# The SQEK: Squatting Europe Research Agenda v. 0.9

Squatting Europe is a research network focusing on the squatters' movement. Our aim is to produce reliable and fine-grained knowledge about this movement. Critical engagement, transdisciplinarity and comparative approaches are the bases of our project. The group is an open transnational collective (SQEK[1]) whose members represent a diversity of disciplines and fields of interest seeking to understand the issues associated with  squats and social centres  across the European Union.

## Why squatting?

While homelessness is escalating worldwide, the production of empty spaces is becoming a regular feature of contemporary society. As states and markets failed to fulfil their allocated function, buildings sit empty while homelessness has been increasing across Europe and the world. In this time of crisis, people who have decided to take matters into their own hands are squatting a diversity of spaces: office blocks, factories, abandoned theatres, public houses (UK) and bars, as well as houses.. In the process, the concept of urban development and renewal, i.e. urban and housing politics and spatial adjustment is re-interpreted and detourned. Indeed, squatting is not just a way to satisfy the need for housing and to express the rarity of spaces of sociability, but it is also an attempt to practice non-hierarchical and participatory organization models. Squats often offer an alternative mode of envisioning social relationships and political practices and developing collective activities such as countercultural events, and critical and radical political meetings outside of, and in antagonism with, commercial circuits. Social centre activists and squatters are thus often engaged in broader protest campaigns and social movements, fighting against precariousness, urban speculation, racism, neo-fascism, militarization, war, and for housing, migrants' rights and income etc.

The existence of vacant buildings once designed to house the production of multinational capital in the metropolis not only belies the neutrality of market forces but also stands as an accusation to neo-liberal home ownership ideology. Yet, in spite of the evidence of  its social contributions to the urban global crisis, many scholars and politicians still consider the squatters' movement marginal.

The rhetoric of economic recovery reflects the vacancy of current political debate. Politicians call for social cohesion and self-responsibility. However, when people actually take these values seriously, they are often treated as criminals who undermine social integration. Academic responses to the current crisis have been just as vacant. While many researchers are struggling with the neo-

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[1] SQuatting Europe Kollective

liberal attack on public universities and seem only interested in getting funding from private companies and in the production of market-oriented information, others seem more interested in theorizing the problem than addressing it. Yet, social movements and urban problems are demanding a much more socially committed production and distribution of knowledge. Accordingly, SQEK will seek to critically analyse the squatters' movement in its relevant contexts (historical, cultural, spatial, political, and economic ), and share the knowledge thus produced with activists and society.

**Different approaches and common issues**

SQEK was born as a research network. When we began to meet through an email list, our initialfirst intention was to cooperate in order to start a comparative research on squatting in the cities of Europe. On January 2009, we held our first meeting on in Madrid. This meeting allowed us to share our different experiences, intellectual concerns, research topics and plans for future involvement. As new members joined our network, in October 2009, we held our second meeting Milan, where we had the opportunity to present and discuss case studies.

Self-funded research in different countries, internal meetings of the research group and public events are, at present, our main activities. Diverse methods of research and theoretical frames are also remarkable aspects of our methodology. Nonetheless, we expect to publish collective books in several languages, articles and special editions of academic journals, in order to amplify the results of our research and debates. If possible, a common research project will be written in the following months as a way of better structuring our work.

Why is squatting important? Though it may not be seen as a very powerful movement, its decades-long local and international dimensions are frequently forgotten. Stressing its political dimension, many activists from European cities have shown a rich experience of collective organization, action and protest that deserves careful attention.

Therefore, we are aware of the need to articulate a local-specific approach to an international and comparative perspective. While English is our instrumental language of communication, we appreciate the fact that we are engaged in a multilingual, complex and diverse field.

Lot of time is usually spent discussing what a "squat" is. But in the end as squat is what squatters make it to be (they are not the only ones of course, all kinds of other actors, narratives and apparatuses are involved). What constitutes a squatter? Is it what s/he does or the subjectivity (and narratives) s/he deploys and performs (and shapes) in the course of her/his activities. Or what? With this in mind we have developed a preliminary research agenda structured around five major axes, which seek to address the phenomenon in its full complexity, while maximizing the diverse

approaches and disciplinary orientations (in terms of method and theoretical frameworks) of our members:

1) Long and medium term structural factors that make squatting possible.

   - Historical perspective on squatting (since WW2)
   - Housing policies and underlying ideologies
   - Urban spaces, urban development and/or renewal, and patterns of ownership.
   - Role of SC in post-welfare state policies
   - Spatial transformation influenced by squatters

2) Analysis of "conflicts" and "dynamics."

   - Processes of mobilization and political radicalization; local relationships with neighborhoods
   - Which squatting experiences were most successful and why?
   - How do squatters use the 'construction of social needs' as a claim to develop their projects; Political trends and practices in SC and squats.
   - How do social and political actors recognise and legitimise squatting?
   - Processes of Repression/criminalization or negotiation.

3) SC/Squats' networks, politics and culture

   - Trans/local connections between SC and squatted houses
   - Trans/national connections. Political coordination: SC/squats, political parties and alterglobal movements
   - Collective actions and public expression (demonstrations, media, etc.)
   - Squatters as producers of knowledge and cultural innovators (alternative media, etc.)

4) Empirical case-studies.

   - Formal and informal ways of organization; decision-making processes
   - Economic dimension of SC and role as providers of income
   - Self-knowledge (reflexivity) and internal contradictions (inter-generational relations and activists' memory, gender conflicts and homophobia, etc.)
   - Class composition and subjectivities within SC
   - Post-class social identities (precarious workers, queers, etc.)

5) Squatting in comparative perspective.

- Map & Database (or Census) recording all the experiences of squatting at each country
- Public opinion survey on squatting and housing policies.
- Size and volume of squatting in each country
- Ideological controversies and orientations within SC movement across the EU
- Legal frameworks, their change over time and across countries.

This list of questions were suggested for current and future research activies.

As has been already mentioned, SQEK is not only a group of scholars but a socially committed group as well. Thus, we are available as a public resource. We want to engage in public debates about squatting, would welcome meetings with activists and would gladly be active participants in their public initiatives. We are also ready to offer our advice to students and young researchers who are interested in this field.

Furthermore, in view of the diverse composition of our network we seek to challenge the traditional dichotomy between researchers and their subjects/objects of knowledge. Whenever possible, our research practices will thus favour a collaborative and dialogical approach to knowledge production in the belief that social movement activists, just as any other social actor, are themselves producers of knowledge. Consequently,we are not sure activists and academics are necessarily irreconcilable categories. Obviously they are irreconcilable if considered as identity "positions". Things get a little muddled if we take the angle of the life-course of concrete individuals. One case in point is the composition of our research group. All of us (whatever our differences) are activists and the majority are full-time researchers. We are aware of the difficulty in reconciling the two positions, a difficulty has a lot to do with embedded (and embodied) structures of power. While we believe that this issue is worthy of investigation in our project, we are also aware thatproblematizing our research persona commendable as it is, in our case runs the risk of essentializing our activist one How should we try to challenge such (an apparently) neat distinction? How can these tensions be productively explored? In more general terms, what constitutes the "activist" activity as active as opposed to what other social actors (don't) do, is it their "passivity"? In what sense are they "passive" actors? We are an open network and we would welcome participation, suggestions, contributions and collaboration to tackle such questions and investigating the research agenda we are proposing.

Best way to contact us is by email to: squattingeurope@listas.nodo50.org

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