

# Squatters Handbook - *online*

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## Intro

This book has been put together by a group of people concerned with the everyday survival and basic needs of people in our community.

The group is called 'Self Help Housing'.

Through this booklet we hope to provide much needed realistic information to people that need it.

- We advocate occupant controlled housing
- We believe that everyone has a right to a home
- We see the present system of housing as creating homelessness and high rents because it is based on profit and property NOT people
- All land in Australia is stolen land from the Aboriginal people
- We believe that governments in all their forms hinder a real solution to the problem of housing the worlds people
- We aim to create an atmosphere where people have equal decision making powers. We make decisions by consensus

## Why squat?

Housing is a basic right for everybody. Houses should not be empty while there are people without homes to live in. People are living without electricity, hot water and food in order to pay huge rents that 'the market' demands, much to the delight of unscrupulous property owners and estate agents. Tenancy with a signed lease doesn't actually provide much more security than squatting, though gives a legal recognition to the occupant. Tenancy laws generally though are there to protect the property owners, NOT the tenants necessarily.

Landowners arbitrarily raise rents and many a tenant knows the possibility of maintenance and repairs from most land owners and estate agents. Real Estate agents discriminate against single parents, young, old, low income earners and anyone who isn't pretty well capable of actually buying a house. Chances of finding acceptable and affordable housing on the private market is nearly impossible, the waiting list on public housing lists are years long and government support for public housing is virtually nothing.

People already occupy run down dilapidated houses due to having nowhere else to go..

Squatters have very little legal recognition and the only way squatters can generally keep their houses is to help each other and be organised and seek support. Such support is essential to organise repairs and to resist harassment and evictions by landowners immediately.

It is important not to be intimidated or bluffed into leaving your home before you have fought to stay there.

## Who owns empties?

Government departments own empty houses, due to mis-management and bureaucratic delays many houses can remain empty for many years.

Private developers keep houses empty so that they can make a fast buck, or maintain the 'market rent' by limiting the available housing. Greedy individuals own houses that are left empty because they

don't need them to live in.

### **Government houses**

Properties owned by public authorities (such as the RTA, DOH, Education Dept, SRA etc - yes many of these different public bodies own quite a lot of property in various locations and may include livable houses that are left unoccupied for years) will generally require some level of negotiation, unless in the rare case they have been completely forgotten about. The time to negotiate may vary, but when you are discovered and requested to leave then an approach to a level of the administration responsible for properties can not do any harm, question the representative about who is responsible for making decisions about the property and approach then directly if necessary, by phone or in person with a friend or two.

### **Privately owned houses**

Privately owned houses may be left empty for a number of reasons. A deceased estate may have no living relatives or interested parties, or they may be willing to allow you to 'look after' the house. Deceased estates where there are no living relatives are administered by the Public Trustees office, and it may take many years for the fate of the property to be settled.

Generally private owners will ask you personally to leave or call the police and get them to remove you if necessary. Quite often the case is that no charges will be laid if there is resistance or antagonism. Quite often the first contact with anyone will be the neighbours, who will eventually have to contend with anyway, it's worthwhile to present yourself as honestly and openly as possible.

### **How do I do it?**

Finding empty houses is generally pretty easy, an unkempt look, mail oozing out of the mailbox, overgrown garden, power off (check the electricity meter to see if the powers on), broken windows and doors etc. You should always knock on the door before entering or when checking out a house. Sometimes old people are living in their home without electricity in rundown states. Take a closer look inside and out, is there thick dust inside? no obvious signs of occupation? check how many rooms the house has, are any floorboards missing? check the overall structure of the place, are the gas and electricity meters still there? You need to know what to bring back to secure the house and fix it up if necessary.

It is important to find out who owns the property so you are aware of the owners as the neighbours are and so you'll know who you can speak to, to negotiate if necessary. Only the owner or the agent of the owner (which can, but isn't necessarily the police) can legally evict you or ask you to leave, not the neighbours or the police without direction from the owner. The police may however take it upon themselves to act against people they know to be occupying property without the owners permission, this may be illegal, but by then you're generally out of the house and looking for somewhere else. Find out as much as you can about the house. The land titles office in Macquarie St, is another way to find out who owns property. The system there may seem mind-boggling but it provides information on recent transactions and proposed development plans. The staff there are quite helpful and you can't be denied access to the information, though maybe have to pay for more detailed information.

Getting in is generally quite easy, often broken windows or doors previously forced by other visitors provide access. Vandalism is often an indication of vacant houses, the local kids maybe use the place, this makes it not so hard to just walk right in (besides being a great argument for people living in houses rather than leaving them empty).

During the day on a weekday is actually the best time to check out houses, less conspicuous and you can see more. It's best to just go for a look first without any tools or anything that might justify a break and enter. As long as you don't damage any part of the property it's ok, if you do then leave

and return at a later time if ok. It's not always good to have tools such as crow bars lying around as the police may try to charge someone for breaking and entering.

It can sometimes take quite sometime for owners to realise that anyone is occupying the house, anything from a few hours to a day to a few weeks even. This time should be used for getting the house together, fixing things up, checking the wiring and water etc. It's a good idea to get services such as electricity and gas on as quickly as possible, so you can cook and maintain a life at your new home. Try to keep the house occupied constantly for the first few days and weeks or until you come to some agreement over remaining there with the owner. Get support from other squatters, friends and others in the local area.

If after a few weeks you're still there and have heard nothing from the owners you can start to get a bit more comfortable, it is harder to evict well established households than people who appear to be just using the place to crash in. First thing to do is change the locks and secure the house. Most barrel locks are easily replaced with a few tools (screwdriver, hacksaw, pliers etc) and are available from hardware shops. Deadlocks may have to be sawn off and replaced totally, these cost more but are more secure. Doors or windows that can't be immediately repaired can have wood or board nailed on them to provide temporary security.

## Services

Water, electricity and other essential services can not be denied to you, though if it is known that you are squatting services may be denied to you, this is against the law, you may however be required to pay a security deposit.

### Water and toilets

If the water is off at the taps find the main and turn it back on, after checking the pipes. If water has been turned off from not paying water rates then you can approach the water authority to pay of some off to get the water back on. If the plumbing is n't in tact, hoses and clamps can be used for at least temporary plumbing.

If the toilet is broken a new one can be cemented in and a bucket used if a cistern is unavailable. If the sewerage is blocked it may need to be cleared, with an electric eel or something similar, take care with old piping.

### electricity and gas

If the wiring is ok, you have a legal right to have the electricity connected, but may have to pay a security deposit. You may be required to show proof that you are living at the house with a lease, just say you're living there and that you have a right to services. It isn't actually a necessarily good idea to tell them you're squatting. **If the wiring is damaged or broken get someone who knows what they're doing to fix it..** The same applies to gas services.

## Eviction! and legalities

Essentially you have no rights as a squatter but if you are threatened with eviction there are things you do to postpone eviction or even negotiate a settlement that means you can stay. Only the owner or the representative of the owner has the legal right to evict you, so don't be intimidated by the cops or neighbours without checking. It's important to try and talk to the evictors, evictions have been stopped at the last moment.

Quite often you will be told lies as to the history and future plans for the houses, demolition, renovation etc, or at least the truth is bent in an effort to get you to leave.

If you are asked by the owner, or an agent of the owner (who may be the police) to leave and you don't then you can be arrested for trespass under the Enclosed Lands Act.

Things you can do to resist eviction include

- Contact your local squatters group (or start your own) for support.
- Get friends and other squatters to come around when eviction is due, people showing support can stall eviction.
- Leaflet or doorknock the surrounding houses, try to get some local community support.
- For public authorities visiting, and perhaps protesting outside of, the offices of the organisation can sometimes cause them to back down from evictions.
- Barricade yourself in. *This can however be dangerous to your health, as the cops are generally more 'pissed-off' when they get in and arrest is much more likely, the police may take many days to evict a heavily barricaded squat.*
- Talk to the media about the situation, though be careful as the media may not portray you and the issue in a favourable light. Utilise alternative media, local papers noticeboards etc.

If you resist or are violent or abusive you will most likely face more severe charges (and larger fines) if the police have to remove you. It is obviously best to talk with the police and any other representatives of the owner outside the house, have someone outside to talk with the police if necessary. If you are arrested you will be taken to the police station, your name and fingerprints will be taken and you will probably be released quite quickly.