Squatters Occupy a Berlin Apartment Building (1981)

Abstract

The squatters' movement that started in the late 1970s was motivated by concerns both political and personal. On the one hand, the movement attracted those who wished to protest the lack of affordable housing and the negative effects of postwar urban renewal. On the other hand, however, it also appealed to some young people who were primarily interested in escaping both parental control and the burden of paying rent. For some members of the counterculture, occupying empty apartment buildings was a way to create a sphere of youthful freedom. But it was also a source of endless conflict with landlords and police, who insisted on the observance of private property rights.

Source

From House to House—Studying a Berlin Movement

According to everything I heard, our occupation was among the better planned ones. This planning basically consisted of "checking out" the house: from the owner, to the state of planning, down to the chances of gaining entry.

We met three times in various combinations in order to get acquainted and make preparations. A few dropped out, others brought along friends. Certainly, each of us thought at least once that the whole thing would remain nothing more than a nice dream. At the time of the occupation, just exactly who would be moving in, and who would rather retreat to the status of "supporter", was as unclear as our notion of what would happen to the house in the long run.

But then, one morning at six-thirty, we simply went in. We brought along the most basic tools, flashlights, stoves with pipes, leaflets, a big breakfast, banners, and two new locks.

When a new lock is on the door and the banners are fluttering from the windows, then the house is considered occupied. That's important. For the police are under instructions to do their utmost to prevent new house occupations, but also to keep their hands off those already occupied.

It's cold and dark. We're excited: will the cops immediately throw us out again? We shine our flashlights into empty rooms, junk is lying around. We start tidying up the most well-maintained apartment. A press conference is supposed to be held at 11:00 a.m.

The people on the street are going to work. We are celebrating the occupation with small chocolate cakes and champagne, which we offer them along with the leaflets. "Another one already?" This is already the fifth occupied house. "Well, in a way you're right, eh? Cheers then!" We seldom run into real disapproval. "Just no rocks, lads, and then I think it's all right too." — "I was almost expecting this," says a man from the neighborhood, "it's a nice little house, eh?" The leaflets are gone within two hours, the champagne even faster. We unload the stoves and building materials. At the press conference, the talk is of shameless speculation, the housing shortage, and irresponsibility. The journalists must have nearly memorized all that stuff about the 80,000 people looking for housing and the 10,000 empty apartments. They're looking for something unusual. How about that one banner—the one that says: "Squatting is hot!" What's that supposed to mean?

At some point the cops arrive, or to be more precise: two COBs, cops on the beat. Is the house still occupied? Stupid question, just take a look. All right, and they're not allowed to enter anyway? Exactly.

Got it. At the precinct station we'll now be entered on the appropriate list. For a few days, two plainclothes policemen in their VW Golf are acting as if they just happened to be standing in front of our house purely by accident in order to get a picture of the squatters.

In the meantime, every day the postman brings us the TAZ[1], and the coal merchant has put us on his list of customers. One day, the manager of the dry-cleaning business across the street comes by with a big plastic bag. The first wash is free, he says, and adds, "You've got to keep clean." Armed with an old sofa and two homemade pies, two grandmas from the old people's home next door show up: "To good neighbors!" They are completely overwhelmed by their own courage, as are we. At some point, a carton of slightly bruised vegetables is sitting on the wall separating us from the supermarket next door. In the meantime, we have started playing occasional soccer games against the Bolle[2] team.

One day, even the gentlemen from "Neue Heimat,"[3] which doesn't know what to do with our house anyway, turns up. He is totally happy that he's allowed to come in. "Usually, they don't even talk with me," he says sadly. Otherwise, he doesn't have much to say. "It's all high-level politics now; we just have to wait and see what the outcome is."

Meanwhile, it's turned to summer. In the garden, the grass (no, not the lawn) sprouts up. Everyone has his own room, and the first house-meetings and the first departures are already a thing of the past. We've built a little cottage for the transvestites who lure johns along our fence; it even has a wastebasket for Tempo tissues.[4] As a way of saying thanks, at the party celebrating the six-month anniversary of the occupation, one of them got on stage and gave us a striptease of the type he performs for the pleasure of otherwise sex-starved Turks in a nightclub two blocks away. The radical faction that wanted to offer the "Transis" an apartment on the ground floor didn't get its way. Instead, a baby group moved in there recently.

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The house next door is certainly the next one scheduled for evacuation. The "Neue Heimat" wants to add three floors of low-income housing to the front building. The cooperative has already written several letters to the "Dear Users"—letters in which they were urged to "voluntarily hand over the front building." In case they needed apartments, "Neue Heimat" would be prepared to accommodate them elsewhere. Initially, they could move to the side wing and the back building, and if they were interested, their banners could be fastened to the front building's scaffolding. The squatters replied that they were adequately supplied with toilet paper, and that they weren't thinking of yielding to the cooperative's requests. "Neue Heimat" also wants to modernize the side wing and the back building, the spaces into which they would have the squatters moved. But that would take place in six to nine months. "Until then they are welcome to stay," the redevelopment commissioner tells me.

The twenty squatters who inhabit the block of about 80 rooms are a colorful mixture. In addition to university and high school students, [they include] unemployed youth, punks, a Maharishi disciple and a bank clerk. There is a lot of fluctuation in the house. Only three of the original squatters are still living there. A group of homeless people, "Berbers" as they call themselves, originally lived in the front building; they had moved in with the support of an agency and the accompanying publicity. Their resistance to negotiations with "Neue Heimat" was not that great. They were more interested in holding on to the roof above their heads; they had furnished some of their digs rather smartly. The majority in the house, however, categorically rejected negotiations or moving out of the front building voluntarily. They don't see any chance of keeping the house when the cops come. We'll see.

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NOTES

[1] TAZ: a leftist alternative daily newspaper—trans.
[2] Bolle: Berlin supermarket chain—trans.
[3] “Neue Heimat”: the trade union-owned building cooperative—trans.
[4] Tempo: the German equivalent of Kleenex tissues—trans.

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