Dwelling - Squats - Transcript

Marnie: Hi, I'm Marnie and welcome to Dwelling. A podcast that explores how we find and fight for feelings of home. Throughout my early twenties, I jumped around the rental market, fighting estate agents and landlords for a decent place to live, spending hours trawling through property websites and figuring out the best way of saying, please let me have somewhere to live. And I got tired of the personal struggle watching my friends go through the same thing and realising that actually the forces that make homes so hard to find are impacting us all. The housing crisis in the UK has been raging for over a decade with rents skyrocketing, house prices becoming entirely unattainable, and we are all feeling the impacts.

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Speaker 1: We don't have any rights as the people leaving here. And I'm like, how is that even possible?

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Speaker 2: And then it got too much rent to pay, uh, a bit too poor and stuff...

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Speaker 3: The only outside space was a tiny little balcony that was directly over the bins, the communal bins. It was so grim.

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Speaker 4: It was like an attic room in a house that had been converted into three different flats. So altogether in this building that used to be a house, there was 12 people living their

1:16

Speaker 3: There must be an alternative. That feeling of like, there must be an alternative to what we are doing

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Marnie: According to Crisis, there's just not enough affordable housing for people on lower incomes. Shelter has reported that homelessness has risen 11% in just the last

three months. And youth homelessness charity Centre Point has reported an increase of 41% since 2016. But it's not just about those who are unable to access housing. Those of us that have homes are reporting worse conditions, poor wellbeing, and an increasing sense of isolation. We're living in a world where the aspiration of home ownership is totally unattainable to most young people. So with the traditional root of home inaccessible to many of us, how can we create alternatives and how can we find that feeling of home?

When you think of home, what do you think of?

2:11

Ross: Yeah, uh, it was, uh, so it was a Victorian or Edwardian era fire station. So like pretty like physically homely, like there were people cooking and workshops that were running and things like that. And, um, loads of ideas bouncing around. So I, I I guess it's really just, yeah, like that thing of you do really rapidly start to kind of build your own little culture somewhere like that where you are with all these people and there's, there's a lot of really creative people who end up in squats as well. So that helps. <laugh>,

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Marnie: This is Ross.

Um, so Ross, how do we know each other?

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Ross: Hello Marnie. Um, swing dance.

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Marnie: <laugh> Oh my God. Yeah, it was swing dance.

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Ross: Swing dance at Bristol Uni, which we did for a year and never got good at and following that appropriately living together. Yeah, it just…

3:06

Marnie: Ross is an enigmatic character. He can barely keep still and can generally be relied upon if you're looking for a bit of adventure or just have an hour long discussion on the intricacies of Survivor. A few months after we moved out of our Bristol house, I texted Ross to see how he was doing. Over the year we'd lived together, we'd spent hours discussing housing and home.

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Ross: I was kind of questioning to what degree market solutions are are good for solving something like housing.

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Marnie: So when I asked where he was living, his answer surprised me.

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Scottish News Reporter: Today we're looking at Baile Hoose in Glasgow. For those of you who haven't held Baile Hoose is the occupation of the former Hamish Allen Center, an asylum seekers night shelter in Tradeston. They were set up to offer accommodation to climate justice campaigners during COP 26.

3:57

Ross: So the charity I was volunteering at was called Stop Climate Chaos Scotland. We were trying to bring people from the official, really sterile environment of cop and connect them to the activist kind of community. I had a pretty good mullet at the time, a long one with a really shit haircut for the normal bit. So I think someone kind of spotted that and thought that I might be the sort of person that would like to live in a squat.

4:22

Marnie: In the UK today, we have nearly 90,000 empty homes. In one of the worst housing crises in living memory, we have 90,000 fully functioning houses sitting empty. There are 10 empty commercial buildings for every registered person sleeping on the streets. The fact that buildings are allowed to remain empty is in itself an inherently political act. It gives right to property to landowners over individuals, community and society.

4:50

Ross: So squatting is a really interesting thing cuz there's all this dead housing stock in the UK. All all of these buildings that aren't being used. And if you think, oh, how are people who need housing? How are vulnerable people who don't have lots of resources gonna get it. Obviously one of the ways is like the squats with people who are willing to take risks cause they're in such, can often be in difficult situations. They just go take it <laugh> like as a kind of model, that was interesting and I I I wanted to find out more. And I also needed somewhere to stay.

5:27

Marnie: So today we're speaking to squatters, people who are creating homes and community spaces to wrest this emptiness into a space that serves a purpose. To breathe life back into buildings. Squatting was basically something I'd only heard my mom talk about, so I started to do some research. I wanted to know how and why Ross and 20 other environmental activists had to break into a disused building, just to have somewhere to stay so they could be part of the conversation.

Squatting is when someone deliberately enters the property without permission and lives there or intends to live there. And squatting isn't just about housing. It provides a way for social groups that society ignores to gather, create movements, and have the spaces and resources to exist. Squatting as we know it today started after the second World War with many homes decimated by the blitz. Families and war widows were unable to wait for houses to be provided by the slow cogs of a post-war government. And as council housing lists became longer and longer, a squatters movement began to emerge to take direct action to house the homeless. And by the 1970s it had become apparent that there was a group of people that the housing system was leaving behind, penalising and punishing: women.

The rise in single mothers and the prejudice in the justice system meant that women were increasingly less likely to be housed and often led to their children being taken

away. The controversial documentary Cathy Come Home illuminated the issues that so many single mothers were facing.

7:02

Man: Well I’m sorry, but I'm afraid we'll have to move you out.
Cathy (to man): We were gonna be evicted anyway.

Cathy (softly, outside): I mean, they turned us out of the caravan, didn't they? And they turned us out the derelict house. Well, they're gonna find us here. I know they will.

Cathy (yelling): Haven’t you got flats that are empty half the night? You don't care. You only pretend to care.

7:24

Marnie: In the 1970s, squatting for women wasn't just about finding a physical home, it was about creating spaces in a way that had previously been denied to them. But there's one name that came up over and over again. Olive Morris, a founding member of the Brixton Black Women's Group. She was an advocate for women, people of color and housing rights and she intrigued me. If you type squats into Google, you're bound to see the picture of Olive clambering onto a roof using a wonky drain pipe as a foothold. She was a cover girl of the Squatter's handbook for over 20 years and remains one of the most influential squat as activists.

So one day in July I took my bike, who I lovingly refer to as Delilah, down to Lambeth archives. I cycled down Brixton Road with the sun blaring down as I weaved through traffic. My backpack laden with audio kit notes and research. When I arrived, I was handed a stack of CDs that held interviews from Olive's, friends, family, and fellow activists. As I put them one by one into the CD drive, as my ancient laptop whirred

and clicked, I felt transported to that time, these people, with issues that are glaringly similar to today.

8:39

Jennifer Lewis: My name is Jennifer Lewis, nee Morris. I was born in Jamaica. I I just remember Olive as being the big sister. She was a very good big sister. She at, at the time. I didn't appreciate it, of course. Um, so she would take charge of us, the younger ones, even charge of her bigger brother <laugh>. Cause that's how she was. I was young so I didn't really pay much attention. I just knew mum and dad wasn't there, they were in in England. My uncle was in England and we lived with our gran. But you know, you just get on with your life running around as kids. Don't really think about it. And when it was time to come over, we knew we were going to England to meet mom and dad again.

9:20

Tube voice: This is Brixton where this train terminates.

9:24

Interviewer: And how was it for Olive?

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Jennifer Lewis: Of course. Cause the sort of, um, nature she had. She had a hard time getting on with my dad cuz she felt that he was bossy to my mom. That's, that was until finally when she decided to leave home, she just felt that she couldn't take it anymore. So when, when my dad hit her, she'd call the police. The police didn't really take it in these days. They would take more notice of it. But in them days they didn't take that much notice. Um, she'd called the police every time she hit her. And then one day she was just sent to a home, to a children's home. So then that's when she first left home, even though she was still going to secondary school in Lavender Hill.

10:06

Jocelyn Wolfe: Um, who am I? I'm a mother, grandmother now, but, um, how did I get to know Olive? I left home when I was quite young. I was about 16 and a half.

There was this kind of widely held belief that at that time as well, that if you had a child or children, you'd get rehoused by the council. But it was, I think just as difficult then as it probably is now. So there were many, um, not only single parents, but couples as well with children who were squatting. So that was really my introduction, if you like, to squatting. So it was, it was not squatting so much, um, as a kind of revolutionary act, but more as a need. You know, we just needed somewhere to live, needed somewhere decent to live.

11:01

Jennifer Lewis: It was in Brixton still and it was on Raton Road. So she'd walk around and say, well that's an empty property. That one's not doing nothing. Let's see if we can get in there. And then she got in there. That was it.

11:14

Sandra Hurst: Nineteen to twenty I was squatting Railton Road. It was wonderful. It was wonderful homes for us for a good period of time.

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Jocelyn Wolfe: But the first time I, I met her at her meeting, I remember thinking, she's not very big because for some reason, I think because she was always being mentioned, I don't know, she just somehow seemed as if she was a very big person, <laugh> and she'd help you whether you ask for it or not, which is, you know, what got her into a lot of trouble. I suppose it's a kind of famous picture of her sort of, um, um, sizing up absent policemen, you know, who were all bigger and taller than her because she was just walking by and saw, you know, police harassing somebody. And she just kind of moved in, you know, as she, as she did.

You know, I had joined the group. There was, I mean, I think because the Brixton Women's group was just full of right on women and I think that was because they started up the women's group. They'd all come from the, the, the founders of the group came from members of the Panthers. And I think they had to be that to kind of shout down the men and sort of go off and do their own thing. So I think they were

very kind of strong women. So they were very vocal pople. I'm just trying to think which of the demonstrations we were involved in. There seemed to be demonstrations every bloody week we were out there making placards for some demonstration or the other

12:47

Mike: Two, 300 people turned up to the event. *clears throat* I'm Mike. I said I was at Olives umerr as in this is Mike, he's my um… er…. To see a woman of that age. And with that vitality just so youthful and so much in front of her, she was just, she just qualified. She got a job at Brixton Law Center. The world was really her oyster. And then for it all to just be taken away so quickly, it was just, just devastating. And then the, uh, the big thing was the memorial service, I think it was two weeks later at the event centre. And that was really big. And that's a woman who had no official position. She wasn't secretary of this, she wasn't a counsellor. And it just extraordinary that kind things she radiated. She demonstrated that more things are possible for people that perhaps they think they are, in terms of what we can achieve from the humblest of beginnings, and I don't mean that in a career sense, but rather in a sense of self.

14:04

Interviewer: What causes do you think she would be interested in

14:07

Jennifer Lewis: Oh yes. Um, I think she'd still be fighting for women's rights. Like she always was. And she always felt that everybody should have somewhere to live. And which was what started her off with, um, the squatting, I think in Brixton. Acre Lane.. she got her place. She didn't stay there long before she died. She spent most of that time with that place in North School. Really, it's unfortunate cause this was a time when she, she would've enjoyed, be able to say, I've actually donem, this is what I wanted. I've got a place.

14:48

Marnie: Olive died when she was just 27. But her legacy has proved powerful as one of her squats. 1 21 Railton Road became one of the longest lasting squats in the UK and was used as a site of enormous change. She continues to inspire activism and was a true pioneer of the right home, particularly for women and particularly for women of colour. But home isn't just about the four walls you occupy, it's about the place, the people, a safety, and a freedom to be yourself. As I continue to dig into how squatting has affected our relationship to home, I found another organisation that utilised squatting to fight for social change and more equitable ways to find home

Overlayed voices: queeruption will be held in a squatted venue, an opportunity for queers of all sexualities together. The gay liberation front based in 121. And then I went to visit the autonomous winter another and another, and another round house *descends into hubbub*

Marnie: so I've been sifting through this box and it's a letter and it starts, dear squatter name, dear squatter name unknown. It's kind of your occupational kind of feels like it, especially in like without bicycle, bicycle scene, late nineties, wasn't it an easy time to be queer? Right, to occupy these premises on This really feels like taking someone the property immediately remove all your personal, I don't know exactly how to say this, but it feels like a small victory to be able to hold a party where you can celebrate your identity that is not being treated well by modern society. Where it's not modern society anymore, I guess. Um, yeah, and it's samba sewing, healing with chocolate. What bisexuals do after dark fertility awareness, life modeling, you are in doubt. It just feels like it was a space solicitor where people could really be themselves, local center.

Marnie: So in many ways the Glasgow Squat Baile Hoose, my Scottish accent is so bad, I'm so sorry. It followed a trajectory. When people are denied these basic

feelings of belonging in spaces in cities or the basic right of home, isn't it only logical that they might try to take it for themselves.

17:48

Chanting woman: Because they think we are powerless. We are those people!

Crowd of yelling women: We are those people!

17:54

Marnie: But squatting today is very different. It's illegal to squat in a building intended for residential use. Due to the increasing restrictions on squatters rights and the negative portrayal of squatting in the media, it proved extremely difficult to get people to talk about their homes and squat. I would find someone's happy to talk, arrange a time to meet, and I would get a lot of this.

beep ringtone *beep ringtone* *beep ringtone*

18:23

Marnie (to phone): Yeah, that's a shame. Hopefully he'll call me back.

Marnie: But I kept trying. I kept calling and I kept emailing until eventually as I was about to give up on speaking to squatters who have it as a way of life rather than as part of a political protest. The advisory service for squatters said they'd be up speaking to me, otherwise known as ass. So on a bitingly cold day, I cycled down to the Freedom press bookshop to speak with Hollis, a squatter of almost 30 years. Going up a set of creaky stairs. I was confronted with leaflets and posters showing activism and protest over the last 40 years from trans rights to animal liberation, to anarchy to the environment. We sat in a drafty office room that smell of curry and tea. Hollis looked a bit nervous to be speaking with me, although as it was in the minuses outside at the time, mostly he just looked cold.

19:11

Hollis: Um, I've known squats since before I was a squatter, partially politically and partially out of necessity. Politically, I don't believe in the ownership of property. I'm also quite poor <laugh>. I personally, and as with a lot of what I've just said, this isn't

a, uh, viewed, necessarily shared by everyone in the advisory service for squatters. But yeah, I see property as part of an inherently hierarchical system, which is, is exploitive in its very nature and means that the resources that that humans need to use to be able to support each other to stay alive are, are held in the hands of the few, and not by all of us as squatters. We're often very good at making a home out of what is about us. We, we can do that very quickly, but it doesn't get, it doesn't last for very long. Often it's, it's very vulnerable, you often have to start from scratch again and again. Primarily it's, it's a roof over people's heads. Um, that, that can't be denied <laugh>, particularly when it's as cold as it is now. While the government provision that is there, things like the se-severe wind winter emergency protocol that's enforced at the moment that may provide a roof over people's heads in the short term, it's not giving people any sense of home, any sense of agency. It's not creating a situation that you can, you can build communities out of.

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Marnie: Throughout my research, the motivations for squatting had varied enormously and had previously been people from all walks of life, but with increasing restrictions. I wanted to know who was in the squatting community now and what kind of people were inside the UK's empty buildings.

21:11

Hollis: Yeah, and it varies from crew to crew. You get some households of squatters who are full on party people ravers 24/7 and some who are very placid chill, just want somewhere to live. And some who are, uh, more militant on the activist side of things and a whole range of things in between.

21:33

Ross: And, and it did act as a really good mixing pot for all these different people. That's <laugh>. I mean, if I look through, if I look through my gallery of that particular moment in time, we had a guy is 70 who was constantly dressed as Santa from Canada. We had a guy from Germany who walked all the way from Hamburg in a giant metal hamster ball. Then there was all of the women and non-binary people

who opened the squat. Then there was all sorts of activists from all over the world, well mostly all over Europe who had kind of been on the front lines of climate activism.

22:09

Marnie: I asked Ross and Hollis what challenges they were facing in a world of tightening restrictions, criminalization and increasingly heavy handed policing.

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Ross: I, there was kinda unexpected for me, like if I was interviewing, that I wouldn't realise it's like the psychological strain of being in an environment like that. Like you have basically a load of people, who generally a squat is not the first choice or place to live. So a load of people who are in, in some way vulnerable, living in a space and there's loads of riot police outside. A lot of them have had previous run-ins with the riot police with like really bad experiences with police and like trauma associated with the police. And then you've also got all of these new people coming and going where like at times there, there could be quite a lot of paranoia in the eye because people are worried about and dunno who they can trust and there's this kind of threat right out the door. And by the end of it was pretty happy to have a break from cuz… Yeah, it's, it's difficult.

23:22

Hollis: And over the last decade, decade and a half, it's become a lot quicker with various different laws. The process of evicting squats through legal channels. We've seen also a rise of more renegade kind of bailiffs and high court enforcement officers who often aren't being challenged for, for the ways that they're going and going about quite often criminally, evicting, squatters and not just squatters people in other vulnerable situations, housing wise.

23:55

Activist: There's not, um, there's not any, any people that are like at serious risk of, um, like deportation or anyone with like unsafe, um, visas. Uh, and we really want that to be the case that people can come. Um, but because this, since, since, since

this place has been public for over the last, uh, well yeah, yesterday it went public. Um, the police had just been like handing us and it hasn't felt safe to invite people in. So

24:21

Marnie: One of the Baille Hoose activists was interviewed outside the squad the day after it went public bail house gained a lot of traction in the media with the Guardian describing it rightly or wrongly as a slice of utopia.

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Activist: Like there's been loads of like mainstream news, um, outlets that have come and like been really, really in support, which is kind of interesting. I haven't really come across that before with things to do with things to do with squatting. I guess it's because like it's cop and there's lots of like <laugh>, white, middle class people involved and

24:57

Marnie: Race and gender and class are a huge factor in how people find home and also how they're treated by the systems of hierarchy and oppression that surround housing. It's also prevalent within activism. The recent case of Satchel, one of the few activists of color in the protests against the high speed railway was arrested and imprisoned while many of his white counterparts weren't even taken into custody.

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Marnie (to Ross): And how did this squat end? Like how, how did you leave?

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Ross: Yeah, peacefully, which was nice and as I understand it, that was a thing that was really unusual for a squat that we were actually able to say, we are gonna leave on this day and then leave because of the fact that it was happening. It became a media spectacle and it allowed for all these different things to happen. Yeah, we walked out on our own accord and for a lot of the people there who were kind of more seasoned at that kind of thing, like I think it was a like important moment for them. It really kept the memories of the place sweet because it did kind of break a lot

of ground and it did really, it really hit, it hit what it was supposed to do. It housed a load of activists during COP.

Pretty much everyone went and did a welding course. <laugh> <laugh>
Except for me pretty much everyone left the squat and decided to go learn how to do metal work. I've, I've said a lot of stuff that's kind of a bit negative about it cause I kind of, I don't wanna give some overly romantic vision of it, but obviously one of the good things about living in squats is that you don't pay rent and on our was an activist one, but you do get ones that aren't, but people do just have jobs and you can save up money and then spend that money on stuff that's not rent. Like learning how to weld. Basically people are using, people are using the money to buy education and investing in themselves.

You know, things are pretty bad now. Like if we don't get some significant change in policy, like what's, what's this country gonna be like in 10 years? Like, it's not gonna be, I I don't know. I I I definitely, I definitely worry about it.
27:02
Marnie: The cost of living crisis is biting and a report by Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing found that three in five young people felt that housing was affecting their mental health. And a study by the New Economic Foundation found that 30 million people in the UK will be priced out of a decent standard of living by 2024. That's almost half the population of the UK. What Hollis had said about the systems of hierarchy and property, it feels like it all makes sense. The gripes I had about extortion rent and the unjustness of the housing system all fell into place. Although Ross and I did not put it quite so eloquently.
27:41
Ross: Why stuff is shit is cuz some people have all the stuff.
27:45

Marnie: Yeah, yeah. Some people do literally have all the stuff. Okay, cool. I'm gonna stop recording now because, uh, yeah,

27:52

Ross: Deteriorating

<laugh>

27:54

Hollis: I'm also surprised at the moment that more people aren't starting to squat the it's not growing and that, that surprises me.

28:03

Marnie (to Hollis): We've spoken quite a lot about the, the difficulties that come with squatting and that they're increasing. Why does it surprise you given all of these, these challenges?

28:14

Hollis: Um, because it seems like amongst every other kind of affordable housing, the difficulties in, in doing anything or increasing on, on the same kind of level, at the same kind of pace.

28:29

Marnie: Before I left White Chapel, I had one final question for Hollis. Someone who had spent his whole life thinking about housing, putting himself through hard situations out of necessity and political beliefs and advocating for others. I wanted to know what a world would look like, where home was for everyone?

28:46

Hollis: That wouldn't need to be squatters because property wouldn't be being owned by a few and fewer and fewer greedy landlords. Uh, we would see a lot more things owned and run and upkept by the communities that are using them. We would have a lot more agency in how we relate to the buildings and structures around us and what we use them for. This, this could overlap easily with, uh, wider land usage and agricultural practices, for example. Yeah, I, I think we can make this world very beautiful and very equal, but we're not getting there yet. <laugh>

Marnie (quietly): yeah…

29:29

Marnie: This series on Dwelling

29:32

Man outside: And when you see the whole Roding or the whole river and its tributaries as your home, then actually, yeah, you want to take care of it.

29:40

Man on phone: And for me, I mean, whether you are travelling or whether you are static or wherever you are, it's people that make home.

29:47

Child: I, I wouldn't think it would be a home if I wouldn't know anybody there.

29:51

Young woman: Definitely it's more freedom, but then that's at a cost isn’t it. That's the thing.

30:03

Marnie: Find us on your favourite streaming platforms and released weekly on Mondays. Follow us on social media at Dwelling_Pod. Powered by Transmission Roundhouse.