Squatting the Crisis

Distributions of the Sensible from Grenfell Tower to the Home Front
Outline

- One year, two days ago…
  - Grenfell Tower Fire (14 June 2017)
  - Calls to requisition empty properties
  - Dismissed as nonsense
- The distribution of the sensible – *la partage du sensible* (Ranciere)
  - Property entitlement
  - Responsibility deficit
  - Aesthetics (voice and appearance)
- Precedent for requisitioning
  - Recognition of people over property
  - Squatting as a politics of force entry
14th June 2017, 12:45am
24-storey tower
Latimer Rd, N. Kensington
250 firefighters
40 fire engines
72 confirmed deaths
A tale of two cities

Royal Hospital
average household income £136,977
88.6% white

Lancaster West
average household income £30,956
62.1% BAME
‘a fresher, modern look’ that would fit in with the ‘overall aesthetic’ of the area (Rydon, contractors)
a large number of deliberately kept vacant flats and properties all over London’

Government should ‘compulsory purchase’ or ‘requisition’ such properties

Survivors should ‘occupy’ them

‘in an emergency you have to bring all assets to the table in order to deal with that crisis’

(Jeremy Corbyn)
‘We don’t support proposals to seize private property, our focus is on rehousing people as quickly as possible, in the borough and the neighbouring borough, and that still stands’ (Downing Street)

‘fit in with [Corbyn’s] hard Marxist views’ (Andrew Bridgen MP)
Calls to requisition or occupy empty local properties were dismissed because of ‘normal’ distributions of (a) property entitlement (b) responsibility and (c) aesthetics.

The post-war squatters (1945/6) demonstrate a precedent for overlooking such ‘accepted norms’ in times of crisis.

Squatting is a politics of ‘forced entry’ that can challenge self-evident distributions.
Approach
- Genealogical Politics

Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault, Brown…

- By taking a genealogical approach…

1. Can reveal the historicity of the present (contingency) of what society believes, the norms society takes for granted (e.g. the distribution of the sensible around private property)

2. Can disrupt narratives of the past (e.g. that UK is a nation that respects private property… precedent for direct action).
‘Normal’ distributions of the crisis
Private Property Entitlement

134% Rise in rough sleeping since 2010
24% Rise in London rents
97% Drop UK social housing
1857 Empty buildings in RBKC
696 Empty for more than 2 years
£53m Brompton Tube in 2014 (Firtash)
£85m Dukes Lodge in 2015 (Candy)
‘Resentful’

‘I don’t want them here’

‘It will degrade things’

Reassurances from Berkeley
'devolved governances and downloaded responsibility have long been hallmarks of neoliberal rule' (Jamie Peck, 2012)
Grenfell Tower fire: Kensington leader says council not responsible for residents' safety

Speaking exclusively to The Independent, Elizabeth Campbell says safety is 'under legal remit' of Kensington and Chelsea tenant management organisation.

Lucy Pasha-Robinson | @lucypasha | Tuesday 7 November 2017 15:29 GMT | 24 comments

David Cameron: I will kill off safety culture

'We need to realise, collectively, that we cannot eliminate risk and that some accidents are inevitable,' PM says.

Andrew Woodcock, Dan Bentley, Ben Glaze | Thursday 5 January 2012 15:45 GMT | 13 comments

Health and safety fears are making Britain a safe place for extremely stupid people

Health and safety concerns are reducing life to mindless mayhem, complains Boris Johnson.

By Boris Johnson | 6:21 AM BST 06 Jul 2009

What is the fire safety order (Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005)?

If you own, manage or operate a business, you need to comply with fire safety law. The main law is the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 or "the Fire Safety Order". It applies across England and Wales and came into force on 1 October 2006.

Who does it apply to?

The Order applies to almost all buildings, places and structures other than individual private homes – that's individual flats in a block or family homes.

Other places covered by the Order include shared areas in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), blocks of flats and maisonettes.

What are your responsibilities?

You need to make sure:

1. Your premises reach the required standards.
2. Employees are provided with adequate fire safety training.
Aesthetics and ‘the poor’
‘only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders’ (Grenfell Action Group, 2016)
They died ‘because they were poor’

‘It was an eyesore for the rich people living opposite. So they put panels, pretty panels, on the outside, so that the rich people opposite wouldn’t have to look at an horrendous block’

(Akala, activist-musician)
Despite the horror of the fire, the idea of requisitioning/occupying empty properties was simply dismissed.

This was because of the normative context of the fire, including entitlement, responsibility, and aesthetics.

Yet there is precedent for overlooking these norms in times of crisis and in the face of squatting campaigns.
Requisitioning and squatting 1945-6
Housing Crisis & WW2

218,000 houses destroyed by blitz
(today, 205,000 houses empty for more than 6 months in England)
‘I deeply regret to see the continued prominence of the Vigilantes...this is a matter of considerable importance and lawlessness should not be allowed.’

‘The law officers and the police should consider all means of putting an end to these pranks; and the newspapers should be induced as far as possible by the Minster of Information to curtail their publicity’

(Churchill, cabinet memo, 15th July 1945)
Extending Requisitioning Powers

Part of Emergency Measures 1939
Extended to housing people 1943

After Vigilantes, final act of wartime coalition ‘in order to prevent further lawless action’ and to ‘bring into use for the accommodation of homeless families any available empty houses… by requisitioning it was possible to secure that available accommodation was used to the full’
‘Empty houses constitute a provocation to desperate, homeless workers, and we call on the Government to legalise the position by requisitioning all properties taken over by the squatters and thus fulfil their election pledge to house the people’ (Nottingham Post, 1946)
Duchess of Bedford House, 8th Sep 1946
Cabinet reaction to Bedford squatters

Put pressure on the Cabinet to act on requisitioning powers (6000 used over the next year).
Post-war squatters demonstrate...

1. **Precedent for requisitioning** in times of crisis (overlooking limits of property entitlement and responsibility)

2. **A politics of forced entry** (overcoming aesthetic limits of voice and appearance)

‘ownership of property was a secondary consideration to the fact that it is empty’ (Watson, 2016)
Putting Grenfell and calls to requisition empty property in context allows us questions of property entitlement, responsibility, and unequal distribution of voice and appearance.
Unlike narrow, technical public inquiries; squatting (as a politics of forced entry) goes *beyond* ‘accepted’ norms and allows ‘the poor’ to intervene, ‘making what was unseen visible; making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech’ (Ranciere 2010, p38)
No coincidence that squatting has been further criminalised now and after the financial crisis: ‘seek to uphold the sanctity of private property and defend the interests of ‘hard-working homeowners’ against squatters’ (Vasudevan, 2017, p7).