 2013, Pogo changed hands and became the Black Cat Cafe.

56a Infoshop on Crampton Street in Elephant and Castle also deserves mention, as a rare example of a long-lasting and still extant project. The last remaining free space from the once largely squatted Pullens housing estate which was redeveloped in the 1980s, it sits on a road one side of which was saved by squatters. Legalised and now paying a peppercorn rent, the tiny infoshop houses a huge countercultural archive. There is also a bicycle repair workshop and a wholefood co-operative, both of which projects probably aiding the long-term survival of the infoshop (indeed the wholefood shop was there first, in 1988).

### ***Location***

The analysis indicates that there have been squatted social centres in 21 boroughs plus the City of London, out of a total of 32 boroughs plus the City of London. The City of London is itself a city within the city of London. This strange state of affairs is caused by the City of

Image 1: Social centres by borough (BLUBS & Author)

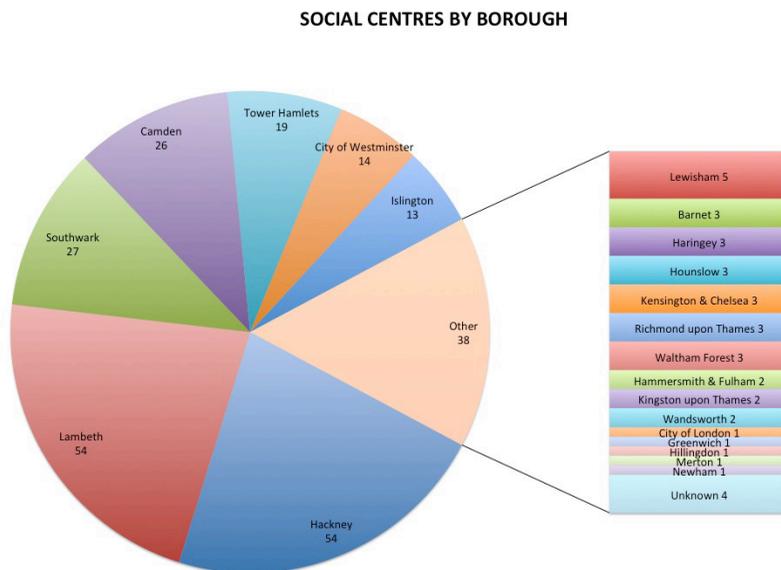


Image 1

London being older than Greater London, with the date of its foundation actually lost in the mists of time. It is counted as part of London but can also be considered as separate in other ways. Examples would be that it has its own police force and that it is governed by the Lord Mayor of the City of London rather than the Mayor of London. The City of London is today also known as the Square Mile and is the financial centre of London.

The two boroughs with the highest number of squatted social centres are Hackney and Lambeth, two areas which indeed have reputations as squatter strongholds. They each had 54 projects (as well as hundreds if not thousands of residential squats). The seven boroughs with the highest numbers are all centrally located (Hackney, Lambeth, Camden, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, City of Westminster, Islington). In fact, these boroughs all touch the City of London, which can be seen as the notional centre of the city (as shown by the image below). Together they contain 84% of all the projects.

The City of London itself has only one entry, namely the Occupy LSX camp which ended up being positioned on the forecourt of St.Pauls Cathedral from October 2011 until its eviction in February 2012. A separate Occupy project called the School of Ideas, which was very close but situated in the borough of Hackney, was illegally evicted the same night by order of the Home Secretary and then immediately demolished, presumably to prevent the camp from moving there.

Image 2: Boroughs of London



Image 2

### ***Type of building***

The table below (Figure 3) shows that a huge variety of buildings were occupied. Squatters are resourceful in repurposing empty space, but sometimes of course the building itself is the reason for the occupation. To give some examples:

The London Fields Lido in Hackney was squatted twice in the 1990s in order to stop it being demolished, hosting a Reclaim the Streets benefit and cinema events in the pool; now the Lido has been renovated and is open to the public again.

During the Arab Spring, in March 2011, a group called Topples the Tyrants occupied an unused mansion owned by Saif Gaddafi, son of the Libyan dictator (Dee, 2013: 256).

The Friern Barnet library was shut down in 2012 as a result of austerity cuts but then opened again and run as a community project by local residents in tandem with Occupy activists. Thanks to this action, a long-term resolution has been reached.

Buildings are also occupied and turned to other purposes. For example:

A large block of flats called Artillery Mansions (opposite the police headquarters at New Scotland Yard) which had been empty for 18 years was occupied in 1994, both as a protest against the proposed criminalisation of squatting and as alternative means of housing

Image 3: Social centres by type of building (when squatted) (BLUBS & Author)

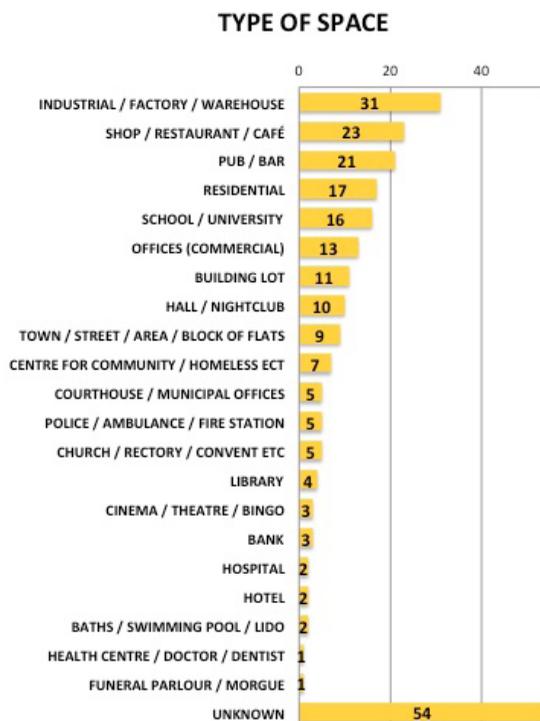


Image 3

for homeless people. Sam from Squall magazine states that the “government started this Rough Sleepers Initiative to supposedly find hostel places for homeless people over the winter months. So the Artillery Mansion squat was a DIY alternative to that” (Wakefield & Grrrt, 2003: 10).

In 1989, an office building was squatted and turned into the Belgrave Homeless Project. It lasted for one year and is documented in the book 'No.1 Clapham Road: A diary of a squat' (see Delarue, 1990).

The Rainbow Centre in Kentish Town was a squatted church which became the main focus of European Rainbow Tribe movement where “circles just meet and everything just takes spontaneously” (Les interviewed in Wakefield and Grrrt: 37-38). Around forty people lived in the squat.

In the 1980s and 1990s punk groups such as the Dolehouse Crew in Peckham repurposed large buildings such as pubs, vicarages, ambulance stations, banks and libraries into music venues (eg Dickie Dirts, Black Boule/Bull, Lord Clyde, Midland Bank and the curiously titled Bzigueuleusmeulde).

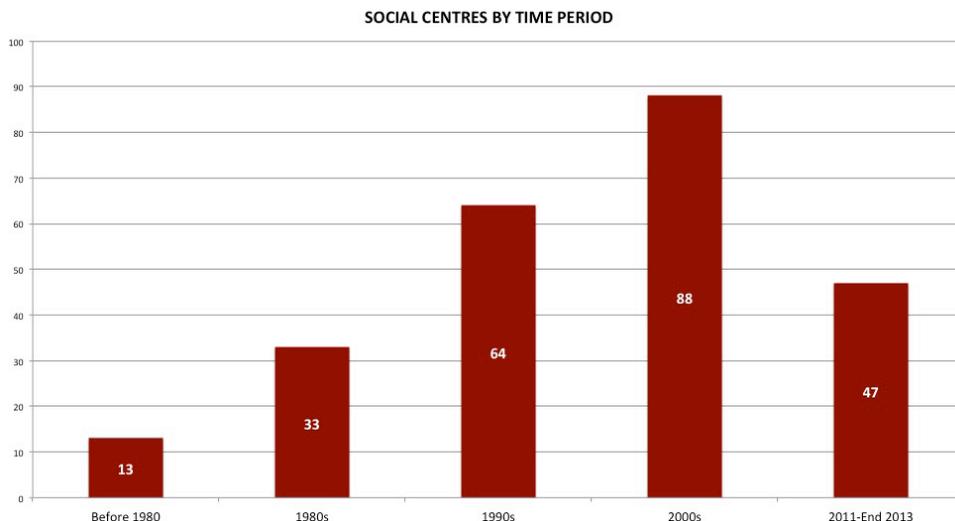
**Time period**

Looking at the bar chart below documenting in what time period social centres were occupied, some observations can be made.

Firstly, if the 1980s were the heyday of the squatters movement in the UK then obviously the 33 recorded social centre projects merely scratch the surface of what was happening. However, it is difficult to gather meaningful data for this time, as mentioned above. Taking Brixton as an example, in the complex of streets around Railton Road, there were plenty of projects such as crèche, a cafe and a bookshop (Needle Collective, 2014). The Gay Liberation Front squatted a row of houses which remain today as a legalised housing co-operative, with the gardens joined together (Cook, 2013). It is probable there were many more unrecorded projects.

Secondly, 46 projects in just three years between the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2013 is an impressive number, particularly when it is remembered that squatting in residential buildings was criminalised in September 2012. It remains to be seen how criminalisation affects the squatters movement, since social centres are often in non-residential buildings as we have seen above, yet at the same time if less people are squatting generally, this may have an impact upon the number of social centres after the initial upsurge of activism against repression has withered away. Nevertheless, occupation remains a useful short term tactic in the activist repertoire, with some groups choosing to squat a building for a limited time period in order to focus upon a single issue campaign, for example Palestine Place, two Anti-Cuts spaces, the Really Free School (focused on education) and Open House (a radical housing conference). In addition, the House

*Image 4: Social centres by time period (BLUBS & Author)*



*Image 4*

of Brag queer social centre chose to organise a time-limited social centre (Sancroft Street) having experienced some rather fast evictions from previous locations.

Thirdly, the steady increase in numbers of social centres every decade up to 2011 is probably a reflection of the increasing ease of data collection as well denoting any particular pattern.

### ***Duration***

Regarding duration of projects, it is not possible to analyse projects coherently before 2001 since precise data is not available. For the time period 2001 until end 2010, there were 90 projects. The longest lasting projects were the Cheese Factory (60 months), Ramparts (66 months) and 491 Gallery (144 months); 29 had no reliable data regarding duration; three were ongoing at the end of 2013 (Grow Heathrow, Hounslow Community Land Project, Pogo (now Black Cat)). The one day Reclaim the Future and week long Temporary Autonomous Arts events were ignored as time-limited, leaving a total of 41 projects to analyse. This gives an average duration of 12.4 months.

For the time period 2011 – end 2013, there were a total of 46 projects. Six were still ongoing (195 Mare Street, Bohemia, Friern Barnet library, Rochester Square, Black Cat cafe) and for five no reliable data was found. Of the remaining 35, 14 were ignored since they were defined as time-limited projects (3xTemporary Autonomous Arts, 2xAnti-cuts projects, 5xReally Free School, Palestine Place, 2xHouse of Brag, Open House). This left 21 projects, which had a total duration measured in months of 62.75. This gives an average duration of 2.99 months, which fits the common perception that squats last for three months (see Needle Collective and Bash Street Kids, 2014). A similar figure was generated for the same time period regarding Brighton social centres, namely 3.1 months (Dec 2014b: 3.9).

### ***Cycles***

Now, having detailed my research and analysed the data in terms of location, type of building, time period and duration, I shall move on to considering what this means in terms of cycles, contexts and institutionalisation processes of the squatters movement.

There are different and interlinked strands of squatting in London such as punk, tekno, traveller, political, homeless activism, immigrant, all with many crossovers. Some do not feature in the database since for example tekno squats are often either residential only or short term rave venues, rather than social centre type projects. This makes it in some ways difficult to track cycles of movement(s) since they are so diffuse. For example Rob, interviewed at the Hackney Squatters Centre in the mid-1990s by Wakefield and Grrrt for their pamphlet 'Not for Rent', stated that there was not so much a movement but rather “different groupings of people” (1995: 34). He goes on to comment:

There's another group that do pubs, that came out of the Neville Arms. They like doing one-off places. They'll do a rave and in one room there'll be a punk gig and they'll have a bar. That group finds this place a bit too political. They see themselves as being 'post-modernists' or 'post-politics' or something. I don't know. People can meet up here and have a meal and maybe it's too quiet for them, it's not full-on (1995: 34).

In the 1990s, punk squatters, building on the autonomy centres mentioned earlier tended to occupy large buildings such as pubs (Black Bull/Boule) or convents (Lady Flo). These were used as music venues and rehearsal spaces. Occasionally these were illegally evicted in a police riot, with many people getting beaten up and/or arrested by the police. This happened for example at the bank in Mile End, the Neville Arms pub in Stamford Hill and the Hell House, an occupied

factory in Southwark.

In more recent times, police violence has occasionally flared at squat party evictions but more notoriously convergence spaces for political actions have often been attacked. The Earl Street convergence space was raided during the G20 protests in 2009 by the Territorial Support Group (TSG). Similarly, the Stop G8 convergence space on Beak Street was raided and evicted in 2013.

In terms of politically active social centres, one early and particularly long-running example was the 121 Centre in Brixton (located on 121 Railton Road), squatted in the late 1970s and evicted in 1999. First occupied as a residential squat by Olive Morris and her partner Liz Obi, then a black bookshop (Sabaar), at a certain point in the early 1980s the 121 was born. The centre survived the Brixton riots without a scratch and provided a base for many groups. The Needle Collective record that:

It was used as a base by groups such as Brixton Squatters Aid, Brixton Hunt Saboteurs, Food not Bombs, Community Resistance Against the Poll Tax, Anarchist Black Cross, the Direct Action Movement, London Socialist Film Co-op, the Kate Sharpley Library, and the Troops Out Movement. There was a printing press in the basement which produced the feminist magazine *Bad Attitude*, the anarchist magazine *Black Flag*, and the squatters' newspaper *Crowbar*, among other publications (2014).

I can say then that it is difficult to discern cycles in the London squatters movement seen through the prism of squatted social centres, since the data is not complete enough to draw firm conclusions. However, with reference to previous works (Bailey, 1973; Dee, 2013, 2014c; Kearns, 1979; Kinghan, 1977; Needle Collective, 2014; Reeve, unpublished; Wates, 1976; Wates and Wolmar, 1980), I can hypothesise a crude outline of cycles, as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Cycles of the squatters movement*

<b>Time Period</b>	<b>Cycle</b>
Late 1960s – Early 1980s	Boom of squatting movement
Late 1980s – Early 1990s	Decline of squatting movement
Late 1990s – Early 2000s	Resurgence of squatting as tactic
Late 2000s - Early 2010s	New forms of activism
2012 onwards	Post-criminalisation

Whilst the number of projects listed from the late 1960s until the early 1980s would not itself justify the statement that in this time the squatting movement was booming, it is clear from the generally agreed numbers of people squatting in London and the examples supplied of squatted streets and areas, that there were various squatters communities in London (Bailey, 1973; Dec, 2014c; Needle Collective, 2014; Reeve, unpublished; Wates, 1976; Wates and Wolmar, 1980).

Throughout the 1980s, this movement declined, although as we have seen there were different groups such as punk squatters occupying varied types of building to use as venues and anarchist squatters founding what can now be seen as early versions of social centres. Perhaps it would be better to say the movement declined following repression and then resurged in the 1980s, as Lucy Finchett-Maddock claims (2014: 223), but there is insufficient evidence for this and overall it seems the movement was declining after its heyday.

In the 1990s, the alter-globalisation movement brought together disparate strands of activism such as hunt saboteurs, ravers, travellers and environmental protestors (as we shall see below, one important factor bringing these groups together was repression). The transnational nature of this new social movement brought social centres in the contemporary sense to the UK and I have mentioned just some of the many examples of occupied social centres in London, a tradition which continues into the present day. As a side strand, the difficulty of maintaining squats for long time periods led to the formation of owned or rented social centres, such as LARC in London. No doubt if property prices were not higher, there would be more of these projects.

Moving into the 2000s, anarchist social centres are frequent (and easier to track since they still exist both on the internet and in the collective memory). Squatting becomes a tactic more frequently used as part of a single issue campaign and/or as a time-limited event. Talk once again of criminalisation led to an upsurge in political projects and the introduction of the law forbidding the squatting of residential buildings has had effects which are as yet difficult to discern. Even though squatters occupy many sorts of buildings which are not defined as residential, the effects of criminalisation run deep in terms of how all actors (police, state, media, squatters, activists) view the changed situation, as we shall see below. This has begun a new cycle, but (writing in 2015) it is still too early to judge what this means.

### ***Contexts***

In terms of the contexts for squatting, we have already touched on several factors, and I will now examine two in detail, namely criminalisation and gentrification.

### ***Criminalisation***

The criminalisation of squatting has been threatened several times and was ultimately achieved in partial form in September 2012, when living in a squatted residential building was declared illegal. It is still too early to assess the full impact of this, although anecdotally it appears squatters now tend to occupy non-residential property. There have also been protest squats in Brighton and London testing the new law by attempting to query the legal definitions of “living” and “residential.” Previously, occupation had been a civil offence which would result in the owner of the property taking the squatters to court to regain possession, a process which tended to take about three months or more. Squatters could fight the court case by pleading technicalities, which could sometimes prolong the occupation but in most occurrences they would be evicted eventually (for more information see Finchett-Maddock, 2014).

With the so-called ‘right to squat’ having been established by housing activists carefully using existing laws in their favour in the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Bailey, 1973), by the late 1970s there was a concentrated attack on squatting, which was repulsed through the strength of the

squatting movement itself and also the links it had made with other groups such as trade unions, since any proposal to amplify existing laws on trespass or occupation were seen as having an impact upon events such as office occupations. A group called the Campaign Against a Criminal Trespass Law was set up by squatters and sympathisers and “attracted a great deal of support from workers and students who were occupying their places of work and study” (Finchett-Maddock, 2014: 218). The plan to criminalise squatting was defeated, although the Criminal Law Act of 1977 did include several clauses which tightened the existing laws: it was forbidden to occupy embassies; if the squat was empty, then there was no-one to oppose the entry of the owner and thus possession could be regained; the term Protected Intending Occupier was introduced to ensure people who had a valid contract which was just about to commence were able to remove squatters quickly; the Displaced Residential Occupier was protected (in the extremely rare cases when squatters occupied a house which was actually in use) (Finchett-Maddock 2014: 219-220, Reeve, unpublished: 95-96). A comic loophole was also closed at this time. Previously, owners had been required to list by name the persons whom they wished to take to court in order to regain possession, so squatters had become expert both in remaining anonymous and switching squats following court cases so as to avoid eviction. Now it would suffice for the court case to be brought against 'persons unknown'.

The next serious attempt to criminalise squatting was the Criminal Justice Bill, which became law in 1996. In its attempt to introduce a new offence of aggravated trespass and to target hunt saboteurs, animal rights activists, New Age Travellers, anti-roads protestors, squatters and ravers, the bill united disparate alternative movements into a coalition of resistance. SQUASH (Squatters Action for Secure Homes) was formed and the attempts to criminalise squatting eventually watered down into the introduction of the IPO (Interim Possession Order) which made evicting squatters easier and faster for the owner.

The Land Registration Act of 2002 altered the basis of adverse possession, the long-standing doctrine enshrined in law which permitted possession to become legal ownership when the occupier lived in or used a location for 12 consecutive years, without the permission of the owner yet with their knowledge. Squatters have successfully gained ownership of their residences in this way, whereas the 121 Centre was unable to prove continuous occupation and thus failed to do so. It is also worth noting that most cases of adverse possession involve land disputes in which one owner encroaches upon a neighbour's land, and thus whilst technically a squatter in the eyes of the law, the protagonist is not at all connected with the squatting movement (as for example with the case *Pye vs UK*, which went all the way to the European Court of Human Rights).

In any case, the situation now (in brief and only regarding registered land) is that after ten years the squatter is required to notify the Land Commission of a claim for possession and the Commission will make strenuous efforts to tell the owner, with the result that the owner will take the squatter to court in order to regain possession. Whilst adverse possession for squatters from the squatting movement is thus still possible, in practice it seems another loophole has been closed. As Cobb and Fox relate, “the Law Commission has clearly identified squatters as morally 'blameworthy'” (2007: 46):

Consequently, the preferable course of action for the urban squatter, on the presumption that they are likely to value continued use and occupation, over an action for title that is probably doomed to fail, must be to protect their future use of the property for as long as possible by staying outside the system (2007: 48).

This points to a factor which has become increasingly important in discourses surrounding

urban squatting, namely the dominance of a hegemonic discourse which frames squatters as a threatening other, indeed a folk devil, in need of juridical repression (see Dee, 2013). In this way squatters are robbed of political agency and simply treated as common criminals by the police and the state (Dadusc and Dee, 2015: 131).

### **Gentrification**

Ruth Glass famously coined the phrase gentrification in 1964 when she discussed how “all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district has changed” (1964: p.xviii). She was discussing the specific situation in London and the changes to the city in the fifty years since she made this assertion have been dramatic, bearing out her analysis and being identified in other capital cities as a pattern of urban change. Chris Hamnett observes that there has been “a dramatic cultural and lifestyle switch which favours inner-city living which is linked to the changes in economy, occupational class and earnings structure of London and other similar cities such as New York, Paris and Sydney” (2003: 2424). Writing with Tim Butler, Hamnett states that “the traditional Fordist industrial city, characterised by a large, skilled and semi-skilled white working class, is now largely a thing of the past” (2013: 197).

Definitions of gentrification have been expanded by thinkers such as Neil Smith and Peter Marcuse but Kate Shaw comments that “in the many different expressions, one thing is common: people who cannot afford to pay are not welcome and homeless people are moved on” (2008: 2). Indeed, Hamnett comments that “In London, gentrification has almost completely transformed Notting Hill, Islington, and parts of Hackney where the housing stock consists of larger Victorian terraced houses” (2003: 2422). Writing about gentrifiers in Barnsbury, a district in Islington which he describes as “one of the iconic sites of middle-class living”, Butler points out how they are exclusively white and fail to mix with the ethnically mixed working class residents who they are displacing (2003: 2484). Indeed, “gentrification has not so much displaced the working class as simply blanked out those who are not like themselves” (Butler 2003: 2484).

Gentrification is obviously a factor affecting squatting, which necessarily requires derelict buildings for occupation. As gentrification occurs, the availability of empty spaces decreases, but this is far from a smooth process, since levels of emptiness may increase temporarily as areas are demolished or left awaiting renovation. Squatters tend to serve as a social actor fighting speculation and highlighting dereliction in all areas of London, from the poorest to the richest. As one example of a social centre in a highly gentrified area, I can suggest the Really Free School, which occupied an empty mansion belonging to millionaire film-maker Guy Ritchie at Rathbone Place (Dee, 2013).

Squats may often occur as protests against urban changes such as demolitions of Council housing or construction of supermarkets, but their precarious, short-lived nature makes it difficult to reach conclusions about contexts apart from stating that squatting is and has been a consistent part of the urban landscape in London.

The twin contexts of gentrification and criminalisation demonstrate that squatting has become more difficult in practice in recent years both as a result of repression and of the decreasing availability of places to occupy. As London has gentrified, traditional strongholds of squatting such as Lambeth and Hackney have been converted into up-and-coming areas, with Elephant & Castle being the current focus of the struggles against gentrification. Yet these are large areas and gentrification is far from being a smooth process; the database does indicate that squatting still occurs in Hackney and Lambeth.

However, as property prices continue to rise, the case of Lambeth shows that even buildings reclaimed forty years ago by squatters are not safe. The Needle Collective (2014) detailed several

instances of houses which Lambeth Council now wants to sell off, since it has decided to raise funds by selling off all its so-called short-life properties. For example Maritza Tschepp occupied a house that was marked for demolition, reconnected it to the mains water supply and repaired the roof. She raised her children in the house and at a certain point in the 1980s signed a short-life contract with the Council which it terminated in 2009. As the Needle Collective comment “The argument that the house actually belongs to the Council does not hold much weight considering the length of time Tschepp has lived there and the money and energy she has expended upon it” (2014).

Whilst places are still gutted so as to be made unliveable, just as in previous decades, improved security such as metal doors, alarms and even use of guards means that emptiness is protected better than in the past. Indeed companies such as Sitex Orbis do very good business in securing properties. In addition, the recent phenomenon of anti-squat living, in which people sign a use agreement to live in a place for a cheap “rent” whilst abandoning any sort of rental rights, again makes less places available for occupation.

Thus we can see in the case of London that repressive legislation, increased property guardianship and the inexorable rise of property prices (reflected in the gentrification of swathes of places previously seen as squatters' paradises) mean that despite high levels of both emptiness and homelessness, squatting as a phenomenon has declined, even though plentiful examples of short-lived projects still exist.

### ***Institutionalisation Processes***

In terms of institutionalisation processes it is actually quite rare to see social centres which successfully legalise, indeed the aforementioned 121 Centre did at one stage obtain the chance to legalise but refused, and then was ultimately evicted. This is in contradistinction to residential squats, many of which have been legalised. In recent times, the 56A infoshop stands out as one example of a successful and still extant legalisation process but as a result of the high price of land in London even projects which have achieved a form of legitimacy through longevity and community involvement such as the 491 Gallery and the Spike Surplus Project have eventually been evicted. Thus I can say that institutionalisation does not really occur to any great degree and thus cannot really be studied regarding squatted social centres, although the co-operatively owned or rented centres could be analysed as a separate phenomenon. And we have already discussed another response to the difficulty of founding long-term projects, namely the intentionally short-lived social centre.

Other European cities such as Amsterdam and Berlin have a substantial amount of places which were squatted in the 1980s or 1990s and that survive into the present day, often in a legalised form. This gives the local squatters movements spaces in which to organise and socialise (for more on this see Cattaneo and Martinez, 2014). However, this is not the case regarding London and thus difficult to say much more about institutionalisation. There were of course the amnesties, most famously the GLC (Greater London Council) amnesty of 1977 in which an estimated 4000 squatters ended up in legalised housing (Reeve, unpublished: 96). Whilst actions of this sort mainly affected residential squats, they can be seen as a factor affecting the movement as a whole and indeed one reason for its decline, since once legalised, squatters lost their radical and antagonistic identity. It is also important to note that many other squatters were critical of legalisation processes, and instead continued to occupy and defend unlicensed squats.

Regarding the institutionalisation of political squats, Miguel Martinez talks of three forms namely integration, consolidation or the creation of anomalous institutions, which would respectively represent the death of the project, an awkward assimilation or the fashioning of

a continuing radical identity (2014: 4-6). On this schema the amnesties would appear to be an example of integration, which “tends to end up in both the total disappearance of the movement and the regular adoption of institutional means by its former members” (2014: 4).

## Conclusions

With 30,000 squatters in London in the mid 1970s (Wates, 1976: 183-4) it is clear that this was the heyday of the movement, as is the case for other Western European capitals such as Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen and Zurich (Kriesi et al, 1995). For reasons which are hard to fathom but presumably connected to the legalisation of many residential squats, the political movement subsided and withered away, leaving many hard-won legalised places (the victory) and not very much political heritage or collective memory (the defeat). In terms of institutionalisation processes, whilst projects from some of the formerly squatted areas of the 1970s and 1980s have survived as legalised entities, such as the Bonnington Cafe and the People's Hall in the former Frestonia, many other long-term spaces have eventually been evicted and this process continues as property prices rocket.

Analysis of the database shows that 44% of all projects were based in the boroughs of Hackney and Lambeth, both considered strongholds of squatting in previous times. Today, if we look at the gentrification literature with its specific references to changes in the urban landscape and if we consider the reclamation by Lambeth Council of properties it basically had forgotten about and handed to squatters in previous times, it is plain that we now live in a very different world. To take one example, by the time of its eventual eviction in 1999, the 121 Centre in Brixton was located in a gentrifying area which did not bear much similarity to the so-called Frontline of the 1970s and 1980s, when the Brixton Riots occurred on the 121's doorstep (Needle Collective, 2014). This dramatic change goes some way to explaining why when the eviction occurred there was much more international solidarity flooding in than local support.

If the political squatting movement is to survive as a housing movement in the future, it seems that squatters will need to move to boroughs further from the centre, since inner London has been so comprehensively developed (although this is not to say that there are no empty or derelict buildings left in central London of course). In fact some early squats were in outer London, so perhaps the cycle of squatting will merely come full circle and eventually squatters will move back into the ruins of the inner-city again.

Finchett-Maddock states that “since the 1970s and 1980, and in the lead up to 2012, there has been an encroaching shift towards the removal of squatters' rights from English law” (2014: 223). Moreover, the impact of criminalisation of squatting in residential buildings has yet to be seen in full, we are still too close to the date of implementation to see how all the actors will behave and react. It seems unlikely that squatting will be repressed entirely since as Kesia Reeve states “the history of squatting is a history of housing crisis” (2015: 133) and currently the UK housing situation is getting worse, not better, as a consequence of years of Government inaction and incompetence.

Whilst the contexts of repression and gentrification mean that it is harder to squat than it used to be, many social centres have been recorded in recent years and we have seen various responses to the short-term life expectancy of squats, including the decision simply to make the project itself short-term. Providing a wide range of resources for the alter-globalisation movement as well as local initiatives, squatted social centres are integral components in what George McKay calls “the line of living, indeed thriving, cultures of resistance, ones that offer their resistance through direct action” (1996: 158).

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