



Homeless families living in squatted building. Porto Alegre, Brazil

## Squatting Spaces

In the broadest sense, to squat means to occupy a space that is poorly utilized, or not used at all, and transform it. Squatting is an ancient practice, ongoing since there have been empty buildings or unused land. Wherever you find inadequate housing, a lack of meaningful public space, or landless people in rural areas, you will also find squatters.

Long perceived as dirty low-lives who just want a free ride, squatters have developed a world-wide social movement, challenging capitalist notions of property while providing an impetus for self-determination, independence, experimentation, and creativity.

One of the earliest documented groups of squatters were the Diggers in England. Declaring that "the earth is a common

treasury for all", they took over unused land in 1649 to farm it communally. They hoped that their ideas and practice would spread, and that property owners would surrender their estates and join their communal living project. Although they were eventually evicted, their vision lingers on.

Modern examples of squatting are found in Brazil, where landless peasants have reappropriated millions of acres of unused farmland, in Manhattan, where a diverse mix of young punks, immigrants, and the local homeless occupy tenement buildings; and in Italy, where there is a vast network of squatted social centres – community hubs for activism, art, youth, and free living space.

Squatting exists everywhere, not only in the places where it has developed into a social movement. Squatters become masters at living in the in-between spaces, the cracks in the system – sometimes living furtively, blankets covering the windows so no light spills out, other times decorating with bright murals and colourful banners, proudly proclaiming a liberated space for all. Anyone, from anywhere, can squat. It just takes a few determined people who yearn for free space to play with, or live in – or both!

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#### **How to squat:**

##### **1) Form an affinity group**

It's no fun to squat alone, and can be downright dangerous.

##### **2) Name your desires**

Do you want living space? A social centre or community space? Something temporary, for a publicity stunt or a party? A convergence centre for an action? A secret hideout for you

and your friends? Clear goals from the beginning can help you select an appropriate site. Preparedness and planning are key, before you actually break any locks.

##### **3) Learn local laws**

Do some research on your area and, if possible, talk to local squatters. Legal issues and local tolerance are different everywhere; it's best to know what you're up against, and what will work to your advantage. For example, in the UK, once you're in and change the locks, it becomes a civil matter and the police can't remove you from the premises without taking you to court. However in most US cities, the cops are more likely to kick your head in, so different tactics are necessary.

##### **4) Select your site**

Explore a few different places. Choose wisely. Ensure that the site is unoccupied, and carefully assess the best way of

gaining entry. From this you can determine what tools you'll need. Bolt cutters for locks are great, yet unwieldy; crowbars are essential. Try to do as little damage as possible while cracking (opening) the place; if you're successful, it will be your home, and you'll have to fix whatever you break!

##### **5) Fix 'er up**

Once you've changed the locks and secured the place, the real work begins. If possible reconnect the electricity and water (if you don't know how, get help). Then, redecorate! Feel free to knock out walls, paint murals on the ceiling, and move the bathtub into the living room if you want. The space is yours.

Another crucial thing to consider is your profile in the neighbourhood. Sometimes survival depends on total secrecy, other times, on community support. If you decide to meet your

neighbours, be friendly and open about your intent. Some squats provide community services, and are known as 'social centres'. People might be stand-offish initially, but may warm up once they realize that you aren't running a crack house. However, they may be opposed to your presence and make you pack up and try a different place. Squatting requires experimentation and perseverance; its lifeblood is the commitment to reclaiming space, and the rebel pioneer spirit which fuels us to take control of our lives in yet another way.

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#### **Resources:**

» **International internet magazine focusing on squatted houses and other free spaces:**  
[www.squat.net](http://www.squat.net)

» **Information from the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) who have run a daily advice service for squatters and homeless people in the UK since 1975:**  
[www.squat.freeserve.co.uk](http://www.squat.freeserve.co.uk)