

**“We don’t have leaders!  
We’re doing it ourselves!”:  
Squatting, Feminism and  
Built Environment Activism  
in 1970s London.**

Christine Wall

The Feminist Design Collective, which later became the feminist architecture practice and discussion group Matrix, was founded by a group of women architects in London in 1978. It aimed to develop a feminist approach to all aspects of architectural production and also to wider built environment issues. A significant number of founder members were living in squats or short-life housing in response to a housing crisis, which emerged in the late 1960s, and as political statement against housing inequality. By the mid-1970s London housed over 30,000 squatters, the majority in nineteenth century terraces owned by local authorities and earmarked either for demolition or rehabilitation, and which became vacant during prolonged planning and funding negotiations. In the 1980s squatting became regulated by a number of progressive Inner London Authorities as a way of mediating housing shortage and small grants were made available to organised groups of squatters for repairs. These large numbers of squatters were connected in what Vasudevan (2017) has termed ‘a radical urban social movement’. This paper uses oral history testimony to reveal a link between squatting, which allowed women to directly engage with and shape the physical fabric of their housing, and the emergence of feminist architectural theories and practice in late twentieth century Britain.

## Introduction

Squatting has long been a response to both housing need and social injustice. Defined as an occupation of property or land without legal claim it is a global phenomenon typified by shanty towns and settlements; from favelas in Rio to tent cities in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Historically, in Britain it is exemplified in the Communist Party organised squats in London of the late 1940s when homeless ex-servicemen and their families took over abandoned army camps and empty central London properties in protest at inadequate council housing provision.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1, dating from 1951, graphically summarises the extent of London's post-war housing problems. It illustrates vast swathes of war damaged, inadequate and outdated housing earmarked for slum clearance throughout the inner city.<sup>3</sup> These areas understandably coincide with the main areas of Inner London where squatting became prevalent. Throughout the 1960s thousands of properties built before 1915, mainly Victorian terraces, and deemed 'unfit' were scheduled for demolition and emptied of their occupants, boarded up by local councils and, in some cases, deliberately vandalised to prevent re-occupation. At the same time a succession of grandiose London plans were published, aiming to restructure the city into zones and build new housing for the working classes in the form of flats.<sup>4</sup> However, post-war reconstruction plans were slow to materialise, council house waiting lists became hopelessly long and the squatting movement that appeared in London in the late 1960s arose as a direct response to housing need among young people and families.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, the vast numbers of empty council owned properties across inner London became the sites for direct action, as squatting not only provided homes but also highlighted the inadequate housing policies of many local councils.



Fig. 1 Areas containing a substantial amount of war damaged, slum or obsolescent property. Source: Administrative County of London Development Plan 1951, reproduced with permission from the London Metropolitan Archives

<sup>1</sup> See Alexander Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City* (London, New York: Verso Books, 2017) for an excellent overview.

<sup>2</sup> James Hinton, "Self-help and Socialism The Squatters' Movement of 1946," *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (1988): 100-126.

<sup>3</sup> *Administrative County of London Development Plan 1951*, London County Council, 33.

<sup>4</sup> The key document for reconstruction was J.H. Forshaw, and Patrick Abercrombie's 1943, *The County of London Plan*, followed by frequent revisions and iterations such as above and the *Greater London Development Plan. Report of Studies, 1969*, Greater London Council together with plans put forward by individual boroughs.

<sup>5</sup> See Ron Bailey, *The Squatters* (London: Penguin books, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> One of the best accounts of squatting in this period is found in Nick Wates and Christian Wolmar, eds. *Squatting: The Real Story* (London: Bay Leaf Books, 1980); and Nick Wates, *The Battle for Tolmers Square* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012). 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 (London: Routledge, 2005), 197-217.

<sup>7</sup> The genesis of feminist architects and architectural practices in the UK is not yet fully documented but existing accounts can be found in Susan Francis, "Women's Design Collective," *Heresies* 11, *Women in Architecture* (1971): 17; Janie Grote, "Matrix: A Radical Approach to Architecture," *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research* 9, No. 2 (1992): 158-168; Julia Dwyer and Anne Thorne, "Evaluating Matrix – Notes from Inside the Collective," and *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space*, ed. Doina Petrescu (London and New York: Routledge, 2007): 39-56; Matrix, ed., *Making space: Women and the Man-made Environment* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). Fran Bradshaw, a founder member of Matrix together with Anne Thorne and Sue Francis, gives an account of the early days of feminist architectural groupings and practice in her chapter, "Working with Women" in *Making Space: Women and the Man-made Environment*, ed. Matrix (organization) (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 89-106.

<sup>8</sup> The extracts used here are from transcripts of author interviews in London with Jos Boys on 5th February 2017, and with Julia Dwyer on 15th February 2017.

<sup>9</sup> For a full account of this community campaign which resulted in Brian Anson losing his job as an architect with the Greater London Council (GLC) see Brian Anson, *I'll Fight You for It!: Behind the Struggle for Covent Garden* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

The movement was largely run on left libertarian and anarchist lines although there was very effective communication between different communities of squatters with local groups producing newsletters and, in 1975, the Advisory Service for Squatters setting up an office in Islington to provide London-wide, legal and practical advice.<sup>6</sup> While squatting developed as a grassroots and spontaneous response to housing need at a local level, it was also inextricably part of the radical social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. To squat is a political act with a range of meanings including challenging ownership of property, the process of capitalist development, the gentrification of areas of the city, and inadequate and unfair housing policies. A number of young squatters hailed from London's architecture schools, where radical and political critiques of architecture and city planning were taught in units at the AA and the Bartlett, known then as the School of Environmental Studies. By 1975 the New Architecture Movement, a loose coalition of students, architects and other built environment activists, were publishing SLATE magazine, a forum for spirited discussions on the social and political role of architects and architecture under capitalism. By the late 1970s a number of women from NAM began to meet separately to pursue an explicitly feminist agenda. They organised conferences and exhibitions resulting in the formation of the Feminist Design Collective, which later split into the feminist architecture practice and discussion group Matrix.<sup>7</sup>

## Squatting as a way of life

The following section is based on extracts from interviews recorded with two women, Jos Boys and Julia Dwyer, both educated as architects and who were active in feminist groups working on architecture and the built environment in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>8</sup>

Both women recounted the radicalising experience of being architecture students in the 1970s, Julia studied at the AA in 1977-78 where she met Sue Francis in Tom Wooley and Hugo Hinsley's Diploma Unit. Jos studied architecture at the Bartlett 1974-77 at a time when students were allowed to choose a modular degree and opt out of RIBA Part 1. Urban planning was taught by lecturers involved with community based action groups, and while still a student Jos joined a group of friends and students squatting in Covent Garden in central London. They occupied one of a number of large Georgian houses in Long Acre and James Street, which had been deliberately damaged by developers hoping to demolish the whole block and re-build at higher densities. An earlier campaign, led by the activist architect and AA unit leader Brian Anson, had succeeded in stopping major demolition and new road building but developers were still hovering.<sup>9</sup> While the squatters objected to the desecration of these architectural significant properties they were primarily attempting to maintain a vibrant, mixed community within an historic area of central London in the face of profit-driven developers. An abandoned warehouse and a number of terraced houses became home to a mix of around 90

<sup>10</sup> By the late 1970s many London borough councils were formalizing squatting, partly as a means to ease the housing crisis, by issuing licenses allowing a household to legally live in an empty property until reclaimed by the council. This usually involved paying a very low rent.

<sup>11</sup> See Jos Boys, "Is there a Feminist Analysis of Architecture?" *Built Environment* 10, No. 1, *Women and the Environment* (1984): 25-34.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen E. Hunt, *The Revolutionary Urbanism of Street Farm: Eco-anarchism, Architecture and Alternative Technology in the 1970s*. 1st. (Bristol: Tangent Books, 2014).

young people for two years. Many people involved with the squat were also involved in NAM and other revolutionary groups as well as there being a substantial number of drug users, alcoholics and homeless people. Jos remembers it as being very rough and ready and 'not all salubrious' but the rooms were large, beautifully proportioned and sparsely furnished with the ubiquitous, wooden pallets and mattresses – a staple of squatted interiors. From Covent Garden she moved to a licensed squat in a nineteenth century terraced street in Islington.<sup>10</sup> Here she lived for five years in a communal household consisting of two adjacent houses linked by a common, self-built 'conservatory' connecting the rear living rooms. The household again was mixed with architects, painters and builders but functioned in a manner far more comfortable and domestic scale than the large squats of Covent Garden. Upon gaining her degree Jos had trained as an architectural journalist with *Building Design* and used office-space in a group of studios in Dryden Street (around the corner from the squat and itself an early example of collective offices). From this base she free-lanced and was, for a time in the 1980s, the feminist architecture correspondent for both *Marxism Today* and the *Architects' Journal*, as well as writing and publishing longer academic articles on feminist architecture.<sup>11</sup> This office also served as a meeting space for the Feminist Design Collective:

*"Squatting meant that I had access to this other space that was free and was very easy to rent, and so we used to have our meetings there, and Matrix, both the practice and the book, grew out of it."*

Jos Boys

Julia Dwyer also studied architecture at university in Sydney, during a radical period in the early 1970s when Colin James was a tutor. She remembers James' involvement with aboriginal housing projects and a number of hands-on projects including a third year project to build an autonomous house with a group of 15 students. After graduating and travelling through Africa for a year, Julia arrived in London and went to the AA where a large noticeboard held an invitation for people to join a squat. This resulted in a brief encounter with Graham Caine and the Street Farmers, a collective of AA tutors experimenting with urban eco-living in south London. Julia heard about nearby squats at St. Agnes Place at a community-run print shop on the Camberwell Road.<sup>12</sup> St. Agnes Place was a street of mid-nineteenth century terraced houses earmarked for demolition by Lambeth Council in order to create a park. The squats were started by a group of stone carvers and sculptors, all students at the City and Guilds School in Kennington Road, and rapidly expanded as the Council proceeded to evict its existing tenants to clear the street. The squatters soon became a highly organised group, which included lawyers, architects, journalists, artists, builders, and at one end of the street a group of three houses squatted by a group of Rastafarians.

Julia remembers her house as architecturally 'dull' and not as grand as the nearby Villa Road squats but it was in quite good repair. Her household made one major architectural alteration by knocking down the dividing wall to open up the basement rooms. When the brick cross wall was found to be load bearing, imminent collapse was averted by scavenging an RSJ from a nearby building site and propping it up with acrows, a type of adjustable steel prop. These were left in situ and later bricked up. Julia was working on an unemployment scheme as a plasterer labourer at the time and was introduced to bricklaying by a fellow squatter who came to help with the acrows an experience that led to her taking a course in basic bricklaying at Brixton College of Building.

Lambeth Council owned St. Agnes Place and, in the early 1970s, employed a confrontational approach to squatters. They refused to negotiate or agree to licenses and demolished or partly destroyed houses immediately after council tenants vacated them, in order to discourage squatters. Julia recounted how one of the houses in the street had already been partly destroyed by council workmen who had sawn out all the floor joists causing the collapse of three floors. This enraged the squatting community and Julia was part of a voluntary workforce of 20-30 people who cleared out all the rubble and repaired the house so it was again habitable.



Fig. 3 Save St. Agnes Place logo, which appeared on all campaigning literature. Source: Julia Dwyer



Fig.2 SAC Newsheet 9 November 1976. Source: Julia Dwyer

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Throughout the 1970s Lambeth Council had over 10,000 people on its housing waiting list and Julia was part of a well-organised local squatting group, the All-Lambeth Squatters Group, which published a newsletter and attended Housing Committee meetings to protest council policy. One of the defining moments of the 10 years she spent living at St. Agnes Place occurred early on when, in 1976, the Council attempted to totally demolish a row of houses they had already partly destroyed in a deliberate strategy to undermine the squatters' case for saving the whole street as housing. On a cold, dark, January morning the squatters awoke to find hundreds of police surrounding the houses and protecting a large crane with a wrecking ball while builders were digging up the street to cut off gas and water supplies. Julia remembered it vividly,

*"So, police had cut the street off at either end, and they were all the way along the roads, and they were coming in the back and we could see these little stars, and you'd think, "What are those stars?" and they were the tops of bobbies' helmets."*

Julia Dwyer

She recalled that demolition started in the centre of the street but the activists mobilised quickly,

*"...we had already got wind that they were going to do something and had contacted our lawyers who worked for Brixton Law Centre and who lived next-door, the ones with the phone, and they'd already organised a meeting with a QC, and also with North Lambeth Law Centre, who were planning experts. The QC got a judge in chambers, by about 9.30, to block any further action because he said the Council was acting beyond its powers, ultra vires..."<sup>13</sup>*

Julia Dwyer

<sup>13</sup> QC, or Queen's Counsel is a mark of excellence awarded to either solicitors or barristers for their work in the higher courts. *ultra vires* is a legal term meaning to act beyond one's powers used particularly in the case of a corporation, in this case Lambeth Council.

In the meantime a photographer from nearby Union Place community print shop had taken a series of superb pictures of the ensuing confrontation between squatters from the street, their numbers boosted by squatters from other nearby areas, and the police. Encounters between police and women and children were photographed as well as the rooftop protests of squatters who had installed themselves by roping their bodies to the chimney stacks. These photographs appeared over the next few days, in both left wing and mainstream press, in accounts of the struggle at St. Agnes Place that supported the squatters and slammed the policies of Lambeth's Housing Committee. Although this positive coverage resulted in a halt to any further harassment of the residents of St. Agnes Place the council did not support long-term rehabilitation of the street. Some short-life funding was made available to the co-operative formed by the occupants but the street continued to physically deteriorate over the years until most of the houses were finally demolished in 2007.



Fig. 4 Photo of squatters Charlie and Julia, St Agnes Place. *Newsline*, 25 Jan 1977. Source: Julia Dwyer

Housing activism was integral to the life of a very political street, which housed members of left revolutionary parties such as Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) as well as non-aligned socialists and feminists. Most of the households lived communally and Julia's operated on the basis of income sharing after it became a women-only house in the 1980s.



Fig. 5 St. Agnes Place 1978. Image Copyright Dr Neil Clifton and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic Licence

## Feminism and squatting

For those individuals who lived as squatters, and if they had the means to do so, squatting opened a world of possibilities in terms of how to live outside traditional and conventional mores. However maintaining this way of living collectively, at both household and street level, entailed many meetings and discussions to achieve group consensus, and it was this experience that Julia valued as vitally important for her coterminous work as a feminist architect. Throughout the years spent squatting Julia carried

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on her career as an architect, training at the AA, working in the non-hierarchical and equal pay architectural practice SOLON, and becoming part of the feminist, architectural co-operative Matrix. She recognised that feminism had always underpinned her politics:

*“Well, I think it’s integral to thinking about the world. So, if you’re an architect, then it becomes integral to thinking about the built environment. I think it’s that really – it’s just a worldview ... The first thing that interested me was of course the idea of breaking down barriers with builders and doing things in a much more integrated way.”*

Julia Dwyer

She considered the experience of squatting had enhanced her practice as a feminist architect,

*“I think some of the things that you do, if you’re organised as a squatter, is [that] you become really good at meetings, with incredibly different opinions and really different people who aren’t all one class. ... organising in a self-generating way was absolutely core to the whole thing. You’re doing it because it’s the right thing to do - that pervaded early squatting... It’s those kinds of things, plus the ‘just doing’ is that sort of confidence around wanting to make the houses better, really hating the way they were.”*

In a similar way Jos recognised that squatting provided an alternative community and way of living in opposition to the traditional values and gender relations of conventional, heterosexual nuclear families. Reshaping Victorian terraced housing to fit a communal lifestyle ruptured the physical fabric of houses originally designed to reflect patriarchal and hierarchical social relations. Jos reflected that squatting enabled women to,

*“... negotiate our relationship with the built environment in a much more immediate way and that included recognising and claiming spaces that didn’t belong to us, that had been taken from us, and recognising that that was a basic unfairness of capitalism - the way that space is bought and sold, and that you could use your own bodies to do something about that.”*

*“... it was that brilliant coming together of something that I needed to do, as a kind of escape or a change or seeing other ways of living than the way I’d been brought up, and something that I felt really committed to politically.”*



*“I think that, for me, the big thing about squatting is it absolutely hits that intersection between trying to live different ways as a person, and not being quite sure what those were, but seeing those things as important, and the politics of it, the really key politics of it, of ... the moment.”*

By the 1980s many inner London boroughs recognised squatted communities as a legitimate, if temporary, form of occupation and the granting of small sums of money sufficient to repair houses allowed a great number of short-life housing co-operatives to thrive. One of these groups included a number of young architects who had met at the AA and who decided to design and build their own collective house using mainly recycled materials in the renovation of two derelict workshops behind a row of houses on the edge of Islington. Two of the architects involved, Mary-Lou Arscott and Susan Francis, had both trained in carpentry and joinery and worked alongside other tradeswomen invited by the collective to work on different parts of the project. Most of the tradeswomen involved were also squatters. I was one of them.



Fig. 6 Architects Mary-Lou Arscott and Susan Francis, one of the founder members of Matrix, setting out a floor plate. Photograph used with permission of Susan Francis

## Feminist process and practice

By the early 1980s I counted myself lucky to have trained on two government-funded, industrial courses in carpentry and joinery and woodworking machinery. I spent some time working with Susan Francis on the collective house, laying floors and making door linings. I remember her approach to work was a world away from the rough and ready carpentry usual to squats and other temporary housing. Sue worked with a care and precision that assumed a future for her construction and she was eventually proved right. Her house still stands, but she did not know this as she coated screws in soap, to make it easier to change the floor if necessary, before fixing sheets of ply to the underlying joists. We worked methodically and slower than I was used to, but that enabled us to talk, as well as produce a better quality finish. Sue told me about her involvement with Matrix and also about a new access course to encourage more women to study architecture that was starting at North London Polytechnic. These conversations were instrumental to me joining the access course a few years later where I began five years of architectural education and was taught by Susan Francis, Jos Boys and Julia Dwyer among others. After recently beginning a project on the history of my own squatting community in Hackney, and a renewed awareness of how the ways in which we physically and spatially shaped our environment were integral to the way we lived our feminist politics, these interviews expanded to include the experiences of architect squatters.<sup>14</sup> Squatting shaped many future careers in built environment professions and trades as well as academia. When it came to interviewing Jos and Julia, our common ages, shared experiences and political perspectives made the interviews at times conversational and generally, eased the oral history encounter. I circulated transcripts of the recordings and subsequent drafts of this article for comments and amendments, which were returned swiftly and duly incorporated into the text. This process of collective working was once the norm for all three of us and hopefully the final text demonstrates this 'shared authority'.<sup>15</sup>

There is not space in an introductory article of this short length to expand on the theoretical connections between squatting and the emergence of feminist architectural practice but these links exist and need further exploration and analysis. The most obvious connection is found in the aim of the Feminist Design Collective to collapse the barriers between designers and builders, an aim with historical antecedents in the Arts and Crafts movement, which had some success in squats but it was, and remains, difficult to translate into the wider construction industry. Grassroots activism and direct action implicit in squatting informed the work of feminist designers and planners aiming to improve and mediate a built environment understood as 'man-made' through designs foregrounding women as users.<sup>16</sup> The constant need for meetings, and consensus, between squatters in order to protect and maintain their housing against the threats of eviction became a forging ground for later design work with community groups. Most importantly,

<sup>14</sup> Some of this earlier research is now published and downloadable in the article Christine Wall, "Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney," *History Workshop Journal* 83, No. 1 (2017): 79-97. doi: 10.1093/hwj/dbx024.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: Suny Press, 1990).

- <sup>16</sup> See Jane Rendell's overview of feminist architectural practice and theory, "Tendencies and Trajectories: Feminist Approaches," in *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, ed. C. Greig Crysler, Stephen Cairns and Hilde Heynen (London: SAGE, 2012), 85. This approach is epitomised by the 1980s work of Matrix and the design guides published by the Women's Design Service.

urban squatting in London of the 1970s enabled a generation of feminist women to engage directly with the built environment: to shape it and adapt it at the level of the household and the community. Julia's phrase 'just doing' contains the kernel of the confidence gained from acting, and in some ways, a turning away from abstract theory to concrete achievements. This physical interaction with the materiality of housing, the bricks, timber, wiring, roofing and internal and external spaces, was also a direct engagement with the city. For these women squatting not only enabled them to determine the terms of how they wished to live but was also their claim to a right to the city and was fundamental to emerging practices of feminist architecture.

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Dedicated to the memory of Susan Francis 1952-2017

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