

W.O.O.D.S.Q.U.A.T. #47

A HISTORY OF THE WOODWARDS SQUAT PART 2: THE WEEK INSIDE: 14-21 SEPTEMBER



People climbed the ladder into the Woodward's squat for many reasons. Some people came because the overfull shelters directed them, others because they had nowhere else to go. Whatever specific situations brought people to the Woodward's squat they stayed because it was safer and more dignified than a shelter or a residential hotel. People stayed because the community they discovered there defied the fact that people sleep in alleys and dangerous shelters while there stands a sprawling building, slated for social housing, which the government was keeping empty. The feeling of urgency in the squat was overwhelming. It was hard to understand what the opening of this building actually meant. Despite any differences, everyone present understood the need to immediately make decisions on how to proceed and work together. The initial 12 squatters called the first squat meeting and after three hours worked out the basic guidelines on how the squat would be run. A strong sense of democracy and justice prevailed and a process was adopted. Decisions would be made by all those staying at Woodward's: each squatter's vote counting equally, the squatters would not accept restrictions on access or residency and finally, no talking to cops. These resolutions created a respect for democratic decision-making which entailed often more than three squat meetings per day. During the first days, those who lived in Woodward's built the community now referred to as "The Woodward's Squat".

DAY 75 – WEDNESDAY – 27 NOV 02

The third day of the squat, Monday Sept. 16th, police entered the building with a court injunction against the squatters. These orders meant that it was illegal to remain in the building and that people refusing to leave may face arrest. Although it was only day three, the squat had been solidified, and threats of arrest were not going to break it. On Sept. 17th the two officers came back armed with an enforcement order and veiled threats of impending police action. They were met with the same response. The squatters could not be moved by words alone. Still, these unexpected visits, by Constables Dixon and Thompson, would become frequent as the week went on. The surprise visits, to inform the squatters that it was illegal and “unsafe” to be inside the building served to agitate and threaten everyone. Dixon and Thompson were playing their role in the government’s attempt to break the squat. It soon became obvious to the police and the government that it would take more than threats and intimidation to convince the squatters to leave.



The squat, to which so many had dedicated their time and energy, took root during the first seven days inside. From nearly the beginning, a system was set up to ensure that all important aspects of the squat were being dealt with. Under this system people who were at one time strangers were able to work side-by-side. Media and police liaisons were selected, communication with unions and community groups was delegated out. Emergency response teams and security patrols were up and running, a kitchen was set up and meals were served. To accomplish this everyone stepped up and contributed, unimpeded by fear of failure. Skilled trades-people, forced into homelessness by an economy in recession, found a place to use their skills in a meaningful way. People with no formal education wrote press releases and spoke to media, and those who’d never had more than

\$20 in their pocket were responsible for receiving donations and distributing resources. For many, the squat meant empowerment, and this translated into commitment. As a result of this commitment the squat was maintained despite incredibly adverse conditions. People sat through 3-hour meetings with the constant danger of police raid. People slept through each night wondering if it would be the last they’d spend in their new-found home. Despite the hostility that the government was imposing in the form of constant police intimidation, democratic decisions were still made, people were fed, and all were kept safe. Through all this the population of the squat grew.

The solid foundation that was developed at the squat was based on a unifying political vision and was maintained by creating a community around that vision. A form of politics was at play that is not often seen in Canadian social movements. This was not politics as a side-note to life, not something that could be left in the streets with the other debris after a large weekend rally. For the squatters the cause came home with them, the cause *was* their home. Maintaining the squat was a way of life. Political pressure was the key to the survival of the squat and this meant a concrete vision needed to be put forward for people to understand and to support. In the beginning a list of demands was drawn up to push the government to address the housing crisis it was responsible for. The squatters recognized the importance of making strong, legitimate, unifying demands. Maintaining cohesion within the group around these demands meant constant discussion and important revisions. Serious issues around including aboriginal rights were brought up and discussed. While issues of racism within the squat and the broader downtown eastside community were brought up in these early meetings by the substantial aboriginal population of squatters, they were not addressed until much later. Decision-making was always complex at squat meetings and as the week progressed the meetings became more intense and the feeling of urgency escalated.

Within the first week it was obvious that social housing was becoming a civic election issue and people everywhere were talking about the housing crisis. The support for the squat was seen in the donations that were arriving, and the eagerness of so many organizations and individuals to endorse the squatters demands. Calls came in from people all over the province and country who were willing to do anything they could to contribute to the squat. The Vancouver and District Labour Council contributed \$500 when a hat was passed around at a meeting.

The squatters demanded a meeting with the bureaucrats in charge of the Woodward building. A letter listing the initial five demands was delivered to Housing Minister George Abbott, Premier Gordon Campbell, BC Housing, City Council and Geoffrey Hughes, the private partner interested in buying the building. Officials had refused to meet or negotiate with the squatters on any terms and squatters felt that the only possible way to address these people was through a public forum. A rally was called for Thursday Sept. 19th at the squat and with under 48 hours notice, over 400 people were mobilized to attend this meeting. The government officials exposed their corruption and unwillingness to discuss their policies and decisions with the people whose lives they affect. Only one city councilor, Fred Bass, showed up and he informed the crowd that he was unable to attend in an official capacity. In response to the rejection of democracy by the invited government officials 200 people climbed the ladder to the inside of the building. That night the squat housed the largest number yet: on September 19th over 100 people slept in Woodward. Police left the squat alone that night, but not without first issuing a warning, Cst. Dave Dixon left, saying, "We are disbanding for now, but we will be back tomorrow. We will be back to remove people with force, and if they are violent we will use pepper-spray. We have stopped negotiating."



Although the owners of the building, BC Housing, had been granted both injunction and enforcement order, they could not move in without public support. Their actions were being determined by the political climate in the province. This was a battle in which the squatters had the upper hand. BC Housing was bound by the need to justify the eviction to the public at large and they would not move in until they were confident their less aggressive attempts to scare people off with

police proved unsuccessful. A story was fabricated to allege the squatters were prepared to use "weapons" of bleach and nail guns against police. The eviction tactics that BC Housing employed had begun with an effort to intimidate and harass people into abandoning the squat and it ended with sending police on an all-out vicious attack the morning of Sept. 21st.



On Friday Sept 20th the meeting started late. It did not really begin until at least 10 pm. At around midnight a tip came in that the police would be moving in at dawn. All business was put aside and the gears started into motion. Immediately people began to focus on ensuring that the eviction, if it happened, would be as safe as possible. This meant buying time so that everyone would be able to gather together and be seated peacefully before the police arrived in the main area. Buying time meant building barricades. All throughout the night people worked ceaselessly securing the exits. The sound of hammers, skill saws and drills echoed throughout the space. Also, safety meant having allies at the site to witness the eviction and help secure the building. Through an urgent and extensive call-around of supporters, the squatters were able to assemble people from all across the city at the squat. As the night wore on people became emotionally and physically exhausted. Many fell asleep, holding on to the vague hope that this was all just a false alarm. At 5:30am on September 21st, the Squat was quiet, only a few people milling around, most of the night's work was done. One squatter outside talking to media heard a reporter say something to the effect of "We got the call, they're moving in." The squatter ran up the ladder and relayed the message to those awake. Within minutes, before everyone could be calmly woke, the terrifying booming of police battering rams had begun.

- Shannon Bundock with Photos by Marwan Marwan

COALITION DEMANDS

THE COALITION OF WOODWARDS
SQUATTERS AND SUPPORTERS

1. Develop Woodward as social housing immediately. There must be an allotment of housing in the building for aboriginal people equal to or greater than the percentage of aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside.
2. Reverse the cuts to social housing and all social services.
3. Draft a civic anti-vacancy by-law to seize and convert empty, abandoned buildings into social housing.
4. Full disclosure of all information regarding the proposed sale and development of the building.
5. The Federal government must fund and support the development of aboriginal business in the proposed commercial storefronts on the ground floor of Woodward. These storefronts must also include an urban native self-governing office with drop-in / support services and culturally sensitive native liaison workers from the community.
6. Decent and dignified immediate shelter for all homeless squatters forced from Woodward and asked to leave the sidewalk in front of the building.



Woodsquat is published by the Friends of the Woodward Squat. FWS is a material support group. It does not represent the Woodward Squat or Woodward Coalition for Social Housing and does not speak for any other of the many groups and individuals comprising this DTES housing action. For daily updates, background info, or contacts visit our website: www.woodsquat.net.

POETRY NIGHT

AT THE SQUAT ON FRIDAY
NOVEMBER 29TH RAIN OR SHINE

Poetry, Music and Statements by Woodward squatters and supporters. All welcome! Come to Abbott & Hastings: bring your writing & instruments!

WITNESSING SHIFTS

The City of Vancouver has obtained an injunction to disperse people back to unsafe parks & dark alleys, where isolation threatens their very survival.

The safety of the Woodward Squatters relies on the presence of credible supporters to witness, record, and by their very presence even prevent the potential policing actions this week.

We are asking you to take on one witnessing shift at the Woodward Tent City. If possible, please bring cell phones, cameras and video cameras, pens and paper.

We have divided these most critical times into three shifts of 4 hours: 10:00 PM TO 2:00 AM, 1:30 AM TO 5:30 AM, & 5:00 AM TO 9:00 AM. Every night from Nov. 25th until Dec. 2nd.

Call 604-727-8471 to sign up for a shift.

WOODSQUAT SCHEDULE

A SERIES ON ARTICLES ON THE CURRENT
HISTORY OF THE WOODWARDS SQUAT

WS#45 – Overview of the History of the Woodward Squat

WS#46 – Part 1 – Opening Day: 14 September

WS#47 – Part 2 – The Week Inside: 14-21 September

WS#48 – Part 3 – Inside and Outside Evictions

WS#49 – Part 4 – The Revised Demands: 02 October

WS#50 – Part 5 – Police Issue Threat to Squat & Disruption of City Council Meeting: 17 & 22 October

WS#51 – Part 6 – Woodward 54 in Court as Disclosure Packages Begin to Appear: 07 November

WS#52 – Part 7 – Vancouver Civic Election: 16 November

WS#53 – Part 8 – Injunction Proceedings: 19-22 November

WS#54 – Part 9 – Events since Day 73 Support Rally