

# ...WE ARE HUMAN TOO. DON'T YOU FORGET THAT.

A personal account of the extraordinary events which took place inside the abandoned Woodward's building "squat" on Thursday September 19<sup>th</sup>, Friday September 20<sup>th</sup>, and comments on the Saturday morning raid.

BY PHILIP LO

[The 19<sup>th</sup>. Evening, around 7:00~7:30 pm.]

Two beams of light danced and wavered, disturbing a seemingly ageless curtain of free-floating dust, and other airborne substances. Otherwise it was pitch black around us -- It was difficult to believe that we were in the heart of a so-called "world class city". Jason and I were within the deepest alcoves on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the abandoned Woodward's building, which has now become a home for the many homeless people in this city participating in the "squat".

Our flashlights were our eyes, and what our eyes saw, I could scarcely believe. What the darkness concealed all these years, was a gigantic, cavernous hall, a hall once haunted by bright neon lights and the proud brands of corporate intent. But tonight, like many other nights in the recent past, it is a hallow sanctuary veiled in shadows, littered with building material, blocked doors, collapsed ceilings. An eerie emptiness reverberated in this lonely shell. Where walls once divided competing economic interests, now rotting pillars stood. The floors had been stripped, revealing bare concrete and hazardous wooden planks. Electrical wires dangled. A large chasm in the center, littered with shattered concrete and other decaying materials, was the only remaining evidence of two escalators that once shuttled eager consumers between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Puddles of water gathered where the ceiling had given way to the corrosion of time.

We, moved into the recesses and alcoves, armed only with our dust-masks and our feeble lights, gathering whatever building material that we can possibly reuse for those who now occupy this hall. Dust flew like fairies around our bodies.

But no, we were armed with more than masks and lights...

In this darkness, we -- the squatters, the grassroots social activists, the citizens, the musicians, the writers, those who have braved this cool night for a common cause -- were bonded by our faith and trust in each other. We lit our way through the darkness knowing that in this ghoulish of spaces, a fire was burning. It was something that I thought had originated within my own heart, but quickly realized that it was the collective spirit which had sought out this light from within me. Each of us, moving about in the darkness, we were all beacons and lighthouses. From afar, we were mightier and brighter than all the constellations in the sky above.

[The 19<sup>th</sup>. Dusk, near the end of the Rally, around 6:00 pm.]

As the rally was nearing its end, we were instructed by Angel and the others to be prepared. One of the many street-level doors on 1<sup>st</sup> floor was to be opened, so that others from the rally could come into the building quickly, bypassing the ladder system outside the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor window which is being used as the main entrance and exit.

In order to accomplish this, we needed to first gain control of the area on 1<sup>st</sup> floor adjacent to the street entrance. We had prior knowledge that that entire floor below was already haunted by a squad of police officers waiting to pick us off in the dark one-by-one, so we had to move cautiously.

To safely gain access to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor from inside the building, one has to navigate a flight of steep, slippery stairs encased in absolute darkness – the very essence of the color black that somehow materialized into a dense fluid and enveloped our senses. Nevertheless, those of us who had lights ventured down these stairs, and past a set of double doors that opened into the dark ghostly space called the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. There was not a source of natural light on this floor, and the outlines of every massive obstacle was set in a deep steel-blue shadow. A sudden coldness struck me as my senses captured the full eeriness of the setting. We could see the set of doors which led out into the street... they were within ten meters of our position. While Jason cautiously paced out in front, we could suddenly hear footsteps, slow, deliberate footsteps. They came from across the floor, and did not belong to us, but we could not see past the obstacles.

They were indeed here.

We hurriedly shut off our lights, and retreated back into the dizzying darkness of the staircase. In my mind, I could not comprehend the situation. I could not reconcile these foes as law enforcement officers, who were supposed to come to the aid of a citizen in need. In my mind, there were images of phantoms, across that floor from us. Phantoms that lurked and blended in with the deep shadows, phantoms who walked slowly and purposefully. Phantoms draped in black, and armed with lethal weapons.

And they were waiting for us.

We returned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, and did not descend onto the floor below again. We simply made preparations for when that street door would finally be opened. I was instructed to stay inside the staircase, and use my light to guide the people up the treacherous climb as they poured in. We lit the propane lamp, and set it near the top of the stairs. We were ready.

That is, until I examined a ventilation shaft near the top of the stairs which gave me an unobstructed view of the dark entrance on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor. I froze, because barricades had materialized near the entrance, which was devoid of any signs of human interference on our last inspection. Both sets of doors – the ones street entrance as well as the ones giving us access to the floor below, were now inaccessible. This was the work of the phantoms.

My heart raced, and I could not think of what they could possibly be planning. I did not even consider how they figured out which street entrance we had planned on using.

Their barricades were simple. They had scavenged their level for building materials, wooden beams, shopping carts and such, and jammed them against the doors, so they could not be opened from our side. I did not see the phantoms do their work... they were suddenly there, and the barricades were in place. From above, I could see their dark, silent forms hovering, lurking, testing their blockade, and giving quiet instructions to each other.

It frightened me because it was an image that had once frightened me in my dreams.

Naturally, there was a moment of chaos among when news of the situation spread. A panicky young man, who was carrying the burning propane lamp, immediately abandoned it in the stairwell and retreated towards the window exit. He said with a fearful voice that he was simply not willing to deal with the violent actions of the police.

But the people poured in. Not through the doors, but up the ladders through the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor window. And as more and more people congregated there, my own secret anxiety was slowly replaced by a joyous comfort. It was not just because we now had a better chance of withstanding the phantoms below, but also because the people brought with them a strength, a joy, a resilience – a sense of solidarity – that comforted me. The sounds of their drums, their chants, cheers, laughter, made me feel at home in this empty shell.

On the third floor, a line of mattresses rested peacefully along the heritage wall of red bricks.

From the floors above, a flock of pigeons disembarked on a journey, packed in a tight formation that was shapeless, and fluid, but unbreaking in unity. I looked out the window and down into the street below. People continued to climb in, but the wind here refreshed me. There was something new in the air.

### [The 19<sup>th</sup>. Evening, around 8:00pm]

So this is what democracy looks like. I had naively thought that I had seen all there was to see on this day, but it was certainly not so.

Night had fallen completely by now. A nearly full moon in the sky, barely sneaking over the buildings across East Hastings, juxtaposed the silently floating banners draped on the sides of the building. Inside, a handful of ceiling lights illuminated sporadic sections of the hall.

A meeting was taking place within. The usual tight circle of people formed the main discussion area. Some drifted along the fringe, others slept on the many mattresses lying about. Ivan Drury was facilitating this large congregation, and order was well kept. Most who were drawn to this circle, including most of the original squatters, were already familiar with the format of these meetings. One person (literally anyone at all) is to facilitate and take meeting minutes, another to keep a speaker's list. Most understood that to be called on to speak, one simply had to raise a hand, be recorded on the speaker's list, and wait for his/her turn.

All were articulate, civil, appreciative of the support from the public, and respectful of all who were present. "We just want people to know that we are human too. Don't you forget that," said one squatter. Issues were debated, resolutions were proposed and voted on. The main concern that the group attempted to tackle was, what next? Was there a plan? Could there be a single strategy to be adopted by all the squatters as a whole? To that end, committees were formed to deal with the specific areas of concern, such as outreach and resources, security, direct action, etc. As I listened to the speakers, I found myself often gazing at the somber structure enveloping me, the growing darkness in the distance, the shadows of people shuffling about... An overwhelming sense of irony gripped me.

It may just be, that within the very heart of this skeletal shelter, true democracy could flourish, *and* spread, without hierarchy, without domination from authoritarian state instruments, without boundaries.

### [the 20<sup>th</sup>. Evening, around 11:00pm. Nightly meeting of the squatters, supporters, activists.]

The hall looked a little different tonight – some minor construction work had begun during the day. Shane, an unemployed carpenter, set up several work benches made of the scavenged wood, and erected a partition/wall between the lockers and the central meeting place. Also, the concrete floor was now covered by a number of black plastic tarps, held down by loose wooden planks.

Shane said that overall, there is a general lack of consensus as to what he should be building next. I asked him what he thought was the most urgent need at the moment, and suggested that he bring it up at the meeting, which was starting soon.

“Well, the first thing we need to do is to get the mattress off the floor, I think that is most important. Because, the people here are dragging their mattresses around the floor, and the dust... just, \*poof\*, flies everywhere, especially when they drop it, and then they breathe it in. Building frames for these mattresses shouldn't be too hard,” he assessed.

But other agenda items dominated the meeting, as two sticky issues revealed a slight division within the squatters. One was the issue of racism, the other was physical versus political strategy.

On the issue of “racism”, the native squatters spoke out against the lack of First Nations representation and voice within the committees, especially the ones who are reaching out to the media. They were concerned about the lack of recognition that even the Woodward's building was built on native land, a land taken forcefully from them without compensation. A resolution was therefore passed to specifically include the First Nations squatters in the Press committee, where they will have direct input on statements released to the media.

The second issue was largely a discussion of tactics and strategy. Casper and Nathan were demonstrating the yet incomplete lock-boxes that would help create a wall of human passive resistance when the police decided to move in. They were making a call-out for donation of materials to help finish them, and possibly make a few more. At this time, another squatter reminded the group that what they should be focusing on is not how to handle the cops, but rather, devising an united political strategy, to gain the upper-hand in the stalemate by presenting a united, non-violent front to the city, thereby gaining more popular support, and putting pressure on the Provincial Government to cave. If we can achieve that, the squatter argued, then we will not even have to worry about police action.

But in the end, police violence was an issue that could simply not be circumvented.

“This *is* my home. I mean, I have no other place to go. After this, I'll be back sleeping on park benches, and... to me, that's the same as going to jail. So I have to stay here and defend this place, until they remove me physically,” said Nathan.

“Isn't it... powerful, if we all choose to be arrested the same way? Isn't it... powerful, if we can all be arrested together and be charged with the same 'crimes'? But then, I believe that a diversity of tactics is just as powerful.”

## [the 21<sup>st</sup>. Around 5pm, outside Woodward's building]

When I arrived at the building earlier today, I found the ladders were missing, and the window was sealed shut. I hadn't noticed that all the windows along Abbott street had been boarded up from the inside until a squatter pointed them out to me.

It turns out that the squatters had been prepared for the raid at dawn this morning. The barricades that they had erected for themselves gave them valuable time to respond. One corporate media source had received a tip that the police were ready to move in. Paddywagons pulled into the parkade. Most of the squatters agreed that they had between seven to ten minutes to wake everyone and link arms in a circle, while those who did not plan to be arrested had ample time to escape via the ladders.

The sound of the battering ram reverberated through the concrete pillars and wooden structures in the crisp morning air.

Riot police entered the peaceful space armed with submachine guns, tear-gas guns, bean bag guns, “huge batons”, and used pepper spray liberally. Most squatters, who were peacefully resisting arrest, were beaten.

Angel, who was pregnant and had every piece of her life riding on this squat, told one riot cop that she was pregnant.

“Then you better leave now, or you may get hurt,” responded the riot police. In other words, “We will hurt you if you do not leave now.” What kind of society are we living in?

People outside the building, bystanders, who were not involved with the squat were threatened, pepper sprayed, and violently handled. Some were even stripped searched.

What was most infuriating was not the actual raid, but the mainstream media coverage. Protesters and squatters were demonized, the squat deemed as another typical drug-house binge on the Downtown Eastside.

FUCKING BULLSHIT. We saw what was happening this week with our own eyes, and it was not what the media had chosen to portray. THIS WAS NOT ABOUT DRUGS. I did not see a single needle inside. It was about poverty, and homelessness. It was about a group of desperate people who were fed up with a government and a society who deems poverty and homelessness as a disease, a scourge to humanity. It was about democracy in its purest form. It was about the voice of every squatter who was inside: Ivan, Angel, Wizard, Sky, Nathan, Casper, Shannon, Shane, Craig... the list is long.

While the bullshit legal wrangling continues with the 54 squatters who were arrested, stories continue to pour in, not just about Saturday, but about the lives of the people who were changed by this experience. The core of the squatters echoed adamantly that this is only the beginning of a movement which will see the Provincial Government fulfill its promise to turn the Woodward's building into viable social housing.

They will be there again.  
And so will we.