

House Magic: an Incomplete Timeline of Occupied Social Centres Around the World

House Magic is a project exploring the movement of squatted social centers (also called OSCs or Occupied Social Centers). These ventures in creative activism have been going on for many years in many countries as activists and artists work together to create spaces (mostly) within the city—spaces in the “cracks”—as platforms for social, political and cultural events. These OSCs are not entrepreneurial ventures (created to make money) and they are not under the supervision of the state.

House Magic offers a chance to explore an idiosyncratic archive devoted to the experience of the social center movement in London, Amsterdam, Madrid, Zurich, Hamburg, Barcelona and Ljubljana among other cities. This project relies on a variety of mediums to document an often ephemeral history: photos, hearsay, websites, publications.

The project coincides with a rising tide of action and discussion around squatting in the U.S.A., and the sharing of strategies regarding urban gardens and farms, land occupations, infoshops and other countercultural formations. This kind of creative activism has been called “prefigurative.” It is about action you want to see. It also coincides with a way of making art—participation, social sculpture—which is not so much theorized as acted upon, that is, enacted continuously over time and outside institutional confinement. It is all part of increasing the historical consciousness of an emerging 21st century tradition of building a just, sustainable society.

The House Magic: Bureau of Foreign Correspondence exhibition opened in Spring of 2009 at ABC No Rio, a longtime cultural center on the Lower East Side. A suitcase version traveled to Chicago for the “Nfo Xpo” at Version Fest ‘09. In the Summer, “House Magic” was remounted at the Sculpture Center in Queens as part of the University of Trash. The project continues as a growing archive, collecting stories and documents, books, downloads, still and moving pictures with a commitment to display when ever possible. In 2010 “House Magic” showed at Basecamp in Philadelphia, Ides of March at ABC No NYC. Moore attended the Squatting Europe Research Collective (SOEK) conference in London and researched in Hamburg. He blogs the project at “Occupations & Properties.”



Mainzer Strasse squats
Berlin, Germany
2-1990

In November of 1990, a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, thousands of police faced off against hundreds of squatters in a days-long street battle to evict the dozen squatted houses in the Mainzer Strasse of Berlin. The twelve houses had twelve different scenes. In some houses were mostly East Germans, in others “Wessies.” There were houses with punks, political freaks, refugees, etc. In every house there were activities: pubs, Volküche (people’s kitchens), a bookstore with left literature, infoshop, and the “Forellenhof,” a pub in Tuntenhof that staged some unforgettable shows of drag queens during its short existence. The non-squatter citizens on the street watched the hustle and bustle with mixed feelings. Some organized themselves into a citizens’ initiative against the squatters because the noise and strident banners (especially the Gay House) were getting on their nerves.

These citizens continually assailed the politicians and administrators calling for eviction. When it came, the eviction was epic, with stone throwing, tanks and water cannons, barricades, riot gasses and stun grenades, a flaming trolley car, and over 100 street battles. During these days, the squatters received assistance from many in the community, like a donation of gas masks from a retired firefighter.

Today the district of Friedrichshain in former East Berlin has changed from a drab residential area to a lively diverse neighborhood with many cultural and political surivals from the days of the squatters.

Excerpt and redacted from Google translation of: umbruchbildarchiv.de/bilderarchiv/ereignis/141190mainzer_strasse.html

See also:
1. Autonomie in Bewegung: aus den ersten 23 Jahren. (Berlin: Verlag Assoziation A, 2003). “Mainzer Straße -10 Jahre zurückblick beim Streikfaktor und in der TAZ”

At the same time, the community garden movement created social and cultural space in neighbourhoods throughout the city on the vacant lots where apartment buildings had been knocked down. These two complex movements intertwined.

See also:

1. Clayton Patterson et al., eds., Resistance: A Radical Social and Political History of the Lower East Side. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007). Squatters’ Rights Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University



Centro Sociale Leoncavallo
Milan, Italy
1975-ongoing

Leoncavallo is the most famous self-managed social centre in the city. The social centre moved to via Watteau from via Leoncavallo in the Casoretto district in 1994. Today the new centre (now called Leoncavallo S.P.A, spazio pubblico autogestito [self-managed public space]) houses a publishing house and bookshop, a legal helpdesk for immigrants and is the headquarters of six associations. Three hundred and fifty concerts a year are held there, together with an international cartoon fair, 96 theatrical performances and 100 film screenings. It also transmits Radio Onda d’Urto 18 hours a day. The centre receives 100,000 visitors a year and has a significant turnover, the profits from which are fed back for “cultural initiatives.”

Excerpt from: turismo.provincia.milano.it

See also:
1. it.wikipedia.org/wiki/CS_Leoncavallo (in Italian)
2. Andrea Membrètti, “Centro Sociale Leoncavallo: The Social Construction of a Public Space of Proximity” (2003), in net/disc/realpublicspaces/membret-ti01_en.htm

Image credit: Anton Van Dalen



Lower East Side squatter resistance movement
New York City, USA
various houses and gardens
1970s and ‘80s-2002

In the face of extensive landlord abandonment of tenement buildings on the Lower East Side of New York City, activists and local residents banded together to take over buildings. At first they worked under city-sponsored “homestead” and “sweat equity” programs, but as these ended and properties in the district were returned to a highly speculative private market, an internationally networked squatting movement claimed “adverse possession” rights to many buildings. The movement reached a high pitch of street fighting antagonism in the 1988 Tompkins Square riot. While most of these occupations were lost, in 2002 a number of squats were legalized as low-income coops.



Binnenpret
Amsterdam, Netherlands
1984-ongoing

On February 10, 1984, these 19th century draw horse stables in the Oud Zuid (Old South) area of Amsterdam were squatted as part of the “Day of Unrest,” organised by the Amsterdam squatters’ movement. This was a protest against the imminent eviction of the huge “Wijers” squat complex to build a Holiday Inn hotel. Wijers was evicted four days later by a force majeure of the police, who had great difficulty due to the passive resistance of 1500 to 2000 squatters.

People active in Wijers came to the new squat after the eviction. Together with squatters from the Schinkel area Hoofddorpplein, and in cooperation with the De Meerpaal center (now Cascade), they organized rental assistance hours and a youth help center. In those early days, the complex offered space to initiatives like the sauna Fenomeen (Phenomenon), the toddler playground Binnenpretjes (now in Cascade), Moroccan youth center Chabab, bicycle workshop Farafina, music studios, the OCCII concert hall, the Kasbah café, the children’s theatre space Wijnand Stomp (adopted by Teatro Munganga in 1988), the info centre Bollox, restaurant Zorro’s Zion (already active under the same name in Wijers), later The Byre, now MKZ; five artists’ spaces, a few homes and a lush green courtyard. From the beginning, efforts were made towards maintaining a horizontal organizational structure, although there were many strong conflicts over space.

In 1989, Amsterdam began the “Clean Ship” campaign in which all publicly owned squats were asked to negotiate. De Binnenpret finally reached a rental agreement. Try to remain independent, changing from squatter to tenant!

In the ‘90s, the way of life with which the squat group in the Schinkel neighborhood had grown up was vanishing. It was no longer easy to get welfare money (“Do they owe you a living? Of course they do, of course they do!”), and the many volunteers made way for jobs subsidized by the state but paying below minimum wage. The business initiatives beginning in 1984 have grown and thrived. Gradually, more initiatives grew, especially for the youth from the neighborhood. Binnenpret

had focused on neighborhood-oriented and accessible activities from its inception. Many Binnenpret people live in this neighborhood, and they attract other local residents. Also, as the state jobs are over, the volunteers are back again. De Binnenpret is still going strong after 25 years, as shown by the weeks of festivities marking that occasion in February of 2009.

Excerpt and redacted from website’s translation of: xs4all.nl/~binnenpr/gesch.htm



RHINO
Geneva, Switzerland
1988-2007

The RHINO squat occupied two buildings on the Boulevard des Philosophes in downtown Geneva, a few blocks from the main campus of the University of Geneva. RHINO housed about 70 people before its evacuation in July 2007. RHINO stands for “Retour des Habitants dans les Immeubles Non-Occupés” (in English, “Return of Inhabitants to Non-Occupied Buildings”). The project also operated an independent cinema in its basement, the Cave 12, as well as a bar, restaurant and concert space on the ground floor called Bistro’K.

The two buildings’ facades were often decorated with protest art, and leftist political messages. The buildings were instantly recognizable by the large red horn installed on the wall. This horn was the first target of police when they evicted the inhabitants on July 23, 2007.

Redacted from: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RHINO_%28squat%29

see also:

1. rhino.la/
2. Discussion with Michel Chevalier, in “House Magic” zine catalogue #1 at: sites.google.com/site/house-magic/bfc/house-magic-bfc-zine-1



Rote Flora
Hamburg, Germany
1989-ongoing

Built as a theater in 1888, the building that today houses Rote Flora in the Schanzen district of Hamburg survived the Second World War. After two decades as a department store, there began a controversy over its further use. Several groups obtained a short term lease. The city soon revoked it, but the groups continued as squatters in the Rote Flora. In autumn of 2000, the Senate of Hamburg began negotiations for a new lease. The question became a political issue, and the building was sold to an entrepreneur.

The Rote Flora had its 15th anniversary in November 2004. It was used as a convergence center for the Anti-G8 protests in Germany in 2008, and for several congresses, political meetings and cultural events. The main issues addressed in Rote Flora are immigration, nationalism in Germany, and privatization of public space. The front part of the building still serves as a space for political, often very subjective and propagandistic, messages. Rote Flora organizes art exhibitions, working with artists from all over the world. In addition to serving as a meeting point for left-wing movements, the Rote Flora organizes flea markets, parties and cultural events, and a wide range of alternative music such as punk, reggae, ska, dub, drum ‘n’ bass and goa.

The Rote Flora is mainly financed through donations and parties.

Redacted from: nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/roteflora

See also:

1. Chevalier in “House Magic” #1, cited above.



56a Infoshop
London, England
1991–ongoing

56a Infoshop was born in June 1991, sharing a squatted space with Fareshares food co-op (purveyors of whole foods and organic vegetables since 1988). After a dark period of no electricity and possible eviction, 56a now has a 10 year lease from the local housing council. Both the Fareshares Food Co-op and 56a Infoshop have been renovated. 56a houses a zine library (including a Europe-wide archive of anarchist, political and squatting activism in the '90s and '00s), with some items and their own publications for sale. The collective hosts reading groups, "cafes" or get-togethers, a small exhibition space, practical squatting meet-ups, film screenings and radical history walks.

Redacted from:
56a.org.uk



CoolTan Art
London, England
1991–92; 1992–1995; 1997; 1998;?

CoolTan Arts took the name from the disused CoolTan Suntan Lotion factory squatted in Brixton in 1991. The group was evicted in '92, and the building was razed to the ground. The collective then moved to a vacant unemployment office building, called the "Old Dolehouse." There more local people became involved, and the co-op evolved to offer an art space, a café, office space for campaigns, rehearsal rooms, darkrooms, low-cost workshops, and a string of serious techno parties. (The last ones saw more than 1,500 people attending.) Among the campaigns hosted were: Reclaim The Streets, Earth First!, various Green Party groups, and London Friends of Travellers (UK nomads). The squat was also the epicenter of

Excerpt and redacted from:
super.tacheles.de/cms

Tacheles
Berlin, Germany
1990–ongoing



The Art-Centre Tacheles is situated in a partially destroyed building in central Berlin (called Mitte). Located in former East Berlin, the area was a Jewish quarter in the past and has now become a meeting point for people interested in arts and culture. The building was part of a huge shopping mall built in 1907. During the war, air raids damaged the building, and it was never rebuilt. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the building was taken over in February of 1990 by a group of young artists from many countries. It rapidly became a center for performances and concerts, theatre, visual art exhibitions, workshops, poetry and special events.

As an international art centre, Tacheles influenced the surrounding area both positively and negatively. By now the once creative community has mutated into a trendy quarter. Tacheles has been recognized by the Berlin government, and receives a varying yearly subsidy to help finance some of its many projects. Other money is raised through commercial enterprises such as the cinema and the bars. Recently the yard has been built up with temporary artists' studios and shops.

Because of its special historic architecture, the dramatic "ruin appearance" of the rear side, and its years of activity in the international arts, "Kunsthau Tacheles" is now well known, and listed in many travel guides of Berlin. In the course of changes since the Wall came down, Tacheles has been confronted with the difficult challenge of remaining true to its roots and ideals without becoming too sentimental about the old squatting times.

agitation against the Criminal Justice Act which outlawed public rave parties. Numerous cultural projects began in this milieu, including the Exploding Cinema, a "hybrid fusion of projection, performance and social space," and CoolTan CUT Arts arts courses for people with mental distress. A key organizer, Shane Collins, later entered political life, running as a Green Party candidate. He said of the CoolTan era, "All of us worked our butts off, not for ourselves, but for the benefit of all. A bunch of often quite different people on the dole came together and we did it. A totally independent community arts squatted centre."

Redacted from:
urban75.org/brixton/features/cooltan.html

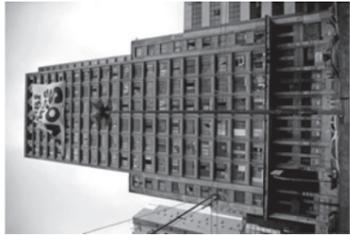


Rozbrat
Poznań, Poland
1994–ongoing

A strongly socialist "freedom movement" in Poznań sought to have their own space. They chose a vacant warehouse in an industrial area. At first the squat was residential, a commune or intentional community. But nearly every resident was somehow active in social activity. Music has always been important at Rozbrat, and concerts were organized very early at Rozbrat (1995 with Oi Polloi of Scotland), although the program began slowly because the space was dangerous. As the building was improved, the character of the place started to change and it became an independent culture centre. The collective widened from a closed group to a wider coalition. In 1997 the Anarchist Federation began working at Rozbrat. "Liberation Feasts" are forum meetings to decide on issues at the occupied social center (OSC). The "Lame Mule" (Kulawy Mul) is a space adapted for recitals, poetry evenings, discos and lectures, and has more recently served as an art gallery. In 2005, a new cafe bar next to the Gallery was created, it is a chillout zone. Rozbrat continues as a centre of independent culture in Poznań – without subsidy or sponsor, "outside of the system... for ourselves."

Redacted from:
rozbrat.org/our-activity/157-rozbrat-squat

See also:
1. House Magic #2



Prestes Maia
2002–2007
São Paulo, Brazil

The Prestes Maia was the largest squatted high rise building on the South American continent. Originally 468 families, united in the Downtown Roofless Movement (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro or MSTC) of São Paulo, and lived in the 22-storey high-rise since 2002. There were approximately 250 families and the numbers varied as people moved in and out. The building had been closed and left in a rundown condition for years, like many buildings in downtown São Paulo. The new residents cleaned out tons of rubbish, and expelled drug operations and criminals. It contained a free library, workshops, and hosted autonomous educational, social and other cultural activities. In the last few years of the squat it was a laboratory for experiments in the bottom-up urban renewal of downtown São Paulo. People of all ages and classes, from all Brazilian states and other nationalities, including artists and students, all worked together. The 250 families comprised more than 1600 previously homeless people, including children, elderly and disabled. Evicted 2007.

Redacted from:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prestes_Maia

See also:
1. Andre Mesquita article in House Magic #2

rampART
London, England
2003–2009



At 5am on Thursday, 15th October, 2009, the rampART Creative Centre and Social Space was evicted by 45 police with chainsaws and, remarkably, a Church of England vicar. Three people and a dog were inside. The eviction marked the end of nearly five and a half years of occupation, during which rampART served as a landmark for the social centres movement in London and a venue for a diverse range of events including political meetings, workshops, info cafes, fundraising parties and the London Freeschool.

The eviction, significantly happened on the same day that Non Commercial House, a freeshop operating out of a building on nearby Commercial Street, lost their case against eviction and a week after the collective occupying 2a Belgrade Road in Stoke Newington successfully defended the space from eviction by council bailiffs.

Excerpt from:
therampart.wordpress.com

See also:
1. Liffthoist.ucrony.net

2. House Magic #2
3. What's This Place: Stories from Radical Social Centres in the UK and Ireland (2008) at socialcentrestories.wordpress.com



Patio Maravillas
Madrid, Spain
2007–2010

Patio Maravillas was a multi-purpose autonomously-governed space in central Madrid. The former school, closed for seven years, was in the Malasaña district. Different activities were organized to involve people living in the neighbourhood. Access to permanent activities was free, such as: the Bicicritica bicycle repair workshop, video and documentary screenings (Cinema Maravillas), an internet room and hacklab, a cafeteria that served as a meeting point for cultural and social exchange, English classes, remedial classes, a storytelling and creative writing workshop, subversion point (political and feminist discussion), the "chikiasamble" (children's activities and games room), a photography workshop (Foto Patio), legal advice, rap workshop, and more. There was also theatre, painting, music, audiovisual, and immigration groups that met, rehearsed and carried out their activities. Also, concerts, exhibitions, neighbourhood meetings, talks about health and consumer issues, and meetings of different groups took place. At the time of writing, the collective has occupied a new space, at Calle Pez número 21.

Redacted from:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patio_Maravillas

Alan W. Moore writes on artists' groups, cultural districts and cultural economies. He worked with the artists' groups Colab and helped start the cultural center ABC No Rio in New York. He is presently running the "House Magic" information project on self-organized occupied social centers.