



**Fig. 1. Areas of housing in poor physical condition and overcrowding in Inner London. Based on 1966 Housing Survey, Greater London Development Plan, 1969, Greater London Council.**

## Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney *by Christine Wall*

To walk through Islington, Camden and Hackney in the early 1970s was to walk along street after street of soot-blackened, late Georgian and Victorian terraces and villas, boarded up and left semi-derelict. In 1971 Greater London contained 23,100 empty dwellings awaiting demolition; twenty-nine percent of this housing stock was built before 1875 and sixty-seven percent between 1875 and 1919.<sup>1</sup> By the middle of the decade, thousands of these houses had been reclaimed and repaired by squatters, in a

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movement which re-emerged in the late 1960s and which, by 1976, was estimated to involve between twenty and thirty thousand people throughout Greater London.<sup>2</sup> This historic spatial configuration of the city allowed the social and political movements of the 1970s to flourish, as groups of like-minded people began to live and work in close proximity. For women, it enabled radical experiments in collective living and shared childcare and for some feminists, active in the women's liberation movement, it provided the framework for an extensive network of women-only housing, together with social and political spaces. This paper examines the origins of a community of women who moved in and squatted the streets surrounding Broadway Market and London Fields in Hackney during the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Through oral testimony, it uncovers the historical importance of this community to wider feminist politics in London, and the significance for women of taking control over their immediate built environment.

### SQUATTING IN INNER LONDON

A complex set of conditions caused the stalling of postwar planning and housing policy which, in turn, resulted in the empty, derelict streets of inner London in the 1970s: these have been investigated in detail by others.<sup>4</sup> However, one of the reasons was the success of what Andrew Saint has described as the London County Council's (LCC) 'policy of dispersal of its inhabitants'.<sup>5</sup> 'Dispersal' originated with Victorian reformers, with their horror of the slum and commitment to slum clearance. It continued into the twentieth century with Abercrombie and Forshaw's post WW2 plan for the relocation of a million people, and industry, from Inner London to satellite New Towns.<sup>6</sup> Postwar population decline was acute: between 1951 and 1961 Greater London lost about 54,000 people a year and between 1961 and 1966 this increased to an outflow of around 70,000 people a year.<sup>7</sup> These leavers were mostly young families with children moving out to the new towns and to suburbs on the outskirts of London. In the London Borough of Hackney between 1951 and 1966 the population fell by six percent, equivalent to 15,731 people moving out.<sup>8</sup>

For those who stayed in London there was a desperate shortage of decent housing. When the LCC was replaced by the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965, work on producing a new plan for the future of London began under the first Labour administration and continued from 1967 under the Conservatives. The Greater London Development Plan (GLDP), published in 1969, provided new data which revealed London's decline and proposed a framework for future development through improved transport, employment and housing.<sup>9</sup> However the GLDP housing strategy still identified large areas of nineteenth-century housing for clearance, to be replaced with new housing mainly in the form of flats.<sup>10</sup> The studies that made up the 1969 Plan identified five Inner London Boroughs – Tower Hamlets, Newham, Southwark, Lambeth and Hackney – as containing seventy percent of Inner London's unfit houses. These were houses which lacked the

three essential household amenities: exclusive use of their own water supply (including hot water), a bath, and an indoor toilet. In 1969, only thirty-six percent of Hackney households had all three amenities.<sup>11</sup> Housing unfit for human habitation was also identified 'by reason of their bad arrangement, or the narrowness or bad arrangement of the streets', with demolition deemed the most satisfactory method of dealing with these problems.<sup>12</sup> Houses within the proposed redevelopment and clearance areas were assessed by council surveyors and medical officers and served with compulsory purchase orders (CPOs).<sup>13</sup> The occupiers were then rehoused leaving behind empty and boarded-up properties, which in some boroughs were also partially destroyed to prevent reoccupation. This concentration of physical housing problems in the pre-1919 housing stock of the Inner London boroughs was graphically displayed in the Greater London Development Plan (1969), in a map which also depicts the areas where squatting communities established themselves in London (Fig. 1).

These conditions prompted a second wave of squatting in the 1960s, only a few decades after the mass organized squats in the years immediately following the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> The housing crisis was brought to media attention with the BBC television broadcast of Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* in 1966 (shown again in 1967 and 1968), which highlighted both the failure of local council waiting-lists for housing and the callous removal of children into care when mothers became homeless. In 1969 a carefully coordinated campaign in Redbridge, organized by the London Families Squatting Association (LFSA), helped families who were on the council waiting-list, but temporarily housed in hostels, to squat vacant council properties.<sup>15</sup> The success of LFSA's direct action in supporting a number of homeless families to repair and squat empty houses, the shocking levels of violence used in the evictions and condoned by the local council and the widespread media coverage that resulted, created more sympathetic attitudes towards squatting.<sup>16</sup> There was less support for squats portrayed by the media as 'hippy' enclaves and 144 Piccadilly became shorthand for these.<sup>17</sup> The squatting movement continued to grow as a grass-roots, spontaneous response to housing need. Although there was some attempt to centralize the movement it was largely run on left-libertarian and anarchist lines; however there was a good communication network between squatting communities, and some produced their own newsletters. A loose coalition of activists from different areas set up All London Squatters (ALS), forerunner of the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS). The minutes of their meetings, throughout the 1970s, give insights into constant battles with local councils against evictions and with the London Electricity Board over reconnecting supplies to squatted properties and also the sometimes difficult relationships with local tenants associations.<sup>18</sup> Squatting was usually based on the pragmatic decision to squat empty local-authority housing rather than individual, privately owned properties, since private landlords were notorious for organizing rapid evictions. Local councils owned large areas of properties,

and this enabled entire squatted communities to appear, as in North London, where over 400 squatters lived in Kentish Town.<sup>19</sup> By the 1970s there was also a growing awareness of the importance of conserving Georgian and Victorian terraced streets threatened with destruction and squatting was taken up enthusiastically by some young architects who appreciated the historic, architectural qualities of the threatened streets.<sup>20</sup> Articles appeared in the architectural press on how to modify terraced houses to allow communal living and documented community involvement between squatters and permanent local residents.<sup>21</sup> In some cases a more politically focused campaign emerged, as in the case of Tolmers Square, Euston, where an entire community of residents and squatters opposed private developers.<sup>22</sup>

A substantial amount of material on the squatting movement in Britain can now be found online, most of it written by men and much by those who were, and still are, actively engaged in squatting and housing activism. A new generation of historians are now beginning to examine the squatting archive. Rowan Milligan has questioned the idea, prevalent at the time and perpetuated in sociological literature and biographical accounts, that the serious business of revolutionary organizing was incompatible with the frivolity of 'new life-styles' supported by squatting.<sup>23</sup> She concludes that this was a false distinction that obscured the 'radical act of squatting itself'.<sup>24</sup> Critical literature on squatting in postwar London is scant. While Berlin has recently been examined in detail by Alexander Vasudevan there has, to date, been no thorough historical interpretation of the spatial history of squatting in London, its associated social and political movements, and its effect on urban development.<sup>25</sup> An analysis of the radical urban politics of squatting in the 1970s has the potential to connect twenty-first century 'occupy' movements, including feminists protesting the lack of safe housing for victims of domestic violence, with a longer historical perspective on housing struggles.

#### WOMEN-ONLY SQUATTING: 'ON THE VERGE OF A REVOLUTION'

Although there were many thousands of squatters in Inner London by the mid 1970s, little information on the gendered composition of these squatted households is available. Matt Cook has described the radical male gay squats set up in 1970s Brixton, and in his edited volume, *Queer Cities*, women-only squatting in Denmark and Finland is mentioned, but there are few accounts of the extensive women-only communities that flourished in London during the 1970s and into the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> They are mentioned, in passing, in some accounts of the women's liberation movement and also in autobiographical writing, but they have yet to be recognized as an important, specifically feminist, urban phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> The spatial organization of the women's liberation movement in Britain is a relatively recent subject of historical analysis, surprisingly so given that much early feminist writing analysed the oppressive architecture of nuclear-family households in both

suburban and metropolitan settings.<sup>28</sup> The antithesis of suburban life was found in the everyday, lived experience of women's squatted communities, which enabled collective living, shared childcare, and the means to live outside dominant power relations. Equally important at the time, was the act of engaging directly with the built environment, adjusting, repairing and adapting it by women and for women, and making these communities unique. Squats delineated a spatial framework for the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, providing for women's centres, refuges from domestic violence, workplaces, and nurseries as well as homes. Women-only houses began to appear in established areas of squats across London, to the north in the boroughs of Camden and Islington, to the east in Hackney and Tower Hamlets, to the west in Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea and in the south in Lambeth and Southwark. Brixton had a long history of squatting and in 1972 Olive Morris, feminist activist and founder member of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), squatted 121 Railton Road, an address which subsequently housed a range of community and political groups until the 1990s.<sup>29</sup>

Several of the women whose memories figure in this article and who were part of the women's liberation movement identified the emergence of radical feminism in the early 1970s as an important factor in their deciding to live in women-only housing. Radical feminism identified the root of women's oppression in the patriarchal power systems upholding male supremacy, the key argument formulated in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970). At the same time many lesbians who had been involved with the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) began politically organizing within the women's liberation movement after becoming angry and disillusioned with GLF men's lack of commitment to feminism.<sup>30</sup> However for most women the reality of squatting was a combination of housing need and feminist political action aligned with the broader aims of the squatting movement. Squatting provided a ready solution to the poor provision of housing for single mothers and single women, and for radical feminists there were political reasons for living with other women. Amanda Sebestyen, political journalist, activist and member of the *Spare Rib* collective, became active in the women's liberation movement in 1969 and in 1970 joined the first radical feminist group.<sup>31</sup>

And pretty soon in our separatist group, which included people who were lesbians and people who weren't and people who didn't know or were 'floating voters', as I used to call myself, we decided we wanted to live with other women...<sup>32</sup>

She remembered that the first house she squatted with other women, just off the Caledonian Road, had been lived in by a master tiler who had left a small shrine in the back garden created out of remnants of Victorian tiles: the women ensured its safety by arranging for it to be carefully dismantled

and removed to an industrial museum in Shropshire before they were evicted. Amanda lived in two women-only households.

...there was this tremendous feeling of possibility. It was a moment, it was about 1972, when everything seemed to be changing. It wasn't just us. It was all around us, and when you moved in the street, there was a whole world of different things happening. ... I felt there hadn't been anything like it since 1919 actually. It almost felt like something was boiling up and it was on the verge of a revolution, and they were putting up shutters in the gentlemen's clubs in Pall Mall, you know, in 1972, and then in 1973, things were moving back again.<sup>33</sup>

Lee Nurse was an electrician and feminist activist who had been involved with Gay Liberation Front since she was a teenager. She remembered how radical the concept of women-only housing seemed when it first appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It was very new. It certainly meant no men staying the night, brothers, fathers, whoever. But the concept of women-only housing, I think, first started in West London. A house in Faraday Road [North Kensington] was the first women's house, lived in by women who were in GLF, and before they split from the men in GLF. It was a very odd concept actually at the time and all the ideas around it seemed really radical... and that house became a very important lesbian separatist house.<sup>34</sup>

Frankie Green had also been part of GLF but left to focus on women's liberation. A feminist activist and musician, she began squatting with women who shared the political understanding that it was a means to gain control over the material basis of their lives and allow collective living and sharing of resources.<sup>35</sup> By the early 1970s there was a row of about six squats near Kings Cross on the Caledonian Road where Frankie lived in the women-only household which soon became an informal women's centre through the simple expedient of putting a sign outside saying 'Women's Centre' and offering free pregnancy tests. She remembers quite close contact with local women living in crowded conditions, often with small children, who had been on the Council waiting-list for years. Some of these women also starting squatting but these were short-lived households and there were frequent evictions by the Council, at that time implementing a policy of eviction rather than licensed squatting.

The legal process for eviction involved a named person being served a possession order. This was time-consuming for the council, and often squatters defended themselves in court, seizing the chance to make political statements about local boroughs' long waiting-lists and empty properties. Evictions were often violent and the police frequently supported the bailiffs, as Frankie Green recounted.

I remember getting to a place in Amhurst Road [Hackney] and the police had an enormous kind of. . . it must have been a telegraph pole they were using as a battering-ram, and there were women, loads of women and kids inside, and the screaming. . . It was really absolutely terrible, and I remember accosting one of the police. Amanda was with me, and I remember accosting the police and then we were all, you know, chucked in police vans and went off to. . . it must have been Stoke Newington Police Station I suppose. Anyway, so things like that happened fairly regularly.<sup>36</sup>

Housing need was particularly acute for single women with children. Lynne Harne was involved with the Claimants' Union in west London where she began squatting. In the 1980s she worked as Policy Officer for Rights of Women where she authored two books on lesbian mothers and the law.<sup>37</sup> She recounted the difficulties of finding somewhere to live in London:

After I had my daughter, it was bedsitters, but most of the private rented places didn't want children. And I can remember I was working for the Social Security Office, and they gave me the sack for being pregnant. It wasn't illegal to do this. There was no Sex Discrimination Act, although there had been the Equal Pay Act by then, in 1971, but they could actually sack me for being pregnant. And again, it was living basically in one room, with a tiny kitchenette and a separate toilet and bath, so that's why we did it. That's why we squatted because it was just like now. I think now is probably even worse because at least then some people could get council housing.<sup>38</sup>

Lynne, within a few years, had joined other women with children and began living in collective squats in Hackney, sharing not just childcare but a feminist, non-gendered approach to child upbringing.

#### BROADWAY MARKET: '... ALL THESE LOVELY HOUSES'

Throughout the 1960s the GLC had been using compulsory purchase orders to acquire properties around London Fields and Broadway Market (Hackney) in preparation for redevelopment. The area designated for development was bounded to the west by Queensbridge Road, to the north by Shrubland Road, to the east by Broadway Market while the Regent's Canal made up the southern boundary. By the early 1970s, as increasing numbers of houses became empty and small businesses moved out of the streets and market, an organized group of squatters started to move in. Broadway Market Squatters Association was set up in the early 1970s and acted as an interface between the squatting community and local authorities.

Until the mid 1970s volunteers ran a communal store-room where squatters could take what they needed from a collection of salvaged building materials, as well as a communal, untended shop, stocked with wholefood



**Fig. 2. Brougham Road north side. Reproduced with permission from Hackney Archives (Ref. P8456).**

basics like rice, flour and lentils where people weighed out and served themselves and left the appropriate cash in a box. Entry was by a key borrowed from a trusted squatter. This ended when the 'shop' was taken over as a fully occupied squat. These shared resources reflected the large number of squats at the time, most of them mixed-sex households, occupying as many as 200 to 250 houses in the streets to the south-east of Broadway Market.

It is not clear when the first women squatters moved into this area and set up women-only households but by the early 1970s there were a number of established women's squats. The community grew through word of mouth and personal connections within political groups and meetings. There was no antagonism from the mixed squats towards the increasing numbers of women who arrived to open up women-only houses, and feminist women who lived with men socialized with and worked alongside the women-only community. By the late 1970s an estimated fifty women-only households were scattered throughout the streets behind Broadway Market, including one continuous terrace of seven women's squats on Lansdowne Drive. The majority of these women identified as lesbians.

Jenny Norton and a friend heard about the women's squats at Kilburn Women's Centre after arriving in London with nowhere to live. She recalled



**Fig. 3. Brownlow Road south side. Reproduced with permission from Hackney Archives (Ref. P9985.18).**

attending a meeting of Broadway Market Squatters Association in 1974, held in a makeshift office in a squat.

It was mixed – there was a lot of men and a lot of women, and there were a lot of lesbians, but it was all mixed at that time, quite congenial, and someone was assigned to help us to go round to talk about which house would be good to open. People didn't open their squats to you. They helped you to open a new squat. At that time, it was big GLC-owned area and people who had been living in these houses were being moved out to the edge of London, and the whole area was going to be demolished, all these lovely houses around Broadway Market, hundreds of them. So there were a lot of empty houses.<sup>39</sup>

Other women arrived from living isolated lives in the countryside after hearing about Hackney on the feminist grapevine. Paddy Tanton arrived in 1976 after living on a croft in Scotland to discover a place that was 'urban and was full of lesbians and was extraordinary and vibrant and exciting ...and I was high as a kite on it really'.<sup>40</sup>

Lee Nurse was invited by a friend to live in a women-only squat in Marlborough Avenue in 1971 and over the following decade helped many women open houses in the nearby streets, her skills as an electrician making

her indispensable in establishing new households. Anny Brackx, at the time national organizer for CND and later a member of the *Spare Rib* collective, decided to move and become part of the women's squatting community in the early 1970s. She remembers the collective action of changing the lock on a front door as having especially symbolic significance, and there were always numerous Yale barrels and keys in circulation.<sup>41</sup> I was also told, by more than one woman, that quite frequently it was local residents who told lesbians when a house was going to become empty so that women could move in before it was tinned up. Existing residents did not want an empty property next door, which might become overrun with rats and contribute to the dereliction of the street. Lesbians were a recognizable group of new neighbours who repaired houses and, in many cases, put up blinds or net curtains. While these were primarily for their own privacy it also helped to make lesbian households indistinguishable from the rest of the street. This approach was quite different to other squatted communities in London, for example the gay men's squats in Brixton, or the large mixed community of Frestonia in Notting Hill, where community meeting-places, shops, playgrounds and gardens were loudly displayed with colourful graffiti and signs. In this particular and much smaller community in the streets around London Fields, lesbians, while living openly, fitted into the existing urban nexus of mixed squats, council tenants and homeowners.

#### WOMEN HOUSE THEMSELVES

Many of the nineteenth-century terraced houses in the area had been kept in good repair by their former occupants: one interviewee said they found their squat 'just as it had been lived in by the previous tenants'. Furniture and other artifacts were often left behind: in one house an ARP helmet, overcoat and gas mask were found hanging on a hook in the under-stairs cupboard. However in most of the houses water and electricity needed to be reconnected and by the mid 1970s there were women electricians and plumbers who were skilled enough to help new squatters reinstate services. The process of acquiring these essential skills varied. Lynne H., for example, had been to an evening class on electrical wiring where teaching was based on a book she remembered as *Electricity for Women* published by the Electrical Association for Women just after the Second World War. Using this knowledge, she was able to rewire and put in new sockets for her squat.

Not all the squats were in good condition. Anny Brackx moved in to a house in Marlborough Avenue in the early 1970s without water or electricity and with a leaking roof, which already housed two women. Then her lover came and joined her:

... she, who I hadn't known was that practical, said, 'I can't live without electricity or water [laughing]!' There were other women who already lived around the corner and one of them was an electrician, so we got a cable, and laid it from her house around the corner, through various

gardens of houses that hadn't been squatted but were empty, and to our house, and it worked. And then, a few months later, when she was fed up going to the public washing places, she took a course in plumbing, and she plumbed in a bath, which was, I thought, fantastic. And so we gradually got everything together to have a household, you know, because we cooked for each other.<sup>42</sup>

Other women had worked alongside men in mixed communes and squats and learnt basic building skills. However acquired, confidence in using traditionally male skills was essential for women who went on to train for formal qualifications in the building trades. By the end of the decade, to the author's knowledge, two women were gaining qualifications as electricians, one as a carpenter, one a bricklayer, one in plumbing and one in furniture design. These women were also active in Women in Manual Trades, a feminist support and campaign group set up to encourage women into the building trades, which still exists.

The architectural design of the large late Georgian houses and smaller Victorian terraces allowed flexibility in the way they were occupied. Damp basements were utilized for workshops, meeting-rooms or newly installed bathrooms. The best rooms were found on the upper floors, if the roof didn't leak, although women quickly became adept at repairing and replacing slates on the roofs. Building materials were recycled from houses which were too derelict to repair or which had been partly destroyed by Hackney council to prevent squatting. This salvaging, or 'totting', meant removing joists, floorboards, baths and anything else which could be re-used. Houses were adapted for communal living, for couples, or as informal single units where women had their own kitchens and living/bedrooms. Working chimneys and fireplaces were the main source of heating, supplemented with electric or gas fires, as fuel in the form of timber off-cuts was readily available from the skips in the yards of small furniture factories in the surrounding streets and near the canal. Resources were shared between some households so that wholefood basics were bought in bulk and fuel collection rotated.

Many houses had large gardens stocked with mature trees and flowerbeds that had been carefully looked after by former tenants. They were appreciated as private and communal social spaces; some women grew vegetables, and one household even kept chickens. Frankie recounted how the gardens were used:

The back gardens were very, very important. When the fences between them had broken down there was an issue for some people about privacy – was it your own garden or could everybody just wander up and down the back of the houses and interrupt you when you're having your quiet breakfast and talk about things? ... One of the women in the house I

lived in was a brilliant gardener and she made an absolutely beautiful garden in the back.<sup>43</sup>

Although women created private domestic spaces in shared houses they also met in public spaces. There were group sports activities and, for a while, there was a Sunday hockey match on London Fields instituted when someone came into possession of a load of hockey sticks. Large groups of women were less welcome in the nearby pubs. Lee remembered that,

Certainly in the early days, in the '70s, if we went to a pub in groups of ten, even though there could be virtually no other customers in there, the bar staff or managers would invariably say that we shouldn't come in anymore because we were stopping other customers. That happened in the Cat & Mutton, more than once. We ended up being quite welcome at a pub called the Belgrave on Queensbridge Road. It was a big, huge pub, and it was great.<sup>44</sup>

The squats provided meeting-places for cultural activities including a poetry group and a photography group; they also became an essential part of the newly emerging women's music scene. Cheap communal living, shared instruments for band members and spaces for rehearsals and song-writing sessions were all available. Frankie Green remembers regular band practices in the houses around London Fields.<sup>45</sup>

From the very beginning children were part of the community and shared childcare was the norm, with some women taking on significant roles in their lives. Paddy Tanton moved in to a squat with two women, one of whom had a small child.

I got very involved with that child's life and became a kind of third mum to her, and then, through that, got involved with other women who had children, and I remember often wheeling children round the streets and having days looking after kids.<sup>46</sup>

No matter how supportive, friends and lovers could not provide protection from the justice system and at that time lesbian mothers were extremely vulnerable to the courts.<sup>47</sup> The entire community was deeply affected when one woman lost custody of her daughter to her male ex-partner who used the fact that she lived in a communal lesbian squat as evidence of her being an unfit mother.

Living in close physical proximity in the squats enabled groups of feminist women to meet, organize and discuss politics as part of daily life. Lynne Alderson, who after a time working in Compendium bookshop in North London set up Sisterwrite bookshop with two other women, squatted near London Fields. She remembers these discussions as 'very serious conversations about how you change society, which theories would work, which

wouldn't work, so you'd do that over your kitchen table, basically'.<sup>48</sup> This opportunity to meet and plan together underpinned many of the feminist co-operative enterprises set up in the 1970s, such as *Sisterwrite* bookshop, *Sisterbite* café, and women-run publishers and presses. Lucy Delap includes *Sisterwrite* in her account of the growth of feminist bookshops in the 1970s and 1980s, recognizing them as important places that 'provided stable, recognizable nodal points, as sites of exchange and recruitment, and spaces of physical encounters', a description that could equally apply to the Hackney squats.<sup>49</sup> The relatively generous social-security system, combined with a minimal rent on a licensed squat, allowed women to volunteer their time in setting up collectively-run feminist enterprises and then to live cheaply on low wages. Others had mainstream jobs including, nurses, teachers, social workers, journalists, factory workers, gardeners, carpenters, electricians, jewellers, shoemakers, musicians, cooks, booksellers and printers.

Political actions, many involving graffiti as a response to current events, were spontaneous and quickly organized. When Astrid Proll, a former member of the German Red Army Fraction who had been living and working under an assumed identity as part of the community was arrested in 1978, a support group was quickly organized. Graffiti backing her rapidly appeared. Lee Nurse and a friend cycled late one night down to Old Street where they painted 'No extradition for Astrid Proll' across the top of the large ventilation shaft in the centre of the roundabout.<sup>50</sup> It remained in place for many years and only disappeared when the new 'silicon roundabout' appeared as part of the transformation of the area into a 'technology hub'. Closer to home there were frequent expeditions to paint out fascist and racist National Front slogans which appeared regularly on the tin hoardings around vacant plots of land and derelict houses. Lynne Harne remembered frequent spray painting in Broadway Market:

And on Christmas Day, we used to go out and do things because we didn't believe in Christmas [laughing]. So, Christmas Day, we used to go out spray-painting because there was nobody about, and you could just do what you liked.<sup>51</sup>

The women's community grew organically and at any one time over a hundred women, from very different social backgrounds, lived close together in a well defined area. According to Lynne Harne:

I think in Broadway Market loads of women, if they weren't lesbians already, became lesbians. Most of the women who moved to Broadway Market moved there because it was a lesbian community and in many ways it was a much freer time for women to be able to live and act in this way, even though in terms of housing it was also precarious.<sup>52</sup>

### ‘CONTROLLED SQUATTING’, HOUSING CO-OPERATIVES AND SHORT-LIFE GRANTS

This period of large-scale, organized squatting in London started to decline when the Conservatives gained control of the GLC in 1977. With Horace Cutler as Leader and George Tremlett in charge of housing, a right-wing agenda was introduced with the aim of ending the GLC’s role as a provider of council housing for rent. This was achieved by selling off council housing and by transferring the GLC’s considerable housing stock to the London boroughs. Cutler promoted council-house sales before Margaret Thatcher made it a cornerstone of the Conservative Party election manifesto and he was committed to the ‘demolition of the GLC housing empire’.<sup>53</sup> As part of this strategy a ‘homesteading’ scheme was launched in 1977 whereby houses in reasonably good condition were sold to individuals who could prove they had lived or worked in London for twelve months. The new owners, often middle-class professionals, could then apply for a low-interest loan from the GLC for the costs of repair.<sup>54</sup> In 1978 the GLC Housing Department ceased handing out licences to squat and announced an amnesty for all squatters living in GLC property. Squatters were offered housing in ‘hard-to-let’ council flats, typically on estates waiting for refurbishment, and large numbers of people took up this offer, in particular single men and women. Those who objected to individual home ownership and who wished to remain in their homes and retain control over their housing were given the option to form housing co-operatives. Broadway Market Squatters Association, after much debate, split into three distinct groups, each group setting up a separate housing co-op. Most of the women-only households, together with an extended local family of three households who had become neighbours in squatted properties in the same streets, formed London Fields Housing Co-op. This was set up in 1978 and in 1981 granted funding from the GLC to purchase and renovate seventeen of the squatted properties. After splitting in 1984 into two management groups, women-only and mixed, London Fields Housing Co-operative continued operating for many years, held together by a core group of women who had arrived as squatters in the 1970s.

Squatting in the area continued, however, after the GLC amnesty. London Borough of Hackney was now responsible for most of the streets designated to become part of the Broadway Market Re-Development Scheme and continued to issue short-life licences on these houses while the development and refurbishment programme was held up for another decade.<sup>55</sup> These changes in housing policy did not deter women who had heard of the lesbian community and wanted to live in the area. New squats were opened up and existing ones taken over by women who continued to arrive throughout the 1980s.

Ivydene Road, for example, took on a new life as a women’s squatted street until it was demolished in the late 1980s to make way for new council housing built by Hackney as part of the Regent Estate. Many of these women were travellers looking for short-term places to stay and they created



Fig. 4. Trederwen Road (graffiti 1981). Reproduced with permission from Hackney Archives (Ref. P8330).

a parallel community with very little overlap between the slightly older women who had arrived in the 1970s. This was the time of punk and a very different politics, as one interviewee told me, ‘it was kind of sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll in our bit of the Hackney lesbian community’.<sup>56</sup>

These women remained in their squatted houses until the final days of the street, even as it was demolished around them. When Hackney finally started full-scale redevelopment of the area, these last women squatters were rehoused across the borough in council flats where many still live. Housing tenure in the area around Broadway Market remains mixed, with renting from council or housing association together with private ownership contributing to a community that remains vibrant despite the exclusive aspects of gentrification and regeneration.<sup>57</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Squatting provided the physical and spatial infrastructure for the feminist activism in 1970s London seen in women’s centres, refuges, nurseries, bookshops, art-centres and workshops. It offered cheap housing for young single women and mothers who were not provided for in standard council accommodation designed around the nuclear family. Communities did not exist in isolation but were part of a wider network of thousands of London squatters, constantly defending their right to housing and exemplifying a sense of solidarity that usually overrode a multitude of different political perspectives and positions.<sup>58</sup> Squatting also allowed groups of lesbian women to live near each other and create their own communities in urban settings. Lesbian lives in the 1970s were precarious. Lesbians had few legal rights and lost their children in custody battles and their jobs through discrimination, while

many were thrown out of the parental home and ostracized by families. The squatting community around Broadway Market offered a place to gather together, its mutual support allowed lesbian women to live openly and move freely within the neighbourhood streets. It was in some senses utopian: an opportunity for self-determination, to live autonomously, to imagine and create a different world. Young lesbians exerted a newly found confidence in a 'right to the city' by reshaping empty houses and found materials into an environment they designed and lived in. The important and revolutionary aspect of the squats described here is that it was women who wielded the crow-bars and jemmies, and repaired and adapted the built environment. While the extensive urban squatting of the 1970s appeared as a result of historically specific circumstances, when empty residential properties coincided with high numbers of homeless young people under a less restrictive legal system, the rallying call of squatting remains timeless. 'It didn't belong to any one of us, and it belonged to all of us.'<sup>59</sup>

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

I am indebted to Sally Alexander for her support and encouragement throughout. This article has been written from an insider perspective. I was part of the London Fields squatting community for a time before I became involved with setting up the housing co-op in 1978. I am very grateful to Alison McPherson for professional transcription, and to Lee Nurse, Frankie Green, Jenny Norton, Paddy Tanton, Lynne Harne, Anny Brackx, Angela Smith, and Amanda Sebestyen for allowing extracts from their oral-history interviews to be used here and for their comments on the text.

<sup>1</sup> *Report on Housing and Demolition Survey*, 1975, GLC Policy Studies Unit, Table C13, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Franklin, 'Squatting in England 1969–79: a case study of social conflict in advanced industrial capitalism', Working Paper, School for Advanced Urban Studies, University of Bristol, 1984. See also Kevin C. Kearns. 'Intraurban Squatting in London', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 69: 4, 1979, pp. 589–98.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the Faculty of the Built Environment, University of Westminster, for a grant to enable transcription of the oral history recordings used in this paper. They are part of an ongoing project to create an oral history record of feminist women squatters who lived in the London Fields area in the 1970s and 1980s, which will be deposited at the Bishopsgate Institute and Library.

<sup>4</sup> The literature on postwar planning and housing is vast but Peter Larkham's recent edited volumes give a good overview on the origins of postwar planning: *The Blitz and its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction*, 2013, edited with Mark Clapson, and

also Peter J. Larkham, and Keith D. Lilley, *Planning the City of Tomorrow: British Reconstruction Planning, 1939–1952; an Annotated Bibliography*, Pickering, North Yorkshire, 2001. Housing Policy is covered in Peter Malpass and Alan Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice*, 1994; and Stephen Merrett, *State Housing in Britain*, 1979; and Hackney's housing policy in Keith Jacobs, *The Dynamics of Local Housing Policy: A Study of Council Housing Renewal in the London Borough of Hackney*, 1999. Cynthia Cockburn's *The Local State: Management of Cities and People*, London, 1977 remains a classic study of local community politics and the birth of the neo-liberal city.

5 Andrew Saint, 'Spread the People': the LCC's dispersal policy 1889–1965, in *Politics and People Of London: London County Council, 1889-1965*, ed. Andrew Saint, London, 1989, p. 217.

6 John Henry Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, *The County of London Plan*, 1943.

7 *Greater London Development Plan. Report of Studies*, Greater London Council, 1969.

8 University of Westminster Archives, Max Locke Papers, MLA 8.27 Hackney.1.

9 *Greater London Development Plan (GDLF)*, p. 11.

10 The GDLF identified that overcrowded households tended to occur in families with small children in rented accommodation with very poor facilities. Overcrowding was concentrated in two main areas, Islington, Hackney and Camden, and to the west in a belt running from Earls Court up to Willesden. Housing problem areas suffered from both overcrowding and poor physical condition of dwellings and these were concentrated in the eastern zone. See Chapter 2, *Population and Housing* pp. 3-36.

11 University of Westminster, Max Locke Archive, 8.27 Hackney.2.

12 Report by GLC Medical Officer, Dr. William Wallace, on certain houses in the streets designated for demolition behind Broadway Market including, Pownall Road, Marlborough Avenue, Broke Road and Brougham Road, London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/MA/SC/3/2284.

13 The original survey notes, the CPOs and objection letters from residents and tenants affected by the Broadway Market Re-Development Scheme are deposited in the London Metropolitan Archives. The superficial surveys reveal that many houses were designated for demolition on spurious grounds and the process was merely a necessary stage in the development plan. See LMA GLC/MA/SC/3/2282 and LMA, GLC/MA/SC/3/2284.

14 James Hinton, 'Self-help and Socialism The Squatters' Movement of 1946', *History Workshop Journal* 25, 1988, pp. 100–26.

15 Ron Bailey, *The squatters*, London, 1973.

16 Bailey, *Squatters*, p. 79. See for a long investigative article on the evictions appeared in *Sunday Times*, 11 May 1979, and *Thames Today* TV news programme broadcast interviews with the squatting families. Later the same year *World in Action* filmed a documentary on the Redbridge squatters.

17 Personal memories of this squat have been collected on the website [http://www.wussu.com/squatting/144\\_piccadilly.htm](http://www.wussu.com/squatting/144_piccadilly.htm) accessed 20 Sept. 2016. An account by one of the original squatters, Phil Cohen, can be found at <http://philcohenworks.com/category/autobiography/>.

18 <http://www.wussu.com/squatting/als06014.htm> accessed 10 Nov. 2016

19 John Pollard, 'Squatting in the City', *Architectural Design* 43: 8, August 1973, p. 504.

20 The Victorian Society, founded in 1957, was given a role at governmental level in 1970 to comment on listed building consent when all applications for demolition had to be passed to the Society for appraisal.

21 Pollard, 'Squatting in the City', p. 504–6 and Mark Gimson, Caroline Lewin, and Nick Wates, 'Squatting: The Fourth Arm of Housing?', *Architectural Design* 46: 4, 1976, pp. 211–14.

22 *Squatting: the Real Story*, ed. Nick Wates, 1980 including chapter 16 by Pat Moan on women squatters' experiences. See also, Kesia Reeve, 'Squatting since 1945: the enduring relevance of material need', in *Housing and Social Policy: contemporary themes and critical perspectives*, ed. Peter Somerville and Nigel Springings, 2005, pp. 197–217, and Kesia Reeves and Sarah Coward, *Hidden Homelessness: Life on the Margins: the experiences of homeless people living in squats*, Crisis, 2004.

23 GLF published a statement implicitly criticizing newly emerging gay and lesbian social and cultural scene. 'What is needed is a fuller analysis of the relationship between gender oppression and other forms of economic, political, social and ideological oppression. ... Street Theatre and new life styles have a valuable function but cannot change society on their own', Quoted in Lisa Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles: an oral history of the Gay Liberation Front, 1970–1973*, 1995.

24 'The Politics of the Crow-Bar', paper presented by Rowan Milligan at the Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism Conference, London, June 30-July 3rd 2016. Accessed 20 Sept at: <https://fightfortheaylesbury.wordpress.com/analysis/the-politics-of-the-crowbar/>

25 Alexander Vasudevan, *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin*, London, 2015.

26 Chapter 7, 'Gay Times': The Brixton Squatters in Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London*, London, 2014; Antu Sorainen, 'Two cities of Helsinki? One liberally gay and one practically queer', in *Queer Cities, Queer Cultures: Europe since 1945*, ed. Jennifer Evans and Matt Cook, London, 2014. There is a larger literature on squatting in mainland Europe, much of it relatively recent and analyzing squatting in relation to urban renewal, but little has been written on lesbian communities. See for example, *The Squatters' Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternatives to Capitalism*; ed. Claudio Cattaneo and Miguel Martínez López, London, 2014; M.A.M. López, 'The Squatters' Movement in Europe: a durable struggle for social autonomy in urban politics', *Antipode* 45: 4, 2013, pp. 866–7; Andrej Kun and Armin Kuhn, 'Squatting and Urban Renewal: the Interaction of Squatter Movements and Strategies of Urban Restructuring in Berlin', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 1: 35 (3), 2011, pp. 644–58.

27 See Penny Holland's account in '68, '78, '88: *From Women's Liberation to Feminism*, ed. Amanda Sebestyen, 1988; Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger: the Women's Liberation Movement in 1978', *Women's History Review* 19, 2010, pp. 337–56 and also some of the oral histories recorded for Sisterhood and After and archived at the British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood>. Further accounts that recognize squatting as an integral part of the women's liberation movement are beginning to appear in blogs set up by feminists who were active in the 1970s and 80s, see for example Liz Heron's blog on the Hackney Flashers photography collective, <https://lizheron.wordpress.com/tag/hackney-flashers>.

28 Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem characterized American suburbia as a prison for married women while in Britain the social institution of marriage was seen as legitimizing domestic labour in the home, see Lee Comer, *Wedlocked Women*, Leeds, 1974, among others. Recently Sue Bruley has addressed the different urban settings for WLM across Britain in her 2016 article, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: a view from some English towns, c.1968–1990', *Women's History Review* 25: 5.

29 For more information on Olive Morris see Remember Olive Collective at <https://rememberolivemorris.wordpress.com>. The squat is mentioned in Steve Platt's chapter, 'A Decade of Squatting; the Story of Squatting in Britain since 1968', in *Squatting: the Real Story*, ed. N. Wates.

30 The exodus of lesbians from GLF is described in Lisa Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles* and also by Lynne Harne, 'Dangerous Liaisons: Reasserting Male Power through Gay Movements' in *All the Rage: Reasserting Lesbian Feminism*, ed. Lynne Harne and Elaine Miller, 1996. See also Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in post-war Britain: how the Personal got Political*, Oxford, 2011.

31 *Spare Rib* was a feminist magazine set up in 1972. Between 1973 and 1993 it was produced by a collective of women, whose membership changed over time and who were committed to non-hierarchical working. See the British Library online archive: [www.bl.uk/spare-rib](http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib), accessed 1 Nov. 2016.

32 Author interview with Amanda Sebestyen, 15 Sept. 2016.

33 Interview with Amanda Sebestyen.

34 Author interview with Lee Nurse, 26 Feb. 2016.

35 Author interview with Frankie Green, 27 April 2016.

36 Interview with Frankie Green. Six members of the Angry Brigade were arrested at a flat in Amhurst Road in 1972.

37 Lynne Harne, *Lesbian Mothers on Trial: a Report on Lesbian Mothers and Child Custody and Valued Families: the Lesbian Mothers Legal Handbook Lesbian Mothers on Trial: a Report on Lesbian Mothers & Child Custody*, 1984; *Valued Families: The Lesbian Mothers' Legal Handbook*, Rights of Women, 1986.

38 Author interview with Lynne Harne, 21 July 2015.

39 Author interview with Jenny Norton, 11 March 2016.

40 Author interview with Paddy Tanton, 27 April 2016.

41 Author interview with Anny Brackx, 16 March 2016.

42 Interview with Anny Brackx.

43 Interview with Frankie Green.

44 Interview with Lee Nurse.

45 Frankie founded the Women's Liberation Music Archive. Her account of Jam Today can be found here: <https://womensliberationmusicarchive.co.uk/j/>

46 Interview with Paddy Tanton.

47 The Lesbian Custody Project was set up in 1982, within the feminist organization Rights of Women, to support lesbian mothers. There was widespread hostility against lesbian mothers in the courts throughout the 1970s, and from judges, psychologists, welfare and social workers and teachers. A survey of 36 lesbian mothers in dispute over custody with former partners revealed that over half avoided court proceedings, where it was customary for judges to focus on lesbianism as the primary reason for mothers to not have custody of their children, over any consideration of the quality of parental relationship or wishes of the children (Harne 1984, pp. 32–35).

48 Lynn Alderson quoted in Jeska Rees, 'A Look Back at Anger', p. 340.

49 Lucy Delap, 'Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000', *History Workshop Journal* 81, p. 191.

50 Interview with Lee Nurse.

51 Interview with Lynne Harne.

52 Interview with Lynne Harne.

53 Horace Cutler became leader of the GLC when the Conservatives won the local government election in 1977. Cutler, *The Cutler Files*, 1982, p. 13.

54 'GLC Leader will draw homesteading lottery', 1 Aug. 1977, LMA GLC/ DG/PRB/35/030/339.

55 The 1980s saw the rise of a new housing bureaucracy needed to organize and fund short-life repairs and licences for newly created housing co-operatives. Short-life funding for basic repairs was available for co-ops which had not been given funding to purchase their properties but were allowed to manage them until they were either sold, often to Housing Associations, or refurbished. The organization and politics surrounding short-life housing are investigated and described in detail by Anna Bowman in her thesis *Interim spaces: reshaping London: the role of short life property, 1970 to 2000*. Downloaded 12/09/16 <http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/34489446/289648.pdf>.

56 Author interview with Angela Smith, 19 May 2016.

57 See William Bradley's well researched article, 'The Gentrification of Broadway Market' in *Hackney History* 16, 2010, pp. 49–62.

58 This network was not confined to London. There were also connections with squats in Europe, in particular Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. See *The Squatters' Movement in Europe: Commons and Autonomy as Alternative to Capitalism*, ed. SqEK – Squatting Europe Kollektive, 2014 London, 2014.

59 Quote from interview with Lee Nurse.