



Well Furnished

Words & photography *Tasman Munro*

Sleeping on the dusty floor of an abandoned shop in Hackney, convinced I'd be arrested at any moment, I began to wonder what the hell I was doing there. My first night squatting in London was terrifying: besides having no clue where I stood with the law, everything just felt a little bit sketchy. But, having heard that squats are amazing creative spaces, I decided to hold my breath and dive on in. They all are curious.

The next morning I was 'kidnapped' by Toby, a regular and somewhat annoying visitor to the squat. He dragged me on a wacky adventure through the streets of London before offering to sell me a cheap bicycle with a large clock strapped to its frame. I gladly paid the eight quid, removed the clock and took the adventure as a sign of things to come.

The community center I had stumbled upon was known as Well Furnished, a squatter-run space named after the furniture shop that was once there. The building was owned by a local church trust; it had been abandoned for years and was one of many empty properties on Well Street. Empty shops were a hot topic amongst our neighbours: they suspected the trust was keeping them vacant in some crooked game of Monopoly – creating an air of dereliction, driving shopkeepers out and eventually buying up the whole strip.





Well Furnished hoped to rekindle the creative side of Well Street by re-energising lost spaces and giving them back to the public. Transforming 'unfurnished' into 'well' furnished, we offered a massive gallery space to the public - free of charge - for a wide range of events. Art exhibitions, Spanish lessons, pole dancing, queer tango, shitcore radio broadcasting, drawing workshops for kids, reflexology, bike building, laughter yoga and community gardening all became part of the weekly schedule.

Aside from the space, we offered a team of people willing to help out: the number of people at Well Furnished was constantly changing, but a solid group of twelve or so kept things moving. Most of the planning took place at our Monday night meetings. These were a strong tradition. Over cups of tea and a system of organised hand gestures, we would plan the week's events (who would curate the exhibition, run the kitchen, man the door or build the bar) as well as discuss general household chores (dishes, cleaning, dumpster diving and barricade building). As

volunteers, we could contribute as much or as little as we wanted. No one would say "take a lunch break at 1:30", so our sanity was our responsibility. That said, the space ran on a "merit-triarchal" system, whereby squatters who contributed most were offered a promotion, i.e. first dibs on the best places to sleep.

Running an arts venue, home and drop-in center under one roof was no easy task. Squabbles began to arise and we soon realised it was time to expand. We cleaned out the old toy shop and bric-a-brac stores adjacent to the property; the rooms were filled with thick dust, crumbling walls and bizarre traces of the shop's former life (Christmas crackers and pregnancy kits). From this, we pieced together goods we found, and built a small creative empire.

The hallway was converted into a bicycle workshop with random tools and a mountain of bikes salvaged from a previous squat eviction. The shop front to the left was converted into a second gallery and conscious cafe, with a kitchen large enough to prepare many dumpster-found banquets.

Most controversial of all was our in-house sex bar. Ulik, our wonderful Polish transgender resident-cumexplicit-painter, adorned the bar with a magnificent mural of a homoerotic orgy, much to our delight. But, after protests from a particularly fiery neighbour, we were convinced to edit out some surplus genitalia. The room to the right was our pride and joy - the theater, where many a night was spent creating, performing and dancing until the sun shone through the shutters.

Over the coming months we hosted a range of events and tried everything in our power to build community rapport. We contacted the trust proposing care-taking agreements, had been in and out of court and played everything by the book. Despite this, one morning at 6am we were evicted in an unexpected dawn raid.

I woke to see two large men with flashlights standing over my bed: "High court bailiffs, time to get out!" Staggering downstairs I was greeted by 20 bailiffs, an equal number of police, guard dogs, a camera crew, plumbers, builders and a whole bunch of squatters

looking really pissed off. They swept through, evicting the whole property. They cut the water pipes, changed the locks, boarded the windows, and installed full-time security. In one hour we lost everything. Standing outside at 7am in the rain, looking back at our creative kingdom, my alarm went off to wake me for work. How quickly things can change. In the realm of squatter run spaces, we had had a good run. It's exciting to live in a place like that; you have unrestricted freedom and an incredible network of creative people. Well Furnished was refuge to a big family of struggling artists, I'm not romanticising the struggling part: a painter robbed by his agent and kicked to the streets, a journalist unable to find employment after an accident, a brilliant Sudanese man attempting to follow his Naval engineering dreams, and a crew of the most inspiring poets who... well, all poets struggle, right?

At times it was difficult with so many people running a space that could vanish tomorrow. All we could do was pretend we were going to be there forever, because at the end of the day it's the people that count, not the space. •

