

Woodwards Squat, Friday Sept. 20  
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Update on what's happened and is happening at the Woodward's Squat.

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Woodwards Squat, Vancouver B.C.

At three in the afternoon, the second floor of the Woodward's building is quiet. It's a huge space: even with several sections further into the building cordoned off with red tape, the area where squatters have left mattresses, blankets and other belongings is easily big enough to house seventy-five, maybe a hundred people sleeping on the floor. And this is just a small section of one floor of the building. Upstairs, where fewer windows are boarded over with plywood, several people have settled in—many have left for the afternoon, but their blankets and bags stake out the area. It's quieter up here, sunny, and the cool breeze coming in through several open windows is a relief after the dust and darkness of downstairs.

I sit in an open window with Anton, one of the people who has been at the Woodward's squat since Saturday. We talk, look out over the street below and the view of the city. It's a beautiful day, and up on the third floor of the Woodward's building, the view is magnificent. I imagine the view from top three floors is more of the same—million dollar views, without question.

But for the people living here now, the value of the view from this West Hastings heritage building is more symbolic than monetary. Through these windows they can look out at the street from inside a place they are calling home—for many, the first place they have called home for a very long time.

No one knows how long it will last. What began as a rally, a march and an impromptu occupation of a building that has long been the centre of a struggle for affordable housing, has turned into something much bigger than anyone expected. Since a handful of street community members and local poverty activists opened and entered the Woodward's building last Saturday, hundreds of people have arrived—some just to show support, others in search of a safe place to stay.

With a constant stream of people coming and leaving, organization is hard, but a core of dedicated and determined individuals persist. Last night, at a meeting that lasted for close to three hours, the loose collective of squatters and supporters hashed out a long list of issues surrounding the continuing squat: what to do when (and if) the police arrived, how to organize the day-to-day basics of keeping the squat running in a healthy, safe manner, what message needed to get out to the media and the public, how to raise support, keep people and supplies arriving. Although exhausting and frustrating, the open meeting worked—everyone who wanted to had an opportunity to speak, those who questioned or were unhappy with the process aired their concerns, and eventually, decisions were made. The process paid off. Shortly after the meeting had ended, a contractor named Julian arrived with an offer of tools and expertise. He had heard that renovations were to occur, he was ready to bring his tools and begin work. He was directed to the person in charge of organizing security and construction, and this morning arrived with his tools and began work. There is now a safety railing and stairs constructed for the entrance window, and the crew is in the process of building interior walls and floors (not in the heritage part of the building and completely removeable, just in case the structures should need to be moved to "Camp Woodward").

For a loosely organized coalition of homeless people, poverty activists, and supporters, the Woodward's squat has accomplished a great deal. They have issued press releases describing their motivations and intentions. They have requested and received donations from a variety of sources. On Thursday, called a rally in support of the squat, and they held a press conference on Friday. They have put together a network of leaders from diverse backgrounds to provide focus and organization for the group, and they have strived to accomplish everything through a process of open meetings in which everyone's ideas and views can be heard.

Kerry has been one of the individuals active in organizing the squat and getting the right message out to the public. This is no small task, especially when the idea is evolving, changing as the situation changes. At the press conference, one of the reporters comments that in an earlier statement, the squatters had said they'd occupy the building for three days. It's now been six. "This is an organic thing," they say. It's true—the squat has taken on an element of vitality. The people are impassioned. "That W on top of the building," Kerry states, "stands for more than Woodwards. Now it's the world watching us, it stands for our wishes and hopes. The world is watching. What are we going to do?"

It has been a long week, and for those who have been actively involved since the beginning, the stress and fatigue is beginning to set in. Jim, one of the organizers of the rally and march that led up to the occupation of the Woodwards building, is determined not to give up, though, no matter how exhausted he might be. Tomorrow morning, exactly one week since entering the building, he has another radio interview. "We need to keep this going until everyone here has homes," he says. "We have people living here who have nowhere else to go—there are people here who are sick, we have disabled men, a pregnant woman. People need a place to live—we won't send them back to the street." What they need most now, he tells me, is for people to keep coming to the squat. "If we have more people, the cops won't come in. They're waiting for everyone to leave." That's something, he says, that won't happen.

When I talk to Crystal, twenty-four years old, six months pregnant, and homeless, it's clear that she, for one, has no intention of leaving. Earlier today at the press conference, she spoke of the squat as her home, as the people living here the only family she's got. After she was evicted from her apartment last week because she couldn't pay her rent, she says she stayed awake for three days, just walking, too afraid to lie down and sleep on the sidewalk. She could be in a shelter, she says, but that's just temporary, and since coming to the Woodwards squat, she prefers to be here, where her support is. What she needs is a permanent home, somewhere healthy and safe where she can have her baby, but the shelter support offered by welfare is hardly enough to house one person in Vancouver, except in rooming houses or slums—places where crime and drug use proliferate. And besides, Crystal feels safer here, where at least people look out for each other, where violence is not tolerated, and where a sense of camaraderie, support and common purpose prevails.

All Crystal really wants is to get some sleep. She's been here for three days, and hates the idea of climbing up and down the two ladders to the second story window that's been co-opted as the Woodwards squat's front door. But she recognizes, now, that she's something of an icon here, that her presence at the squat is a strong statement to much of what's wrong with how poverty and homelessness are dealt with by the government. She's been interviewed, photographed, videotaped and recorded. She's good-humoured, laughs about it, "but if anyone wakes me up to talk to any more media," she says, "I'm gonna go hormonal on 'em."