

Self managed Housing

The ultimate goal of any resistance housing is to turn it into self-managed housing, free from harassment of either landlords or the State. But how do you convert a squat or occupied building into a comfortable, secure, long-term home controlled by the people who live there?

It's a goal that can be as close as the support of a strong community organization, or just another pipe dream foiled by a lack of planning and back-up resources.

Many a squat has floundered, the building lost, because the occupants failed to come up with a practical proposal, possible financing sources, or even community backing at a critical moment. It's too late to discuss negotiations when the wrecking ball is at the door.

Yet occasionally, squatters find themselves face-to-face with a landlord or the State, forced through public pressure, to negotiate a building takeover, or alternative housing proposal with them. Is resistance housing then something to work with? Can it be secured in the best interests of the occupants? Or is it just another marginal experiment doomed to failure?

If the occupants want something more than another short-lived crash pad, they have to figure out a means to transform occupancy into control. Usually, in the shadow of the private property system, 'ownership' is equated with 'control'. This means that unless the building occupants want to pack up and move when the crunch comes, legal ownership of their space - whether it is an abandoned apartment building or an occupied empty house - may present itself as a serious, debatable long-term objective.

If people want to turn the space into low-cost, social housing, then they embark on the long twisted road to legal control of the property.

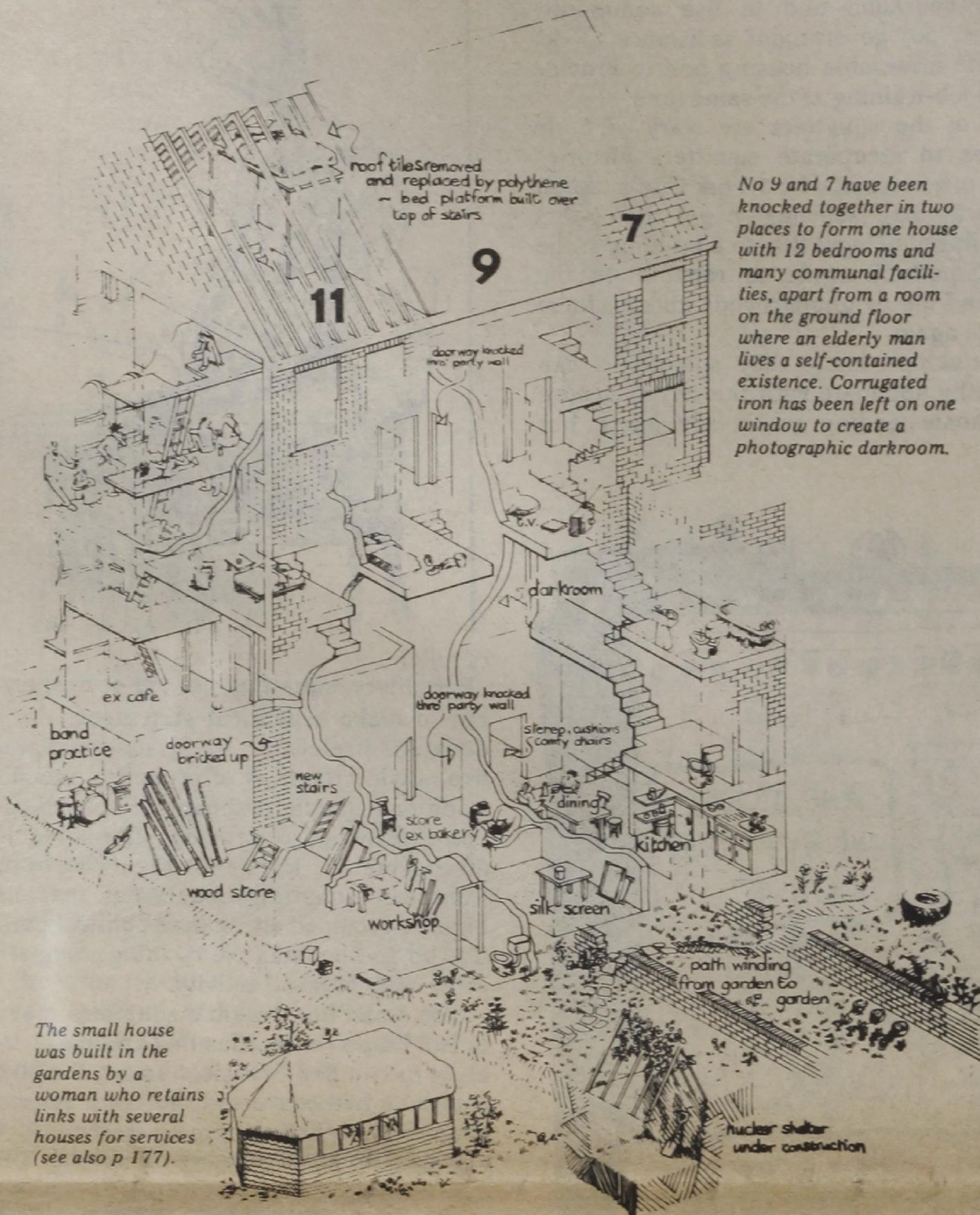
A non-profit housing coop can be one of the more likely possibilities. The occupants would aim to negotiate to buy and convert their building into a limited equity, non-profit coop that removes the property from the real estate market and guarantees its availability and affordability as future resident controlled housing.

It should be remembered though, that they do not necessarily give tenants full control, but as a compromise en route to full control, they can beat tramping the streets at the mercy of landlords and the housing market.



Buying a building and converting it to a coop is a long and difficult task that requires financing and skills. The skills can be learned. The hard part is coming up with the money, or, convincing the State or the community that self-managed housing in this instance is in everyone's best interests. It can prevent a confrontation, or further

Practically gutted by fire, No 11 was converted into a cafe/meeting room/dancing space/theatre on three floors with platforms at split levels. It was later converted into 3 bedrooms because of pressure of space and lack of communal maintenance.



The small house was built in the gardens by a woman who retains links with several houses for services (see also p 177).

confrontation; it can house homeless people; it can contribute to neighborhood stability; it can save a decent building.

But serious resistance housing in the end, means talking big money, something foreign to most activists.

'Creative financing techniques' can become an important part of a resistance housing scenario. Can tenants get into a 'leasing cooperative', forming a partnership with outside investors (like community groups or trade unions) that allows the partnership to own the building and lease it on a long term basis to the tenants through their cooperative corporation?

These are important questions for any long-term housing project. There are others:

- operating costs tend to jump up sharply when properties are first converted and renovated;
- tenants have to grapple with major financial questions even before a purchase, such as, is the price fair, what are the operating costs, upgrading costs, can the tenants afford the increase in rent (after, let us say they have been rent-striking for a roll-back in rents), is there financing available, subsidies for low income residents, how many tenants can afford to stay after the renovations;
- where will the money come from: the State, the community, many federal government programs that once financed and subsidized coops are ending.

It's also important for housing activists to beware getting stuck with someone else's bad investment, taking over substandard housing that is not affordable in the long run because of the amount of upgrading required.

Despite all the effort to set up a coop housing project, coop members in the end are still confronted with unavoidable contradictions, like being their own landlords and having to raise their own rents to meet the needs of outside financial institutions. There is no way around this one. And without the

NO OIL
NO HEAT
NO WALLS
NO RENT

alternative of coop housing many properties would be lost to condo conversions and the speculative market, reducing the affordable housing stock even more.

At least with coop housing, tenants have an opportunity to develop a working model of self-managed housing where mutual aid and self-reliance can be practiced day to day, on the homefront, without living under the threat of a landlord's next whim.

The much criticized 'sweat equity' programs of New York, where workers/tenants are paid by the State to rehabilitate abandoned, unoccupied buildings means they may be able to bring the rehab costs down somewhat, but it still leaves lower income families hard-pressed to afford the prices of the renovated properties.

Community ownership and control of ur-

RESOURCES

For more on direct action approaches to housing, check out the following:

BOOKS:

(there is very little about squatting in North America, much more about tenants' rights.)

• **Squatter's Handbook**, published by the Advisory Service for Squatters, 2 St Pauls Road, London, N1 England. \$2 US each.

(Though English, contains much practical info about breaking and entering buildings and general squatting maintenance.)

• **Squatting, the Real Story**, edited by Nick Wates and Christian Wolmar; 1980, Bay Leaf Books. (The best book on squatting available, even though it's completely English.)

• **Housing, An Anarchist Approach**, by Colin Ward, Freedom Press, 1976.

• **The Tenant Survival Book**, by Emily Jane Goodman; Bobbs-Merrill Co.; 1972. (Excellent how-to book for tenants)

• **Homelessness in America; A Forced March to Nowhere**; by Mary Ellen Hombs and Mitch Snyder; 1982; published by Community for Creative Non-violence, 1345 Euclid St, NW, Washington DC; \$5 USA

• **Displacement: How to Fight It**, by Chester Hartman, Dennis Keating, etc.; published by Legal Services Anti-Displacement Project, 1982; \$10 USA from National Housing Law Project, 2150 Shattuck Ave #300, Berkeley, CA, 94704.

PERIODICALS

• **Brix and Bottles**, c/o 1369 Haight St, San Francisco, CA, 94118; \$1 USA; an irregular San Francisco squatters newsletter.

• **City Limits**, 424 W 33rd St, New York, NY 10001, USA; \$2 USA. (An excellent urban monthly, full of news about the NY housing situation.)

• **Planners Network Newsletter**; 1901 Que St., NW, Washington, DC 20009, U.S.A.; (A monthly newsletter for radical planners with useful listings of current housing books and periodicals.) \$1 US

• **Crowbar**; Squatting news from Brixton; c/o BM Box Hurricane, London, England, WC1; (anarchist squatting news) \$1 US

FILMS AND VIDEOS

• **Guide to community Media**, (an annual) from Media Network, 208 W 13th St, New York, NY 10011; (An excellent resource guide listing more than a dozen titles on squatting, rent strikes, resisting evictions, and more. \$2.50 plus postage. Highly recommended.)

ARTICLES/PAMPHLETS

• **The Alternative Press Index**, available in any good public library—lists hundreds of articles on resistance housing subjects.

• **Rent, an Injustice**; a pamphlet from The Match, POB 3488, Tucson, Arizona, 85722, USA \$1

• **The Expropriation of Dwellings**, by Peter Kropotkin, 1882, reprinted in his book, **The Conquest of Bread**. A classic essay worth reading.

ban land trusts seems to offer another way out beyond single coop building ownership, but so far, this isn't a highly developed alternative. Communities are still having problems raising money and resources independent of the State.

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