We House, You are Housed, They are Homeless

Colin Ward

Footnotes:

1. N. J. Habraken, *Supports: an Alternative to Mass Housing* (London, 1972).
2. John Turner and Robert Fichter (eds), *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York, 1972).
3. Barbara Ward, *Poor World Cities* (London, 1970).
4. William P. Mangin and John C. Turner, 'Benavides and the Barriada Movement' in Paul Oliver (ed.) *Shelter and Society* (London, 1969).
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. Colin Ward, 'The People Act', *Freedom,* Vol. 7, No. 22, 24 August 1946.
8. 'The Squatters in Winter', *News Chronicle,* 14 January 1947.
9. Nicolas Walter, 'The New Squatters', *Anarchy,* Vol. 9, No. 102, August 1969.
10. Andrew Gilmour, *The Sale of Council Houses in Oslo* (Edinburgh, 1971). For a fuller presentation of the case for tenant control see Colin Ward, 'Tenants Take Over' *(Anarchy*, No. 83, January 1968).

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In English, the word 'housing' can be used as a noun or as a verb. When used as a noun, housing describes a commodity *or product. The verb 'to house' describes the process or* activity *of housing...*

Housing problems are defined by material standards, and housing values are judged by the material quantity of related products, such as profit or equity. From the viewpoint of a central planner or an official designer or administrator, these are self-evident truths...

According to those for whom housing is an activity, these conclusions are absurd. They fail to distinguish between what things are*, materially speaking, and what they* do *in people's lives. This blindness, which pervades all institutions of modern society explains the stupidity of tearing down 'sub-standard' houses or '`slums' when their occupants have no other place to go but the remaining slums, unless, of course, they are forced to create new slums from previously 'standard' homes. This blindness also explains the monstrous 'low-cost' projects (which almost always turn out to have very high costs for the public as well as for the unfortunate 'beneficiaries').*

JOHN TURNER,
'Housing as a Verb' in *Freedom to Build*

Ours is a society in which, in every field, one group of people makes decisions, exercises control, limits choices, while the great majority have to accept these decisions, submit to this control and act within the limits of these externally imposed choices. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of housing: one of those basic human needs which throughout history and all over the world people have satisfied as well as they could for themselves, using the materials that were at hand and their own, and their neighbours' labour. The marvellously resourceful anonymous vernacular architecture of every part of the globe is a testimony to their skill, using timber, straw, grass, leaves, hides, stone, clay, bone, earth, mud and even snow. Consider the igloo: maximum enclosure of space with minimum of labour. Cost of materials and transportation, nil. And all made of water. Nowadays, of course, the Eskimos live on welfare handouts in little northern slums. Man, as Habraken says, 'no longer houses himself: he is housed'.[1]

Even today 'a third of the world's people house themselves with their own hands, sometimes in the absence of government and professional intervention, sometimes in spite of it'.[2] In the rich nations the more advances that are made in building technology and the more complex the financial provision that is made for housing, the

between the owner-occupier and the municipal tenant. Nearly a third of the population live in municipally-owned houses or flats, but there is not a single estate controlled by its tenants, apart from a handful of co-operative housing societies. The owner-occupier cherishes and improves his home, although its space standards and structural quality may be lower than that of the prize-winning piece of municipal architecture whose tenant displays little pride or pleasure in his home. The municipal tenant is trapped in a syndrome of dependence and resentment, which is an accurate reflection of his housing situation. People care about what is theirs, what they can modify, alter, adapt to changing needs and improve for themselves. They must be able to attack their environment to make it truly their own. They must have a direct responsibility for it.

As the pressure on municipal tenants grows through continuous rent increases which they are powerless to oppose except by collective resistance, so the demand will grow for a change in the status of the tenant, and for tenant control. The tenant takeover of the municipal estate is one of those obviously sensible ideas which is dormant because our approach to municipal affairs is still stuck in the grooves of nineteenth-century paternalism. We have the fully documented case history of Oslo in Norway as a guide here. It began with the problems of one of their pre-war estates with low standards, an unpleasant appearance and great resistance to an increase in rents to cover the cost of improvements. As an experiment the estate was turned over to a tenant co-operative, a policy which transformed both the estate and the tenants' attitudes. Now Oslo's whole housing policy is based on this principle. This is not anarchy, but it is one of its ingredients.[10]

There are two camps within the camp - the official squatters (that is the people placed in the huts after the first invasion) and the unofficial squatters (the veterans, who have been allowed to remain on sufferance). Both pay the same rent of 10s a week - but there the similarity ends. Although one would have imagined that the acceptance of rent from both should accord them identical privileges, in fact, it does not. Workmen have put up partitions in the huts of the official squatters - and have put in sinks and other numerous conveniences. These are the sheep; the goats have perforce to fend for themselves.

A commentary on the situation was made by one of the young welfare officers attached to the housing department. On her visit of inspection she found that the goats had set to work with a will, improvising partitions, running up curtains, distempering, painting and using initiative. The official squatters, on the other hand, sat about glumly without using initiative or lifting a hand to help themselves and bemoaning their fate, even though they might have been removed from the most appalling slum property. Until the overworked corporation workmen got around to them they would not attempt to improve affairs themselves.[8]

This story reveals a great deal about the state of mind that is induced by free and independent action, and that which is induced by dependence and inertia: the difference between people who initiate things and act for themselves and people to whom things just happen.

The more recent squatters' campaign in Britain had its origins in the participation of the 'libertarian Left' in campaigns in the 1960s over conditions in official reception centres for homeless people, principally the year-long campaign to improve conditions at the King Hill hostel in Kent. 'The King Hill campaign began spontaneously among the hostel inmates, and when outsiders joined it a general principle was that decisions should be taken by the homeless people themselves and the activities should confine their part to giving advice, gathering information, getting publicity and raising support; and this pattern has been repeated in every subsequent campaign'.[9] From the success of the King Hill campaign the squatters' movement passed on to the occupation of empty property, mostly belonging to local authorities who had purchased it for eventual demolition for road improvements, car parks, municipal offices, or in the course of deals with developers. This was at first resisted by the authorities, and a protracted lawsuit followed the use of so-called private detectives and security agencies to terrorise and intimidate the squatters. Councils also deliberately destroyed premises, (and are continuing to do so) in order to keep the squatters out. The London Family Squatters Association then applied a kind of Gandhian moral blackmail before the court of public opinion to enforce the collaboration of borough councils in handing over short-term accommodation to squatting families. In some cases, to avoid political embarrassment, councils have simply turned a blind eye to the existence of the squatters.

Just one of the many predictable paradoxes of housing in Britain is the gulf

more intractable the 'problem' becomes. In neither Britain nor the United States has huge public investment in housing programmes met the needs of the poorest citizens. In the Third World countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America the enormous movement of population into the big cities during the last two decades has resulted in the growth of huge peripheral squatter settlements around the existing cities, inhabited by the 'invisible' people who have no official urban existence. Pat Crooke points out that cities grow and develop on two levels, the official, theoretical level and the popular, actual, unofficial level, and that the majority of the population of many Latin American cities are unofficial citizens with a 'popular economy' outside the institutional financial structure of the city. Here is Barbara Ward's description of these unofficial cities, *colonias proletarias* as they are called in Mexico, *barriadas* in Peru, *gourbivilles* in Tunis, *bustees* in India, *gecekondu* in Turkey, *ranchos* in Venezuela:

Drive from the neo-functional glass and concrete of any big-city airport in the developing world to the neo-functional glass and concrete of the latest big-city hotel and somewhere in between you are bound to pass one or other of the sectors in which half and more of the city-dwellers are condemned to live.

Sometimes the modern highway passes above them. Looking down, the traveller catches a glimpse, under a pall of smoke from cooking pots in backyards, of mile on mile of little alleys snaking through densely packed huts of straw, crumbling brick or beaten tin cans. Or the main road slices through some pre-existent shantytown and, for a brief span, the visitor looks down the endless length of rows of huts, sees the holes, the mud, the rubbish in the alleyways, skinny chickens picking in the dirt, multitudes of nearly naked children, hair matted, eyes dull, spindly legs, and, above them, pathetic lines of rags and torn garments strung up to dry between the stunted trees.[3]

Well, that is how it looks to the visitor. The local official citizens don't even notice the invisible city. But does it feel like that on the ground to the inhabitant, making a place of his own, as a physical foothold in urban life and the urban economy? The official view, from city officials, governments, newspapermen, and international agencies, is that such settlements are the breeding-grounds for every kind of crime, vice, disease, social and family disorganisation. How could they not be since they sprang up without official sanction or finance and as the result of illegal seizure of land? The reality is different:

Ten years of work in Peruvian *barriadas* indicates that such a view is grossly inaccurate: although it serves some vested political and bureaucratic interests, it bears little relation to reality... Instead of chaos and disorganisation, the evidence instead points to highly organised invasions of public land in the face of violent police opposition, internal political organisation with yearly local elections, thousands of people living together in an orderly fashion with no police protection or public services. The original straw houses construct-

ed during the invasions are converted as rapidly as possible into brick and cement structures with an investment totalling millions of dollars in labour and materials. Employment rates, wages, literacy, and educational levels are all higher than in central city slums (from which most *barriada* residents have escaped) and higher than the national average. Crime, juvenile delinquency, prostitution and gambling are rare, except for petty thievery, the incidence of which is seemingly smaller than in other parts of the city.[4]

Such reports could be quoted from the squatter experience of many parts of the world. These authors, John Turner and William Mangin, ask the obvious question: can the *barriada* - a self-help, mass migration community development by the poor, be exported to, for example, the United States: 'Some observers, under the impression that the governments of Peru, Brazil, Chile, Turkey, Greece and Nigeria had adopted the *barriada* movements as a policy for solving these same problems, have thought the US could do the same. In fact, these governments' main role in *barriada* formation has been their lack of ability to *prevent* mass invasions of land. They are simply not powerful enough nor sure enough of their own survival to prevent invasions by force. In the United States, the government is firmly entrenched and could prevent such action. Moreover, every piece of land is owned by someone, usually with a clear title...' [5] They point too to the lessons of Oscar Lewis's *The Culture of Poverty:* that putting people into government housing projects does little to halt the economic cycle in which they are entrapped, while 'when people move on their own, seize land, and build their own houses and communities, it has considerable effect'. Lewis's evidence shows that many social strengths, as well as 'precarious but real economic security' were lost when people were moved from the self-created communities of San Juan into public housing projects. 'The rents and the initial investment for public housing are high, at the precise time the family can least afford to pay. Moreover, public housing is created by architects, planners, and economists who would not be caught dead living in it, so that the inhabitants feel no psychological or spiritual claim on it'.[6]

In the US, Turner and Mangin conclude, the agencies that are supposedly helping the poor, in the light of Peruvian experience, actually seem to be *keeping* them poor.

The poor of the Third World shantytowns, acting anarchically, because no authority is powerful enough to prevent them from doing so, have three freedoms that the poor of the rich world have lost. As John Turner puts it, they have the freedom of community self-selection, the freedom to budget one's own resources and the freedom to shape one's own environment. In the rich world, every bit of land belongs to someone, who has the law and the agents of law enforcement firmly on his side. Building regulations and planning legislation are rigidly enforced; unless you happen to be a developer who can hire architects and negotiators shrewd enough to find a way round them or who can do a deal with the authorities.

In looking for parallels in British experience, what exactly are we seeking? If it is for examples of defiance of the sacred rights of property, there are examples all through our history. If you go back far enough, all our ancestors must have been

squatters and there have continually been movements to assert people's rights to their share of the land. In the seventeenth century a homeless person could apply to the Quarter Sessions who, with the consent of the township concerned, could grant him permission to build a house with a small garden on the common land. The Digger Movement during the Commonwealth asserted this right at George's Hill near Weybridge, and Cromwell's troops burnt down their houses. Our history must be full of unrecorded examples of squatters who were prudent enough to let it be assumed that they had title to the land. It is certainly full of examples of the theft of the common land by the rich and powerful. If we are looking for examples of people building for themselves, self-build housing societies are a contemporary one. If it is simply the application of popular direct action in the field of housing, apart from the squatter movement of 1946, mass rent strikes, like those in Glasgow in 1915 or in East London in 1938, are the most notable examples, and there are certainly going to be more in the future.

At the time of the 1946 squatting campaign, I categorised the stages or phases common to all examples of popular direct-action in housing in a non-revolutionary situation. Firstly, *initiative,* the individual action or decision that begins the campaign, the spark that starts the blaze. Secondly, *consolidation,* when the movement spreads sufficiently to constitute a threat to property rights and becomes big enough to avoid being snuffed out by the authorities. Thirdly, *success,* when the authorities have to concede to the movement what it has won. Finally, *official action,* usually undertaken unwillingly to placate the popular demand, or to incorporate it in the *status quo.*[7]

The 1946 campaign was based on the large-scale seizure of army camps emptied at the end of the war. It started in May of that year when some homeless families in Lincolnshire occupied an empty camp, and it spread like wildfire until hundreds of camps were seized in every part of Britain. By October 1 038 camps had been occupied by 40 000 families in England and Wales, and another 5 000 families in Scotland. That month, Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health who was responsible for the government's housing programme, accused the squatters of 'jumping their place in the housing queue'. In fact, of course, they were jumping right out of the queue by moving into buildings that would not otherwise have been used for housing purposes. Then suddenly the Ministry of Works, which had previously declared itself not interested, found it possible to offer the Ministry of Health 850 former service camps, and squatting became 'official'.

Some of the original squatter communities lasted for years. Over a hundred families, who in 1946 occupied a camp known as Field Farm in Oxfordshire, stayed together and twelve years later were finally rehoused in the new village of Berinsfield on the same site.

A very revealing account of the differences between the 'official' and the 'unofficial' squatters comes from a newspaper account of a camp in Lancashire after the first winter: