

No Place Like Home

The materials in Cell's Reading Room draw from archives held at MayDay Rooms, a central London resource space and safe haven for social movements, experimental and marginal cultures and their histories. Items from collections on London housing struggle, activist group East London Big Flame, the London Squatter's Movement and *Race Today* magazine trace community-led responses in Tower Hamlets to an acute, ongoing UK housing crisis that took hold from the mid 1970s, and Thatcher's solution, in the form of the landmark 1980 and 1988 Housing Acts.

In the early 1970s Britain entered its worst recession since the 1930s, bringing an end to a quarter century of prosperity, compounding refusals by landlords to let properties under legislation passed in the 1960s intended to give tenants in the private rented sector better conditions. In the mid-1970s thousands of buildings in London were empty, at least 3000 in Tower Hamlets. A movement of over 30,000 squatters across London united by need, lifestyle choice or political commitments—often socialist or anarchist, and coordinated by groups such as activist-organisers East London Big Flame and the London squatter community's *Crowbar Magazine*, claimed their right to a home in a city experiencing housing shortage.

Coming into office in 1979, Thatcher introduced Right-to-Buy legislation financially incentivising council tenants to become homeowners from 1980, and increased the rights of private landlords in the 1988 Housing Act, further encouraging the growth of a private rental market. Her housing policies provided the architecture and incentive for a systemic dismantling of State social housing in need of modernisation, involving the widespread transfer of council estate management to private

housing associations trusts (or HATs), and the condemnation of others justified through strategic disrepair, limiting the council housing supply.

A transition from social democratic housing policy broadly directed by the needs of residents, to a new political common sense prioritising private developers' profits in the free market was especially stark in Tower Hamlets. With a higher than average rate of council tenancy in the borough of over 82% as late as 1985, under Thatcher's aggressive policy the "slums" in the East End's docklands were soon cleared to make way for a new financial district at Canary Wharf, sold by developers as a cross between Venice and New York (Wall Street with waterways).

Today, Tower Hamlets remains in housing crisis, according to the 2021 Census, the fastest growing local authority in the UK with the highest level of child poverty, 25 percentage points above the national rate. Across the city, boroughs facing chronic housing shortage have been offered Sadiq Khan's 'Right to Buy Back' programme (ending March 2023), helping councils to buy back flats on their estates sold under Thatcher's 'Right to Buy'. The Squatters' Movement, which peaked with over 50,000 UK squatters in 1989 according to ASS (Advisory Service for Squatters), persists at a reduced scale, in spite of 2012 legislation making it a criminal offence to squat in residential property. The political trajectory of circumscribing land use and access in the interests of property owners finds its latest development in the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, introducing new powers criminalising trespass, likely to affect Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in particular. Where will it end?



Vitrine A

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4. Race Today, *Race Today*, July/Aug 1976
5. East London Big Flame, Don't Let Empty Houses Rot, 1974
6. East London Big Flame, *People's Food Coop*, 1975
7. Author unknown, 'Mass Squatting in Tower Hamlets,' *Women's Struggle Notes*, Nov/ Dec 1974
8. Author unknown, 'Demonstrate Against the Criminal Trespass Law,' 1976
9. The Local, *Housing Scandal*, June 1979
10. Department of the Environment Welsh Office, *The Tenants' Charter*, 1980

Vitrine B

11. Tower Hamlets Research, Resource and Information Centre, *Taking Stock: The State of Housing in Tower Hamlets*, June 1985
12. CASE UK, 'Not For Sale' (poster), 1986-7
13. CASE UK, 'Estate Sales Victims Protest,' *CASE UK Newsletter 5*, August 1987
14. CASE UK, 'Developers Keep Out!' (sticker pack), 1986-7
15. SCAT, *Campaigning Against Dampness*, 1986-7 (first pub. 1978)
16. Advisory Service for Squatters in London, *Squatter's Handbook: 8th Edition*, May 1986 (first pub. 1976)
17. CASE UK, 'The National Campaign Against the Sale of Estates,' 1988
18. CASE UK, 'Lobby No Choice,' 1988
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20. Author Unknown, 'Homelessness and the New Act,' 1996
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22. Eviction Resistance, 'Eviction Resistance,' 1990 or later

Reading Room (Downstairs)

Vitrine A

Vitrine B

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