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## *Creating Spaces of Insurgent Citizenship: Squatting in Activist-Friendly Helsinki<sup>1</sup>*

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In many European (and other) cities urban activism is being acknowledged and recuperated as a resource rather than a protest. This impacts urban governance, planning and marketing, and it has shifted definitions of the good citizen, increasingly expected to be self-responsible and even activist. Accounts of such activism encompass a range of social practices in the city, while commentaries including academic texts highlight use of online tools, its self-organizing or ‘DIY’ (do-it-yourself) ethos and the fact that contemporary activism appears less oriented towards protesting against something than in prefiguratively transforming cities at the level of everyday experience. We argue that though recognized as diverse, some forms of activism are deemed acceptable and even celebrated while others, notably squatting, remain unacceptable and are even violently quashed. Taking an ethnographic approach to Helsinki-based squatter activism, we show that it constitutes an important critique of the privatisation of public spaces, overuse of surveillance, over-consumption and socially hostile architecture. Although squatters in Helsinki are related to an international trend of pre-figurative grassroots (self-organizing) urbanism, which is highly celebrated in Helsinki, we want to make visible the different goals that people and groups labelled as ‘activist’ are working towards. We suggest that the concept of ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Holston) is a useful tool for throwing into relief how squatters challenge entrepreneurial, individualist and capitalism-friendly definitions of good citizens.

**Keywords:** Squatting, activism, Helsinki, insurgent citizenship.

### **Introduction: Self-organizing**

Parallel to processes of de-industrialization, intensified urbanization and economic insecurity, European cities are witnessing a proliferation of world-improving, proactive, small-scale interventions, such as neighbourhood sharing schemes run on digital platforms, self-build skateboard and other parks, urban food gardens, pop-up restaurants and local festivals (Kohtala and Paterson 2015), and in Helsinki, even semi-legal saunas (Bird et al. 2016). Accounts of such activism highlight use of online tools, its self-organizing or ‘DIY’ (do-it-yourself) ethos and the fact that it is less oriented towards protesting against something than in prefiguratively transforming cities at the level of everyday experience (Bialski et al. 2015, Monge 2016). In Finland there has been considerable interest in and support for this new activism. It is even seen as heralding a transition in urban planning (Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017, Rantanen and Faehnle 2017) and, as elsewhere, it is valued for contributing to environmental sustainability objectives as well as ideals of local democracy. Pro-active and entrepreneurial, almost akin to business start-ups, citizen activism (*kansalaisaktivismi*) is associated with a new, active and self-directing politics that constitutes a resource for a growing Helsinki, a Good Thing that should be supported.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Finnish-language references are numerous: the main newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, the city’s own websites, social media platforms and research-driven interventions like [www.tilapioneerit.fi](http://www.tilapioneerit.fi) and [www.kaupunkiaktivismi.wordpress.com](http://www.kaupunkiaktivismi.wordpress.com) (accessed 12 February 2018).

However, alongside this politically inoffensive activism, other interventions exist that are either ignored or discouraged. In this article we focus on squatters, activists who barely figure either in popular or academic accounts in Finland, unless it be to disparage them. They too are an important resource for wider debate: they make explicit deep contradictions in urban democracy worldwide, as regards for instance the normalisation of regeneration and gentrification as economic imperatives (Maeckelbergh 2012) or the promotion of self-help as a solution to inequality, both phenomena that corrode democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Officials and the police in Helsinki have even used considerable force to evict squatters and demolish buildings they occupied, fostering moral panic over squatting and its threat to the *status quo*. This happened for instance in 2015 when a suburban squat (*Mummola* or *Fastholma*) was violently evicted.<sup>4</sup> A wooden villa built in 1910, it had actually been transferred to the leafy suburb where it remained in private use until the 1980s. Owned by the city, it was later rented out as shared accommodation until 2011. Since then it had been empty. Located near a prized nature conservation area and in relatively good condition, far-reaching plans for developing it for public use had been proposed by volunteer groups (Hukkatila työryhmä 2011). It was eventually squatted by mostly young occupiers who posed questions about how youth homelessness persisted alongside buildings standing empty or abandoned and controversial new housing developments. Media coverage concentrated, however, on how a dilapidated building had been taken over by anarchist-sympathisers (*Helsingin Sanomat* 2015). What happened at *Fastholma* contrasts markedly with the support enjoyed by other activists who also appear self-motivated, keen to participate and sympathetic with the city of Helsinki's ambition to solve global problems whilst building 'the world's most successful everyday life' (Unspecified source in the City of Helsinki, quoted in Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017).

This discourse sidesteps the relationship between public space and private property, even though the question has animated Helsinki activists at least since the early 2000s. An area now filling up with new cultural building in front of the parliament building was then a 'left-over space', but it became a pioneering site of grassroots action (Lehtovuori 2005). The right to city space, particularly green space, returned to political debate in the run up to municipal elections in 2016, and there has been growing and sometimes acrimonious debate as to whether privatization and neo-liberal policy are perhaps even leading to the end of public space. In Helsinki as in other cities, the role of law in mediating or structuring the relationship between property and publicness is also a question that gets posed but rarely elaborated (Bird et al. 2016).

Our efforts to put squatting activism more squarely into the picture builds on Eeva Berglund's work on Helsinki's activism (2013) and, above all, on many years of participating in and researching squatting by Vesa Peipinen, with the core ethnographic and archival

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<sup>3</sup> There is some research on these in Helsinki. See for example, the work in Finnish by Eeva Luhtakallio and Maria Mustranta (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://en.squat.net/2015/03/30/helsinki-finland-eviction-report-of-mummola-squat-and-the-solidarity-demonstration-that-followed/> (accessed 02 February 2018).

material<sup>5</sup> drawn from his Masters dissertation on the life-courses of activists. This article is a result of being invited to contribute to an edited collection on self-organized activism in Finland, and wanting to elaborate our ideas beyond that short comment piece (Berglund and Peipinen 2017). Our approach questions dominant framings of contemporary activism and reconnects it to a politics as well as an analysis that takes worsening structural inequalities seriously. We also echo recent calls to analyse marginal forms of resistance without pathologizing, resorting to binaries or making moral judgements (Theodossopoulos 2014).

Activist self-organizing can be both part of and opposed to the dominant control and consumption-oriented tenets of urban development. However, the ‘hegemonic drive of neoliberal capitalism to stabilize state-citizen relations by implicating civil society in governance’ (Miraftab 2009: 32) has blurred distinctions between projects that support and those that protest against prevailing policies. Notionally horizontal governance (in contrast to top-down government) does not just give citizens more voice, it turns activism into a generalized virtue: cities, states, companies etc. are all exhorted to be activist. Urban activism also provides occupancy and interest in spaces awaiting development that would otherwise lie empty and unattractive. Such areas have been abundant in Helsinki over the last decade (Berglund and Kohtala eds 2015). Pursuing a kind of shape-shifting capitalist policy (Harvey 2012), the city of Helsinki has appropriated several recurring grassroots projects — cleaning day, restaurant day, pop-up sales points of all kinds, as well as countless greenish and wholesome-sounding design and innovation ventures. Though they may be technologically radical, healthy and green, or just quirky, these self-organizing initiatives can also prolong and strengthen business-led and growth-oriented politics (Berglund 2013).

Helsinki offers an example of how, in a short time, urban activism has made city life more inclusive, fun and permissive for some (Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017). From a social science point of view, however, the inclusion implied is not convincing, even deflecting attention from worsening structural problems (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017). The situation thus demands empirically more precise, analytically sharper and politically more imaginative understandings of urban activism that acknowledge the different roles self-organizing can play in shaping cities. It also invites attending to activists’ expectations of the state and their understandings of citizenship. In this vein, we suggest that squatters are seeking to create spaces of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2008) in a struggle for freedoms and rights and a refusal to collapse the important distinction between the world as it is and how it should and could be. We hear an echo in their labours of Henri Lefebvre’s (1996) idea of the city as a joint *oeuvre* that needs to be vigilantly cared for and frequently fought over. And we identify some refashioning of old socio-political claims being directed at the state in symbolically laden urban space, not unlike the indignant demands of the 2010s ‘movements of the squares’ (Gerbaudo 2017).

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<sup>5</sup> Archival material was collected mostly in the People’s Archives, the central archives of the Finnish left-wing Labour movement and civil society organizations. Additional interviews were collected in 2014-17.

To spell out the specificities of squatting, we first briefly discuss shifts in what activism means, sketching out how these relate to trends in planning, social movements, squatting and subcultures as well as to citizenship.

### **New Functions for Activism**

In just two decades it has become commonplace for those tasked with producing interest, vibrancy and attractiveness in cities to foster cultures of informality, civic voluntarism and practical grassroots initiatives. This has effectively refunctioned urban activism. The results can be visible changes in the urban fabric but are also felt in how things that a generation ago were marked deviant or marginal environmental causes, animal rights, anti-consumerist or antiracist agendas, are now valued. This is activism recuperated. Discussions of it usually highlight its global focus and the way it has been facilitated by digital technologies, and often note a strong anti-materialist orientation, lack of reliance on institutional supports and resources (such as trade unions) or respect for centralized leadership structures (Luhtakallio 2010, Mayer 2013, Laine 2013). Further, these repertoires of small-scale urban improvements have been paralleled by the normalisation of participatory planning (Bialski et al. 2015: 13).

At the same time, many cities are witnessing large-scale municipal and metropolitan developments that encroach on familiar landscapes and infrastructures and impact, sometimes heavily, on everyday life (Monge 2016). The social costs of recent urbanization have, of course, been the focus of much scholarship, for example in New York City (Maekelbergh 2012), London (Lees et al. 2014), Hamburg and Berlin (Novy and Colomb 2013) and Helsinki (Lehtovuori 2005), in contexts where housing crisis is mixed with urban upgrade and cultural policy. Critical research in geography, planning and urban studies, particularly since the financial crisis of 2007-8, have generated a persuasive picture of globally dominant urban economic policy that offers privatisation of public space, overuse of surveillance, unsustainable consumption and socially hostile architecture, also raising the question of whether the disposal of spatial assets is either just or sustainable (Kaika 2011, Brenner et al. eds 2012, Harvey 2012, Maekelbergh 2012, Edwards 2016). Furthermore, terms like enclosure, land grabs, extractivism and even expulsion (Sassen 2014) and shrinking cities (Ringel 2018), are helpful in making sense of spatial dislocation and responses to it all over the world.

Squatting as the occupation of buildings and other spaces in someone else's ownership operates where spatial injustice and social movement mobilising overlap (Vasudevan 2017) even as it intersects with broader, often anti-capitalist, agendas of change making (Krøijer 2015). As usually with political mobilization, success in squatting requires group longevity, trust and organizational capacity, even if the movement's aims are not always clearly articulated (Krøijer 2015). So although squatting operates like a social movement in generating social change and making space for politics, our ethnographic approach follows anthropological work in highlighting new cultural and social meanings, and less in terms of the success of otherwise of movement aims.

The Helsinki case also illustrates the continuing salience of subcultures, a concept that underlines the mainstream's discomfort with cultural forms that appear as strange, even dangerous and mysterious, to outsiders (Haenfler 2013: 19). The media still often portrays them

as socially corrosive even though contextual understanding of youth cultures and their histories have long offered a counter-force to negative popular impressions (Malone 2002, Williams 2011). An ethnographic sensitivity to subcultures can, we suggest, shift the way urban cultures in general take shape within political and economic conditions. This is necessary, we argue, as urban decision making is recasting ‘activism’ as a resource, whether to help improve a city’s image or to displace responsibility for urban goods. This has ‘instrumentalized dynamic local subcultures and harnessed them as a competitive advantage in interurban rivalry’ (Mayer 2013: 4-5). As a result, all kinds of discourses reproduce politically expedient stereotypes (quirky hipsters), where young citizens are valued predominantly as a resource, as potential ‘talent’ for business. Stereotypes aside, many people’s material fortunes are increasingly precarious, even as Helsinki’s administration routinely uses their entrepreneurial DIY-spirit to project an image of the city as a hot-bed inventiveness (Berglund 2013). People get caught up in the contradiction between symbolic affirmation (‘ethnic’ food, ‘exotic’ music and night life) and material hardship wrought by prejudices, economic constraints and state authorities.

We argue that squatters are challenging the now dominant view of the city as a collection of privately owned properties, as well the idea that urban governance is above all about their proper management. Squatters also demand respect for doing so, which brings us to the indignation typical of mass mobilization and back to the concept of insurgent citizenship (Holston 2008), understood as continuous struggle or negotiation over terms of membership in the wider collective. Even in the cities of the global North squatters, we argue, put questions about rights and responsibilities back into the depoliticized arena of urban development. Their actions respond in context-specific ways to many other issues too, but here we highlight squatting as a way to deal with unprecedented strains in the socio-material conditions of reproducing life (Mayer 2013, Van der Steen et al. 2014, Vasudevan 2017).

### **Squatting in Helsinki**

Squatting is an unlawful occupation of abandoned buildings or urban space, but definitions, like activism, vary by context, land law or availability of housing. Following Hans Pruijt we see it as ‘living in – or otherwise using – a dwelling or empty buildings without the consent of the owner’ (2013: 19). Squatting has often been intertwined with youth cultures, and as such has had an important role in many local protest movements across Europe (Pruijt 2013, Mayer 2013, Andresen and Van de Steen eds 2016). Helsinki is no exception. In January 2015, when Helsinki faced a new wave of squatting, *Fastholma* was occupied and then evicted prompting public debate about activism in which, however, some essential questions were not asked. The squatters were framed in a hazy way as young ‘anarchists’ with unclear intentions. Few commentators bothered to ask who the young squatters were, what were their objectives and what were they really doing. Squatters’ unauthorized presence in urban space was simply seen as an attack against the regulated, privatized and diminishing norms of urban space (Hou ed. 2010: 1-17).

In Europe the history of squatting runs parallel to the historical normalisation of private property in land and fixed assets. Knud Andresen and Bart Van de Steen (2016) suggest that the diverse urban movements in European cities can be summed up as ‘youth revolts’.



Alexander Vasudevan's survey of post-1960s European and North American squatting (Vasudevan 2017) shows huge variety, but also argues that it makes sense to speak of it as a movement seeking an alternative to contemporary urbanism. In Finland Leo Stranius and Mikko Salasuo (eds 2008) also see squatting as a youth movement and note that it has been diverse but that as a social movement it has been studied surprisingly little.

The first time that squatting came into the spotlight was in 1979, when the building that later became the alternative cultural centre *Lepakko* (Bat Cave) was occupied by mainly young activists associated with punk culture. A former warehouse, it had become somewhat notorious having been a night shelter for homeless men. After a relatively peaceful take-over, the building, abandoned by then, was occupied by artists, musicians, students and political activists. *Lepakko* became an important and visible scene for alternative culture: from within it punks, hippies, and urban activists together 'fought against apathy' (Rantanen 2000) and facilitated the arrival of a new, youth and creativity-led alternative culture in Helsinki. In the 1980s there were other individual squats in Helsinki also, some of which pushed young people's housing problems into public consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Much as in Berlin, Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Vienna, activists were mainly young students, artists, left-wing political activists and punks who adopted 'green' and alternative lifestyles. Although squatting remained marginal, as a milestone *Lepakko* shifted the boundaries of what kinds of cultural practices were acceptable.

A second wave of squatting coincided with the severe economic crisis of the early 1990s, triggered by the fall of the Soviet Union, leading among other things to housing crisis and youth unemployment but also to growing numbers of empty buildings. This was in many ways an exceptional period, a difficult episode in the economic history of Finland particularly for young people. For most of the 1980s, unemployment rates had been around five percent, in line with the other Scandinavian countries, but in just four years, starting in 1991, unemployment rose to close to twenty percent (Koskela and Uusitalo 2002). Conditions for squatting activism were fruitful.

A key event was the occupation of an old soap factory, *Kookos*, in 1990 (for instance, discussed in English in Peipinen 2015). Located on a prominent corner plot near the industrial waterfront in the Sörnäinen district, the empty building was owned by the Haka Oy construction firm, which was planning to demolish it and build a new headquarters on the site. Debate about saving the old factory rumbled on until in April the council voted to adopt a new plan allowing the demolition. But to prevent this, in May 1990, activists occupied the old factory. Squatting lasted a week, with hundreds taking part, mostly young residents and some passers-by. Here is an excerpt from a diary by an unknown writer, found in the People's Archive.

'The third of May 1990 was a fine and sunny Spring day. Plenty of sweat on our cheeks as we waited for the word "go" on the Haapaniemi sports field. Chatting with friends. A little after three we set off for our destination: the old soap factory on the corner of Sörnäistenrantatie and Haapaniemenkatu. The owner, Haka-

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, the *Freda 42* -movement, which took its name from the address of an empty old church occupied in 1986. The church was sold and renovated as a nightclub and eventually reopened as a church in 2014.

company wanted to dismantle it from under its new HQ. A handful had already been there to clear away the shit and open the way in. Inside the building it was lovely and cool. We hung banners from the windows and took our places...'

The building was cleaned and around hundred people slept there every night, and the squat received media attention. During the occupation, squatters organized concerts, art exhibitions, public discussions and opened a café. Public appeals to save the building were made, not only by the squatters but by many local associations. The squatters even received financial support from the Helsinki University student's union for a telephone and a fire extinguisher. A group of young architects produced a plan for renovating the building. Plans began to be made for all kinds of activities in the building: space for alternative culture, workshop spaces, small businesses, flea market, youth hostel, café and concerts as some people began to see *Kookos* as a venue for a new kind of urban culture.

On the eighth day there was a massive police operation at the request of the owner. It took several hours from the police to empty the building. Some squatters strapped themselves in doorways or climbed onto the roof. After the eviction, squatters continued to campaign by sleeping nights in front of the building and by lobbying city council party groups. Occupying *Kookos* was tough for the movement because, unlike in previous squats, the building owner was a big business, the largest construction firm in Finland at the time. Its effort to secure the demolition of the building was supported by the major political parties in Helsinki. Following the squatting, fifty-one activists were charged of whom twenty three were under aged.

Significantly, the building was in fact not demolished: it now houses the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts, Helsinki. Public interest in the episode had complicated tenets of urban development that some had presumed beyond question, but it had also given visibility to youth cultures. It had also given this generation of squatters a confidence-boosting chance to develop their own practices and politics, both internally within the group and vis-à-vis the wider public. Squatting the old factory allowed young activists to explore and develop new forms of collective self-governance.

This second wave of squatting activism peaked in 1990-1994, but squats continued to shape later urban processes in different ways. Generally, it was buildings awaiting demolition, owned by the city or the large construction firms that were occupied. As former squatters set up to organize youth housing by renovating old buildings for collective housing and run an active alternative cultural centre in an old gas factory,<sup>7</sup> they even made squatting into an 'acceptable' form of activism but one that arguably nurtures diverse and alternative youth activism (Peipinen 2012, 2015, 2017).

Since the 1990s, housing and the question of youth unemployment have been the squatters' primary focus. As the city was undergoing change, occupying publicly owned property in particular put important social, economic and legal questions into the spotlight. Squatters not only questioned why houses remained abandoned, they also contested the legitimacy of ownership when it meant keeping houses empty while there was a housing crisis.

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<sup>7</sup> This is known today as Oranssi Association and Oranssi Apartments, Ltd. See [www.oranssi.net/English](http://www.oranssi.net/English), accessed 12 February 2018.

For young activists, direct action and civil disobedience have periodically felt like the only effective means of influencing things: if housing is not otherwise forthcoming, there is always squatting.

### **Putting Politics Back into Activism**

We have argued that in the last twenty years, in Helsinki, the acceptability of grassroots urban initiatives has increased and activism has merged into participatory practices that range from the genuinely transformative to the rhetorical. Now an imperative, activism's oppositional force and political critique has been diluted. Squatting activists, however, are resolute in keeping politics in urban activism. It is difficult to say whether their recent activities could be deemed to have influenced policy or economic practice, and it is even debatable whether their activities are aimed at taking power. What is clear is that they are opening up political space, for instance for alternative definitions of urban success.

Let us return to January 2015, when a new generation of squatters was again challenging norms of ownership. Here the site was owned by the city, but it was under pressure to behave like a business aiming for commercial profit.

Afterwards, one young activist interviewee captured a general mood by saying:

'We should not be forced into thinking that nothing is possible outside this capitalist system. All these rules and all kinds of controls have affected people's minds. And if you want to do something you need to think about what it costs and is it allowed. So what we need is freedom and not to be scared. We need to believe that we are right.'

This quotation illustrates how squatters identified urban space not merely as a site for competitiveness and as part of a city's attractiveness (to both capital and the right incomers), but as a political space where the meaning of citizenship is negotiated as part of a struggle. That is, squatters' own articulations of what they are doing point towards discourses that are much broader and deeper in their social critique than the celebrated forms of today's self-organizing, more 'fun', activism. Squatters question the prevalent idea that spaces beyond the reach of private (or at least clearly demarcated ownership) are inherently suspicious or abnormal, really in need of 'development'.

This points to the very many things that squatting achieves: the actual act of civil and social disobedience, which then allows other counter-cultural practices to take hold and pre-figurative free spaces to be built; horizontal forms of self-organization; counter-cultural identities and imaginative modes of political participation. It is also clear to squatters that doing something illegal is a way to draw the public's attention to massive social problems that become manifest in urban development trends, like the high social cost of speculation, or the privatization of public land and buildings. This puts squatters at risk of repression however, even as — and this is our current intuition to which we return below — their actions may be gaining some popular support.

The local state's repressive or containment strategies however, often force the movements to 'choose' either eviction or some form of legalization (Pruijt 2013). Sometimes squatters go



back and forth between direct action and negotiating with authorities, in a kind of dual-track strategy where radical core groups and more moderate supporters elsewhere divide up the political labour. In Helsinki, squatters have been able in this way to extend their squats and the infrastructures for collective living and political organizing. And even where squats have been evicted more or less by force, their actions have often led to saving old buildings, like *Kookos*, from demolition. In many European cities squatters' movements have also enhanced the political participation of vulnerable tenants and residents (Lees et al., 2014), and led to new forms of institutionalized participation and 'careful urban renewal' instead of 'urban removal' (Mayer 2013: 1-9), that is, outright eviction.

The *Fastholma* activists were arrested and charged with criminal offenses. Against the background of celebrating DIY culture, this was testament to the vacuity of political rhetoric. Despite explicitly calling for young people to act self-responsibly and to adopt a more 'active citizenship', when they actually took their values seriously and defended the shared environment, they were treated almost as criminals. But in challenging the use of literal space, they made new space for politics. The occupied urban space served to explore direct-democratic decision making, to prefigure post-capitalist ways of life, and to devise further innovative forms of political, including practical, action. As bodies that continue to be present — that do not go home at the end of the demonstration and that speak for themselves rather than being represented by others (Mayer 2013) — they were putting politics back into activism.

If these demonized activists were treated differently from those seen to be contributing to urban change in acceptable ways, one reason is the well-known question of what and who urban space is for that mainstream society still refuses to confront (Vasudevan 2017). For in parallel to stories of citizen activism, whether radical or more polite, the last two decades have witnessed a massive shift of urban property — including people's former homes as well as shared spaces — into private ownership, overwhelmingly under the guise of 'regeneration', 'development' or other notionally positive processes of urban change (Edwards 2016). Where international capital seeks refuge in real estate, notably in London and New York, housing crisis and homelessness are endemic, and where it does not, abandonment and decay tend to follow, Detroit being the paradigm example. Evictions and foreclosures continue, squatting has become criminalized around Europe (Vasudevan 2017: 6-7). After decades of permissiveness, initiatives to confront squatting have swept across Europe, like the new offence of squatting in a residential building created in England in 2012. In the face of this new law, thousands of homeless and vulnerable people became criminals overnight, facing up to six months in jail and fines of up to £5,000. The critique has raised the question that the new legislation affects the most vulnerable people in society, empowers unscrupulous landlords and burdens the justice system, police and charities.<sup>8</sup> The aim of the law is outlawing the practice of squatting ('inconvenient' activism) as such (Dadusc and Dee 2015: 141). As a result, situations that were previously managed by means of civil proceedings between squatters and owners have become the responsibility of governments. Before criminalization, municipalities had autonomy in their policies towards squatters and the police could intervene only after a court judgment. The new

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<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.squashcampaign.org/> (accessed 12 February 2018).

laws, aimed at protecting the interests of property owners, have made the process of eviction less dependent on the juridical system, with the result that the police had more authority to act against squatters. This has been widely regarded as a right-wing ploy to defend and enhance private property rights over the human right to shelter (O'Mahony and O'Mahony 2015, Vasudevan 2017).<sup>9</sup>

This is compounded by a shift from universalistic welfare politics towards control-oriented politics, which target particular individuals and groups for punitive measures. Helsinki's decision makers and media appear happy to follow such international trajectories, even if some scholars sometimes align with critics (Berglund and Kohtala eds 2015, Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017). If the incumbent political logics and economic imperatives of urban development invite the criminalization of squatting, in return squatting today voices a powerful critique of what and who is protected by law. It also rehearses the old call for the 'right to the city'. Claiming this right, pushes against the normalised imperative in Helsinki to attract 'good tax payers' over others. As a website article on *Fastholma* observed, 'The squat Mummola existed as an obstacle to capitalist and authoritarian urban space, as part of a global movement of autonomous spaces'.<sup>10</sup> This throws into relief how urban activism flourishes in Helsinki insofar as it is novel, constructive and imaginative, but poses no threat to capitalist principles and the security apparatuses maintaining them.

### **Citizens and Activists**

We believe that there are sociologically and perhaps even existentially important reasons for paying more careful, indeed any, attention to squatting activists. We conclude by approaching them as — dare we say it — activist academics, because alongside the activism that has become so acceptable and inoffensive, the critique posed by squatters provokes us all, academics, activists and other change makers alike, to think much harder about how the success of a city and the criteria of belonging are currently defined. The starting point is how squatting urban space and buildings challenges visions of the good city but also of the good citizen that neoliberalization has put beyond discussion. Not of course completely, as squatting activism shows, but also not without impact, although in this respect, our conclusions remain speculative.

Basically, citizenship by any definition confers some form of inalienable and basic political rights that bind the personal to the collective. These rights are imagined as independent of parentage or wealth and are enjoyed by all regardless of allegiance to a political party or leadership. The origin of the word citizen comes from its association with cities. Throughout history, citizenship has been connected to urban space through the organisation of space of political power (from parade grounds to playgrounds) or types of labour (from state offices to polluting industries), while claims to citizenship have often been pursued by occupying public

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<sup>9</sup> The work of the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson (1975) on the hysteria of the recently privileged capitalist class in 18<sup>th</sup> century England after they enclosed for their own enjoyment land formerly accessible and necessary to others offers a suggestive historical parallel.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://en.squat.net/2015/03/30/helsinki-finland-eviction-report-of-mummola-squat-and-the-solidarity-demonstration-that-followed/> (accessed 2 February 2018).

squares and other symbolic spaces. Thinking historically about citizenship allows an appreciation of the fact that ideas of the good citizen far predate modernist planning ideals. A historical view combined with an ethnographic sensibility alerts us to the way that cities are and always have been to some extent self-organizing. Even ancient cities did bureaucracy. It seems likely that the modern administrative machines that for so long have helped create an illusion of the city as *not* self-organizing, along with arguments that the modern state was a violent imposition on urban life, were products of an unstable, often imposed and often colonially upheld, industrial capitalism. Urban governments have no doubt under-appreciated how much citizens' self-organizing has always been necessary to urban life.

A simplified historiography of self-organizing might go something like this: welfare-based and biopolitical arrangements turned more and more aspects of everyday city life into legible or quantifiable values labelling all that lay beyond these historically shaped institutions as informal, voluntary or vernacular; gradually and unevenly, a new and broadly neoliberal preference for flexibility and horizontalism allowed urban development interests to co-opt acceptable urban activism; with accessible online connectivity, self-organization reaches a new intensity and stretches the reach of political as well as practical projects.

This may be to oversimplify, but what is undeniable is that today online and offline feed off each other in all types of activism (Ratto and Boler 2014), and the use of online communications is perhaps unusually prominent in Finland (Luhtakallio 2010). The use of the networked and 'flat' internet, accentuates the horizontal and self-organizing aspects of activism, key examples being neighbourhood support networks and happenings like Restaurant Day and other small online-facilitated initiatives or 'tiny social movements' as the activist-author Pauliina Seppälä (2012) has called them.

A caveat is necessary: we do not wish to belittle any contributions to vitalising collective life let alone challenging the *status quo*. Activism can be less political or more political (and we can think of situations where it might be politically expedient to deny the political nature of change). Yet there are fundamental political issues at stake where Helsinki's squatters are among the few who are offering alternatives to the depoliticization, even 'immunization' (Kaika 2017) of urban publics against the very idea of structural change. For squatters are not driven by hopes of becoming empowered as online users or consumers of services, such frequent explanations of the apparent democratization of and progress in urban change making (Mäenpää and Faehnle 2017, Rantanen and Faehnle 2017). Rather, the democratic values espoused by activists confer a different kind of dignity and sense of self. The context of Brazilian urbanization as analysed by the anthropologist James Holston (2008) is vastly different, yet it offers a helpful analogy with what we believe squatters in Helsinki seek.

Holston's concept of 'insurgent citizenship', developed from an analysis of Brazilian political history, captures a historical shift in subjectivity and the position of the poor in Brazil's wider political and legal landscape. It was, in his argument, part of late twentieth-century urbanisation, born in the auto-constructed — self-built semi-legal or illegal shacks — neighbourhoods of Brazil's peripheries. Here the poor transformed themselves from people the state could ignore, because they were without rights to themselves (slaves) or other resources (land and skills like literacy), into citizens with 'rights to rights'. This shift was channelled

through neighbourhood associations and alliances fighting for tenure of the houses they called home. It was squatting, but it was also a strong claim for the right to enjoy a roof over their heads. For it had earlier been assumed, writes Holston, that Brazil's masses were 'silent and mostly ignorant citizens who were incapable of making competent decisions on their own and who needed to be brought into modernity by an enlightened elite and their plans for development. As insurgent citizens, they are informed and competent to make decisions about their own organization, whilst they still participate in and hold accountable the institutions of society, government, and law that produce the conditions of urban life' (2008: 248).

Inspired by this analysis, but also aware of the multiple goals of any protest mobilisation as we explained above, we argue that Helsinki's squatting activism creates spaces of insurgent citizenship, literally and figuratively. It persistently challenges the intensifying drive for urban growth, competitiveness and private ownership. In offering alternatives to the dominant discourse that equates progress with properties to attract more high-paying tax-payers, more data, tighter security and more entertainment, it makes space for quite a different political imagination from that offered by activism when it is reduced to a resource for the broadly speaking neoliberalising city. Squatting activism does not demand revolution, it asks that the state serve people, not an abstract economic calculus.

In Helsinki such official aspirations are rapidly becoming visible and tangible in a singularly commercialized urban fabric. The local costs of the city's desire for growth are also becoming apparent.<sup>11</sup> In relation to unbuilt recreational areas and some cherished old buildings (particularly, Malmi airport) there have been conventional protests, but when it came to squatting buildings such as *Fastholma*, activists drew attention, successfully we feel, to the economics that most commentary overlooks: squatting challenged not just a specific property owner, but the whole direction of thinking and acting regarding the urban environment. An older claim to shared and collective enjoyment of urban space flew in the face of the new imperative to enclose and privatise. Moral indignation ensued on all sides.

As Lucy Finchett-Maddock points out, 'the extraordinariness — otherness — of squatters, the peculiar method of adverse possession, does not quite compute with the constructs of neoliberal capitalist times' (2015: 228). Indeed, the city, the police and the country's main newspaper operationalized this discourse all the way to an efficient demolition operation. Subsequently, few if any people have publicly admitted to wanting the house demolished, yet it was a job done with remarkable speed and thoroughness. In fact, the episode was quickly seen by other commentators including local residents, city-wide amenity associations and writers (some with ties to squatting culture) as unduly hasty and unnecessary.

In the aftermath of the action there was, perhaps, a new sense that one could and should question the way space in the city was being reduced solely to a source of profit. For a while squatting appeared as reasoned rather than unreasonable, as better grounds for more just and sustainable ways of planning urban futures. This suggested hope for a number of other groups

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<sup>11</sup> A comprehensive new plan for Helsinki was passed in October 2016 after heated debate. <http://www.yleiskaava.fi/en/2016/city-council-approves-new-city-plan-after-six-hour-debate/> (accessed 2 February 2018).

working for similar ends to the squatters but using polite — acceptable — registers, and a hazy promise that a different politics might be on its way.<sup>12</sup> For others still, it gave resources for questioning the almost naturalized elision of citizen with consumer that has occurred in the last three or so decades. Also, there was a very interesting development that took place in the wake of the *Fastholma/Mummola* eviction: newly appointed Deputy Mayor Anni Sinnemäki appeared to be stepping into the space created by the squat's demise. She simply noted in public that squatting was a 'form of citizen activism' and that she intended to revisit the way authorities handle it.<sup>13</sup> It has not been our intention to assess whether or not Helsinki's squatters constitute a continuous 'movement' or are just temporary reactions to a crisis. Like social movement mobilizations generally, they rise to visibility in specific situations (Fillieule and Accornero eds 2016) but operate quietly — latently — when not under the gaze of the media or social scientists. It is only occasionally that squats emerge as a confrontational response to crisis. What is less visible, yet sociologically fundamental, are the ongoing socio-spatial processes that exacerbate inequality even as they escape notice. Also at the edges of Finnish urban life disengagement from the collective political process grows relentlessly but also mostly beyond the spotlight.<sup>14</sup> What we have called acceptable activism gets into the spotlight but only as long as it avoids questioning society's deep structures and recapitulates entrepreneurial, individualist and capitalism-friendly definitions of good citizens. *Kookos* factory and *Fastholma*, in contrast, generated alternative definitions of the city and belonging. The practical experience of using abandoned buildings or urban wastelands for alternative activities also allowed young people to explore possibilities for creating a society more reliant on an ethic of sharing than the imperative of profit.

Discussing the new forms of ownership, commodification and control of public space, Jeffrey Hou notes that the scholarly challenge is 'to think and to act in novel ways in support of a more diverse, just and democratic public space' (2010: 12). In this light, the invisibility of squatting in debates on activism in Finland is troubling. It makes it harder to pose what we feel is the critical question: what is the city towards which the good (activist) citizen might aspire? Currently only one vision has traction. It is green and clean, capitalism-friendly and hostile to refugees. As they challenge it, squatters are making fresh political space.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Lapinlahden Lähde, low-budget interventions in a historically significant old psychiatric hospital [www.lapinlahdenlahde.fi/fi/yhteystiedot/](http://www.lapinlahdenlahde.fi/fi/yhteystiedot/) (accessed 2 February 2018, in Finnish).

<sup>13</sup> See <http://yle.fi/uutiset/3-7872189>, national news (accessed 12 February 2018).

<sup>14</sup> A key exception is Luhtakallio and Mustranta (2017).



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