

## **UK squatters' social movement's crystal ball: the future of UK squatting during the post-UK Brexit and post-COVID19 recovery period**

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### **Abstract**

It's not about UK Brexit or the virus per se. It's about the large body of homeless people, subsisting during the challenging economic crisis, post-UK Brexit and post-COVID19. United Kingdom (UK) squatters are living in fear, deep poverty and hunger. For the purpose of this text: UK Brexit is the decision by a very narrow majority of the UK population; to sever all formal economic, political and social ties with the remaining 27 European Union (EU) member states. UK Brexit is a socio-economic political decision, which will have a profound effect upon the UK squatters' social movements throughout the 2020s. Living as a squatter in the UK is an act of surviving adversities in a country with a panoply of human paradoxes. The UK squatters' social movement simultaneously inhales and exudes human tragedies, alongside demonstrating heroic acts of solidarity. This is because how UK Brexit actually works, enabling increased financial capitalisation of domestic and commercial property, will be laid bare. Societal polarisation, radicalisation and social division will intensify, with civil protests being suppressed by ever more draconian UK policing legislation. Suppression from increasingly vicious policing starkly evidenced by people's lived experiences. There will be a demographic transformation of UK squatters in the 2020s, with people now living in neo-poverty caused by the global post-COVID19 cost of living crisis. There will be a neo-homeless: a body of typically low-middle income people who were previously just about managing; now literally being evicted due to UK Brexit, long COVID or both.

**Keywords:** UK housing policy failure; neoliberal financialisation; UK Policing Bill 2021; neo-homeless; neo-social centres; UK squatter's mental health and well-being

### **Structural flaws in UK housing policy perpetuating the need for UK squatters' social movements**

The neoliberal financialisation in the housing market which exploded in the 1980s continued apace into the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period. As in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-8, the UK post recovery period will experience an upsurge in squatting (Martinez, 2019, p191; see also Tornberg, 2021, p91).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tornberg (2021) identifies a 'fiscal crisis' as a causal factor resulting in social change. Tornberg (2021, p100) indicates that squatter communities are delivery agents which help effect social change.

Globally, financialisation of the housing market has acted to monetise residential housing as an asset, without constructing new houses. This is a structural flaw in the housing market, enabling the value of accommodation and subsequently mortgages to grow, without increasing housing supply (Kohl, 2020, p1). A shrinking state signalling the end of priority needs critical resource allocation, alongside less building of social housing has reduced housing supply. Privatisation of the housing market has acted to increase house prices and rents, baking in a profit motive to reduce housing supply. Globally, the additional finance which has been made available for housing capital investment distorts the housing market (European Network for Housing Research, March 2021, p24). Globally this is housing policy failure, manifest in the manner housing financialisation acts to incentivise the non-supply of housing. These structural flaws of a neoliberal housing market will produce a perfect storm in the 2020s; manifesting as an increased number of UK squatters during the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period.

### **UK policy drivers effecting UK squatters' social movements**

The Conservative Party UK General Election victory December 2019 massively shifted the balance of political power towards capital investment and policing in the UK. The former issue perpetuated the perfect storm driving the neoliberal financialisation of the UK housing market (Nowicki, 2021, p843). Capital investment provided finances for land banking, urban regeneration and property speculation. Land banking is the worst manifestation of capital investment as the practice often distort housing markets, leading to an increase in UK squatting (Kohl, 2020, p20). During capital investment a property developer buys land not to build residential housing, but to inflate the value of existing housing investments elsewhere. In practice land often with planning permission attached stands empty and undeveloped, with no housing or accommodation being built that people can live in. Capital investments assets increase in value whilst no physical housing construction takes place, the rental value of existing residential is artificially kept high (Jimes, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2021; Dingle, Blandy and Blandy, 21 June 2021).<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile UK homelessness and squatting rates increase, mainly for many single people unable to secure accommodation due to the shrinking state. The private sector simply won't be able to cope with the clearly foreseeable increase in housing demand, post-UK Brexit post-COVID19. Qualifying criteria for private sector rental accommodation will be ever more stringent, most people not in stable employment won't be able to apply (See Crisis, March 2021, 18). For those people who are accepted, private sector rents will have continued to rise at the market rate, matching the costs of a mortgage. Many people from privately renting, will also be unable to access social housing: now an even scarcer resource in the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 recession.

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<sup>2</sup> This Dingle (2021) reference item is dated 1 January 1970, which is clearly an error. The article makes reference to a policy review led by Sir Oliver Letwin in 2017. The article access date is 21 June 2021, so I have referenced this Dingle source as 2021.

## **A new post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 normal: UK squatters' social movements' neo-social centres**

In the 2020s globally there will be a growing body of people living in neo-poverty, caused by the global post-COVID19 cost of living crisis (See Ndhlovu, 2022, p10). A likely development of post-COVID-19 neo-poverty, will be the formation of social centres set up by both global and UK squatters' social movements. Essentially the provision will be neo-social centres delivered either on their own or in association with other community groups (see Tornberg, 2021, p83). UK squatters' social movements will also be involved, in raising public awareness on environmental issues such as a proposed return to fracking. There will be ongoing protests and campaigns concerning, airport expansions, #Black Lives Matter, clean air, Extinction Rebellion and high-speed rail (HS2). UK squatters will also take part in protests on issues such as post Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021 implementation. The Policing Bill 2021 as it's known proved to be particularly contentious with UK squatters' social movements and associated campaign protest groups. The Policing Bill 2021 eroded people's civil liberties substantially, compared to UK legislation in force pre-UK Brexit and pre-COVID19. The Policing Bill legislation gave UK Police Forces the right to set the noise limit, start and finish times of authorised protests (UK Government, 13 May 2021; Casciani, BBC News, 22 March 2021). The Policing Bill 2021 severely limited grassroots activism's ability to peacefully protest in an effective manner, preventing raising of awareness of social justice issues. One effect of the UK Policing Bill in its various forms through the 2020s, was that locally based social centres became easier to establish, whereas public protest became harder.

In the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 recovery period, the Policing Bill 2021 had an unintended societally beneficial effect, the proliferation of UK squatters' associated social centres. I argue these will be neo-social centres, not based on the beneficial anti-capitalist latter day 20<sup>th</sup> century model of a squatted social centre (Martinez, 2019, p189). Instead, UK neo-social centres in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period, will focus on providing the social infrastructure for neo-homeless transition. In the post-recovery period, the neo-homeless will be much more fluid and transient in nature, spending quite short periods of time as a UK squatter. The neo-homeless can assist with and will require help from neo-social centres. New advice, community and support groups will be formulated, with existing groups reinforced by an army of very capable vocational workers on hand (see Wong, 2020, p231).<sup>3</sup> This was due to the mini economic depression in the UK, as UK Brexit had not worked out as planned. Sufficient international trade deals continually proved elusive, difficult to negotiate, unexpected tariffs and adverse UK Supreme Court decisions acted to impede UK Brexit. The UK economy took longer than expected to recover post-COVID19, intermittently, wearing face masks and varying social distancing measures remained. The result of these circumstances was the UK economy flat-lined, stagnated, unemployment

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<sup>3</sup> Wong's (2020) study indicate how the ranks of social activist groups, can contain very able people. Wong (2020) explains how an asbestos removal campaign group, were able to challenge information belatedly supplied by corporate asbestos manufacturers to regulatory authorities.

increased and vacancies fell. More people (often with high levels of non-mortgage personal debt) were poorer, living in neo-poverty caused by the global post-COVID19 cost of living crisis.

Neo-social centre housing movements similar to PAH (Platform for people affected by mortgages) assisted in fundraising and/or supplying rent bonds (Martinez, 2019, p191). (Private sector landlords often ask for 4 weeks rent and another 4 weeks rent as a deposit in advance. This is before a person is offered a rental agreement to sign, along with the keys to the accommodation) (see also Crisis, 2021, p3).<sup>4</sup> The army of unemployed workers contain highly qualified very able people, a human capital resource which can be redeployed into neo-social centres. They will be able to deliver legal, employment and welfare tribunal representation, helping people to avoid eviction, remain employed and access their benefit entitlements. These neo-social centres will be vital grassroots schemes, providing key services to UK squatters and others in the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period. There will be UK squatters home re-start initiatives, projects that liaise with private and social landlords to re-house squatters. The work of this type of housing neo-social centre would include, getting the accommodation offered, cleaned and furnished. UK squatters re-house re-start neo-social centre schemes, would coordinate ensuring the property is re-connected to gas, electricity and water services. Day-to-day advocacy work would include, providing grants or loans for private landlord bond schemes, alongside assisting UK squatters with their welfare benefit claims. In this sense, neo-social centres have been through a process of '*...co-optation and being tuned into service-providers*' (Bluhdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p267). I argue such a transformation of the UK squatters' social movements', in providing essential social infrastructure to UK squatters is societally beneficial. The neo-social centres we will see in the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 recovery period, will be quite different to the squatted settlements model of the 1960s onwards (Nowicki, 2021, p844).

### **UK squatters' social movements' activism, engagement and issues they address**

There will be a process of repoliticisation and depoliticisation by many within the UK squatters' social movements, concordant with a reduction in organising resistance (Bluhdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p267). This reflects the global North direction of travel regarding squatters' social movements, who will continue to routinely face housing policy failure, caused by neoliberal financialisation (Martinez Alonso, 2022, p487). There is similar harmonisation with squatters facing increasingly vicious policing in both global North authoritarian and liberal states. There will be varying levels of acceptance and reconciliation from the UK

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<sup>4</sup> Crisis (March 2021, p91) identify the need to 'stem a potential tidal wave of 'new' homeless, expected as the COVID-19 induced recession takes hold'; also, that UK Brexit will cause 'disruption to trade and various temporary labour markets'. Welfare and housing protections will be scaled back or ended.

squatters' social movements, with collaborative working with non-squatters' movement community groups and state actors (de Moor et al., 2021, p313). The post-UK Brexit post COVID19 recovery period will demonstrate resistance for resistance's sake is counterproductive, throughout all genres of social movements. Whilst there will always be a need for direct action, there is little benefit in contentious confrontation with political opponents (Bluhdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p267). The UK squatters' social movements, post recovery, will be more about service-delivery and raise awareness campaigns. Politicisation of social action including squatting will be observed and understood through differing economic and pragmatic lenses, as appropriate in post-UK Brexit post COVID19 times. UK squatters and others will see that the benefit of transformation to a Fabian gradualist approach, will reap societal buy-in rewards in the long-term (See de Moor et al., 2021, p315). The UK has witnessed a neoliberalisation of local housing administration, engendered by compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and the introduction of arms-length management organisations (ALMOs). Public welfare provision has been similarly ravaged by capitalism, manifest in the privatisation of energy, water and public transport (Bayliss et al., 2020, p4). The neoliberalisation of environmental politics is more mixed, the political impetus to reduce the use of plastic faded quickly. The quest for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and clean air is much more tangible in the long-term. International, national and local engagement continues to take place, with non-state groups including UK squatters working collaboratively devising practical solutions to environmental concerns. In this sense global squatters' social movement activists have agency; able to act strategically regarding the future context of their work.

### **Continuous fundraising**

UK squatters' social movements, alongside numerous other mutual aid and community associations, will join forces to organise fundraising for many disadvantaged marginalised people (Rutherford, Antipode Online, 1 April 2021). Sums raised will be redistributed by the newly formed community coalitions, mainly in the form of food banks. UK Squatters social movements will be assisting in distributing food to people, who otherwise would go hungry. Fundraising will be a continuous pursuit, the social message no one should be hungry, food is a basic human right, falls on deaf ears. The UK left the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights in the early 2020s (Saunt, MAILONLINE, 20 June 2021). There will be high unemployment, as the UK economy won't have fully recovered in the initial stages of the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period. The economic downturn will produce a relatively new phenomenon, destitute households being given additional money towards food, utility bills and public transport use (Hansard, 8 February 2022, column 841). Low to middle income now unemployed households will need to address period poverty. This is a social issue which many global North squatters' movements have faced since their inception in the 1960s.

## **UK squatters' mental health and general wellbeing**

The incidence of mental health disability reached worryingly high levels during the COVID19 pandemic in the UK (Centre for Social Justice, February 2021, p44). Although it won't be acknowledged by the UK government during the post-UK Brexit post-COVID period: UK Brexit will be proved to be a contributory factor in the UK's deteriorating mental health. There is a high prevalence of UK squatters with mental health problems who very often due to being homeless, are unable to access treatments. UK squatters were not able to obtain the medication they need, participate in therapy sessions, analyse their self-meaning to see a positive side. More UK squatters did not have the physical or social space, to express or reflect on everything in their daily living experiences. The UK had not fully recovered from the austerity measures cuts to public services, in response to the global financial crisis 2007-8 (Bailey et al., 2021, p159). The UK was thrown into economically turmoil again in 2021 when in quick succession; both the UK Brexit transition period and the bulk of Government financial support in response to the COVID crisis ended. This led to a significant spike in UK people needing mental health care. UK squatters were particularly hardest hit as they are homeless people, living in often insanitary, insecure, uncomfortable, unheated, very stressful conditions. The trends described here also apply to squatters based elsewhere in the global North.

## **Conclusion**

The transformation of the UK squatter's movement, in the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period towards service-provision, presents a dichotomy (Malamidis, 2021, p34). On the one hand it represents a sting in the tail. To a degree engagement with a broader non-squatter's movement base, hollowed out the UK squatter's movement in the post-recovery period. There was a resulting loss of identity, due to the financial dependence on state actors from broader engagement. The likelihood of transgressive actions, marches, resistance and protests from UK squatters reduced (Bluhdorn and Deflorian, 2021, p267). The other side of the dichotomy, is the UK squatter's movement will be seen as a collaborative working body. This would result in UK squatters being recognised during the post-UK Brexit post-COVID19 period, as a societal force for good. Structural changes in the global social landscape: manifest as continuing housing capital investment neoliberal financialisation; increasing levels of vicious anti-protests policing legislation, the global post-COVID-19 cost of living crisis; are all social policy drivers, which will influence the possibilities and limits of global North squatters' movements.

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