

The Battle for Ungdomshuset

The Defense of a Squatted Social Center and the Strategy of Autonomy

CrimethInc.

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Ungdomshuset was a four-story autonomous social center located in the Nørrebro neighborhood of Copenhagen. A stronghold of the workers' movement since the end of the 19th century, it had served the community as a bastion of international squatting networks since the beginning of the 1980s. Twelve years ago today, on March 1, 2007, it was evicted and destroyed in one of the biggest police operations in Danish history. In response, supporters initiated some of the most intense rioting that Denmark had seen in generations. After a week of street fighting and a year of weekly demonstrations, the Danish government was forced to let the movement take possession of a new building. This stands as a major victory, illustrating the power that autonomous social movements can wield by means of uncompromising direct action.

Ungdomshuset is Danish for "Youth House." The original Ungdomshuset was located at Jagtvej 69—hence the prevalence of "69" tattoos among Danish punks of a certain generation. Most European countries retain at least one social center from the heyday of the squatting movement a few decades ago: Norway has the Blitz, Austria has the EKH, Germany has Kopi in Berlin and Rote Flora in Hamburg, Slovenia boasts an entire occupied neighborhood called Metelkova. Over the past two decades, European governments have mounted new attacks on these last redoubts. In 2007, Ungdomshuset was the first squatted social center of its stature in northern Europe to be attacked; politicians across the continent were watching to see what would happen.

The stakes were high. Supporters rose to the challenge, wrecking Copenhagen and teaching bureaucrats around Europe a lesson that they would not soon forget. Today, the Blitz, the EKH, Kopi, Rote Flora, and Metelkova all remain free. All this underscores the importance of establishing a proper *rapport de force* with the authorities.

The strategy of autonomy that we saw in the defense of Ungdomshuset represents an alternative to paternalistic top-down Scandinavian state socialism. In this alternative approach, grassroots social movements refuse all dialogue with institutional power, instead aiming to force the state to relinquish resources and territory so that people can experiment with meeting their needs autonomously. Today, when it has become patently obvious that the state cannot solve the problems capitalism causes, this model may suggest a way forward. Where the previous wave of autonomous movements sought to create preserves in which subcultural rebels could maintain their traditions, we aim to create ruptures throughout society, creating spaces in which it will be impossible for capitalists to continue profiting on exploited labor and the destruction of the environment.

Account: What Ungdomshuset Meant to Me

The first time I visited Jagtvej 69, in 1998, the whole neighborhood around it was boarded up following riots protesting a racist extradition. Police patrolled the area in armored cars and kept the building surrounded. We were there to play a punk show. After the show, we slept in a room on the top floor that was reserved for bands to sleep in.

All night, we heard the police exchanging threats with the punks standing guard on the roof. The pigs had some kind of loudspeaker and they were reading out the legal names and social security numbers of the people they thought were guarding the house. It was a classic intimidation tactic. They may have known that we were in there, too, but they didn't know *our* names or social security numbers. We were unfamiliar with the terrain, but ready to fight for the network of squatted spaces that provided us a home everywhere we went across three continents.

Worldwide networks like this were essential to making Ungdomshuset a living project—both in peacetime and in war.

The last time I visited the old Ungdomshuset, it was fall 2005. It was my fourth time in eight years to perform there with a punk band.

The show in 2005 was less tense—just a couple hundred old and new friends enjoying delicious food and rowdy music, everyone from veteran squatters to boisterous street kids cooking and eating and talking and dancing together. As morning approached, our hosts rolled out two long gym mats under the high ceiling of the theater room on the second floor and several dozen of us bedded down on them, sleeping in two long rows.

The person sleeping next to me was a stranger, a traveler from Australia who had been to parts of the worldwide network I hadn't even heard of yet. I stayed awake in the dark whispering stories back and forth with her, not wanting to miss a moment.

When our band played at a state-run center in Sweden the following evening, the contrast couldn't have been starker. A glass cage was set around the drums to protect the precious hearing of young Swedes. State employees bustled about enforcing a host of Kafkaesque regulations, constantly checking the volume of the bands with a decibel meter. The teenage attendees stood awkwardly between metal barriers, not daring to violate the rules by dancing. We literally couldn't turn our amplifiers above 1 without officials offering to cancel the show then and there. Everything was over long before midnight, the music consumers returning alone to their atomized individual lives, and the building emptied out and locked. That's the top-down paradise offered by social democracy—a dystopia in which liability trumps liberty.

Fortunately, not everyone is willing to follow the rules.

Timeline: Squatting and Resistance in Copenhagen

1897 — November 12. The building at Jagtvej 69 is completed with the name “Folkets Hus” (“The People’s House”) as a headquarters for Copenhagen’s embattled labor movement. Over the following decades, both Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg speak there. In 1910, the Second International holds an international women’s conference at the house, during which Clara Zetkin proposes an International Women’s Day. March 8 becomes International Women’s Day, celebrated worldwide to this very day.

Several historic demonstrations are organized in Folkets Hus, including the massive demonstration in 1918 in which workers storm the Stock Exchange. As late as the 1950s, the building is still used by associations and unions involved in the labor movement, hosting boxing matches, dances, and other activities.

1971 — September. Fifty activists squat Christiania, an old military compound in the heart of Copenhagen. Over the following years, it becomes home to nearly a thousand people.

1981. Punks and anarchists form a group called “the initiative for a youth house” to fight for an autonomous space for young people in Copenhagen. At first, they attempt to get a house through legal means, but they are turned down by the local council.

1981 — October. People squat the empty bread factory “Rutana” and, later, the empty rubber factory “Schionning & Arvé.” Police evict both buildings with tear gas and brutal violence. Next, Abel Catrine-stiftelsen is squatted, which lasts for three months.

1982 — March. The former Musical Mechanic Museum is squatted along with the empty building next door Sorte Hest (“Black Horse”). The occupants make clear that they won’t give up without a fight. That spring, even more houses are squatted, including “The Little Feather,” “Bazooka,” and “Allotria.”

1982 — October 29–31. The city council caves in and hands over the keys to the building at Jagtvej 69 to the squatters movement, delivering them to an undefined group called “the users of Ungdomshuset.” (Rumor has it that when the mayor shows up to the opening party, squatters emptied a bucket of water on his head in front of the flashing cameras of the press.)

Over the following years, a vast number of musicians play at Ungdomshuset, including Nick Cave, Ice-T, Green Day, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Bjork. The house is in constant use by thousands of people, hosting festivals, dinners, theater performances, meetings, a bar, and a wide variety of musical performances.

1983 — January. Massive numbers of police storm the “Allotria” squat only to find it empty. For months, the occupants have been digging a secret tunnel; after dropping a banner reading “We decide when we fight” and yelling insults at the police outside, the occupants escape to a plumber’s shop across the street and make their getaway in a truck.

1983. — Ryesgade 46 and 58 are squatted and remain occupied for three years during negotiations with the local council and the owners of the buildings.

1986 — September 14. A popular protest stops police from evicting the squatters on Ryesgade. Hundreds of activists dressed in identical work suits and ski masks defeat the police in a series of street battles during which huge barricades are erected. The standoff continues until September 22, when the city government calls on the Danish army for assistance, and the defenders withdraw to pick their next battle.

1996 — January 27. A fire damages Ungdomshuset. The building is renovated thanks to volunteer labor and funding.

1999 — May 6. The city council votes to close Ungdomshuset down. Note that the building was in operation for nearly eight more years after this, showing the extent to which the state had lost control of the situation.

1999 — June 17. Seven Ungdomshuset activists stage a takeover of the national television news station, spray-painting slogans on the back board of the set; after a few minutes, the news program goes to “technical difficulties.”

2000 — January 26. The city council puts the house up for sale. The squatters hang a tremendous banner on the front of the building reading, “For sale along with 500 autonomist, stone throwing, violent psychopaths from hell.”

2000 — November 16. The city council sells the house to a shell corporation called HUMAN A/S.

2001 — September 28. The extremist Christian sect Faderhuset (“house of the Lord”) buys up HUMAN A/S, after their cult leader has a dream in which God commands her to destroy Ungdomshuset by any means necessary. The squatters refuse to recognize the sale or to permit the self-styled “owners” to enter the building. The battle between Father House and Youth House is on!

2003. — Faderhuset sues the users of Ungdomshuset, demanding to take over the building.

2004. — The court rules in favor of Faderhuset; the users appeal the case.

2006 — The appeal fails in court.

2006 — May 11. Protest for Ungdomshuset.

2006 — June 22–25. Ungdomshuset hosts the widely attended K-town Festival and “Bike Wars.”

2006 — September. A fund entitled “Jagtvej 69,” organized by Danes sympathetic to the squatters, attempts to buy the house from Faderhuset to hand it over to the users. Faderhuset refuses to sell. One final attempt is made to get an appeal.

2006 — September 23. Protest march from Ungdomshuset to Christiania.

2006 — September 24. Reclaim the streets for Ungdomshuset.

2006 — October. The court decides that the users must leave the house before December 14. The last attempt to get an appeal is denied. The chief of police promises that there will be no attempt to evict the house in 2006. Ungdomshuset supporters send out a worldwide call for assistance.

2006 — October 22. Users of Ungdomshuset visit the offices of Faderhuset.

2006 — October. Ungdomshuset celebrates the house’s twenty-four-year anniversary.

2006 — December 12. The fund “Jagtvej 69” offers to purchase the house for several times its market value. Faderhuset once again refuses to sell the house. Even capitalist press outlets express disbelief.

2006 — December 14. Thousands of people take part in a huge protest for more autonomous spaces in Copenhagen.

2006 — December 14. A pirate radio station begins broadcasting from inside Ungdomshuset.

2006 — December 16, evening. An unpermitted demonstration sets out from Ungdomshuset. People from all over the world have come to participate. They only get a few hundred yards from the house when riot police attack, resulting in hours of fighting in the streets and 273 arrests.

2006 — December 29. The mayor proposes to move Ungdomshuset to Christiania in the center of Copenhagen. The proposal is turned down, since there is no space available there.

2007 — January 3. Faderhuset receives permission to tear down Ungdomshuset.

2007 — January. Liberals protest against Ungdomshuset. Nazis join their protest. Fights break out.

2007 — January 8. The mayor proposes to move Ungdomshuset further down the street to an old firehouse that is owned by the state. The request is denied by the state.

2007 — January 13. A house is squatted on Dorteavej, not far from Ungdomshuset. Police evict the place 48 hours later.

2007 — February 3. A house on Grondalsvaenge is squatted, but evicted the same day.

2007 — February 16. Morning traffic is blocked by protesters with banners for Ungdomshuset.

2007 — March 1, 7 am. Police and military units dressed as police attack Ungdomshuset in one of the biggest police operations in Danish history. Six officers are lowered from a Navy helicopter onto the roof through the barbed wire defenses the occupants have erected; two cranes lift containers filled with riot police up to the windows on the first and second floors, while fire-fighting equipment from Copenhagen airport sprays the entire building with huge amounts of foam to block vision and prevent the use of Molotov cocktails; one last group of cops breaks through the wall from a building next door.

The police say it takes five minutes to secure the building, but in fact it takes them forty minutes before they have succeeded in violently incapacitating and arresting all thirty-five people inside. Within an hour, a hundred people have gathered and riots are breaking out; after another hour, there are 1500 people and barricades are appearing throughout the area, some in flames. The group Feminists for More Free Space is responsible for twelve barricades and for another one later in the afternoon.

2007 — March 1, 5 pm. A march starts moving towards the building at Jagtvej 69 and the biggest riots in Denmark's history break out. Activists barricade the streets and set cars on fire to block police vans. The police shoot tear gas and protesters return fire with Molotov cocktails, rocks, and bottles. 217 people are arrested.

2007 — March 2. A group occupies the headquarters of the mayor's political party. The police bring in cops from all over the country; police vans from Sweden and Holland are brought after protesters smash the local ones. That night, about 2000 people once again attempt to reach Ungdomshuset; when the police attack, they build barricades and set police vans on fire. The riots spread throughout the city to other parts of Copenhagen. 188 people are arrested.

2007 — March 3. Police illegally raid places around Nørrebro; 130 arrests. 13 foreigners have already been expelled from Denmark. Members of the Anarchist Black Cross who had been organizing prisoner support are themselves arrested and their phones shut down; later that day, the Black Cross announces a new phone number. Despite the violence, the support group Citizens Group for Ungdomshuset is swamped with calls from people who want to join; its membership has grown to almost 700 in the preceding days. 2000 people gather for a march in the afternoon. Solidarity demonstrations are occurring all around Europe: over the following days, protesters occupy Danish consulates, shut down highways, and trade projectile fire with police. That evening, riots break out again all over Copenhagen. 76 people are arrested. The cost of the riots is estimated to be \$2.7 million.

2007 — March 5. Masked workers start to tear down Ungdomshuset under heavy police guard; many companies have refused to participate, if not because they support Ungdomshuset, then because they can't guarantee the safety of their workers.

Vehicles belonging to the companies that tear down Ungdomshuset have their tires slashed, their windows broken, and acid poured on their seats. One of the companies sends its workers home and bills Faderhuset for the damages.

Late that night, two trucks are burned in the parking lot of the company that has been transporting material from Jagtvej 69. The company, "3x34 Transport," announces that it is a politically neutral company and "will transport any order no matter the political, religious, or ethnic ground." Despite this, they choose to stop working around Ungdomshuset: "3x34 Transport will at any time choose to not do work that will pose a threat to the people working in the company, and has, with this in mind, chosen to not take any more orders in connection with the clearing of Ungdomshuset at Nørrebro."

2007 — March 6. The cult leader of Faderhuset gives a victory speech in which she announces that the young people of Nørrebro are possessed by demons, but that God was victorious over Satan. She says the next things to fight are homosexuality, pedophilia, pornography, abortion, and satanistic toys.

2007 — March 8. 4000 people celebrate International Women's Day, which was first proposed at Jagtvej 69 almost a century earlier, with a march in support of the struggle for Ungdomshuset. The building has been destroyed, but the fight for a new house is gathering steam.

2007 — March 16. A vanload of police stops by Jagtvej 69 just to piss on the ground where Ungdomshuset used to be. Asked by a bystander if it is not illegal to urinate on private property, the police answer, “We have a very good relationship with Ruth” [the cult leader of Faderhuset]. Meanwhile, the police department admits to having “accidentally” attacked crowds with a potentially lethal form of tear gas.

As soon as the smoke clears, Faderhuset puts the property up for sale for DKK 15 million (they’d purchased it for DKK 2.6 million). City councilors express irritation, since Faderhuset had refused to sell the house when “Jagtvej 69” offered to buy it for the squatters, and the riots that followed the eviction cost the state an estimated DKK 72 million.

In all, more than 750 arrests took place during the eviction and resulting conflicts, including 140 foreigners. Solidarity actions occurred throughout Denmark and as far away as South Korea. Thousands of people joined the fight for a new Youth House and people from the 1980s squatting movement came out of retirement, organizing weekly protests as the Grey Bloc.

2007 — May 14. Police enter Christiania to demolish the abandoned Cigarkassen building. Hundreds respond, building road blocks and disabling construction vehicles; when the police retreat, people rebuild the house. By the early afternoon, a few thousand people have gathered in Christiania. Police are patrolling in large groups, sometimes arresting people, sometimes being pelted with bottles and rocks. The police are eventually driven out by a combination of squatting activists and hashish peddlers; they shoot tear gas into Christiania from outside, but a huge burning barricade is erected to keep them at bay.

In the course of all this, somebody manages to pour a bucket of urine and feces on police commander “Bjarne Bonelock,” who always handles cases related to Christiania and Ungdomshuset. The fighting continues late into the night, but the police never regain the upper hand. There are 50 arrests; the prosecutor demands they remain imprisoned lest they participate in further disturbances in Copenhagen, which they say is “in a state of rebellion.”

2007 — August 30-September 6. A week of action occurs on the six-month anniversary of the eviction, including several massive demonstrations, a feminist day focusing on self-defense skills, the usual barricading and street fighting and property damage, and a group of children squatting a house at H.C: Oerstedsvej 69 and defending it from the police with pies and water balloons. After the riots on September 1, the US embassy sends warnings to all American citizens in Denmark to keep out of Nørrebro. At the end of the week, there are 69 simultaneous protests at 69 different locations that have the house number 69. Squatting activists have announced that an abandoned water pumping station at Grøndalsvænge Allé 13 will be occupied the following month, using tactics from the G8 summit protests in Germany.

2007 — October 6. Almost 10,000 people gather in Nørrebro to occupy Grøndalsvænge Allé 13; nearly 1000 have trained for months for confrontations with police. After the march sets out, it divides into four different blocs, each with its own themes and preferred level of risk. The chosen building and the entire surrounded area is full of barbed wire, police, and police dogs. The vast majority of the crowd is explicitly nonviolent, but the police still attack with tear gas, dogs, and batons, even gassing themselves and innocent families at various points. 436 people are arrested, apparently the biggest single mass arrest in the history of Denmark.

Despite all this, a few hundred people manage to reach the house and raise the Jolly Roger flag from the roof. In the end, they don’t succeed in holding the house, but the mayor announces that she wants to negotiate.

2008 — April. A massive demonstration called “Blok-R” is planned for April 3 in Copenhagen; the idea is for thousands of people to forcibly occupy City Hall. The action is canceled at the last second, on April 1, when Copenhagen politicians agree to hand over a new Youth House to the movement as soon as possible. The planned occupation becomes a victory party involving 3000 people.

2008 — July 1. The partisans of Ungdomshuset take control of the building at Dortheavej 61.

2008 — October 18. The new Ungdomshuset at Dortheavej 61 opens to the public.

2017 — March 1. A confrontational demonstration observes the ten-year anniversary of the eviction.

The new Ungdomshuset at Dortheavej 61 still operates to this day. *When we fight, we can win!*

Accounts from the Defense

Dortheavej, January 13, 2007, 1 pm

Twenty-eight people are crowded into a one-room apartment. For weeks, people have been meeting at night in parks, playgrounds, and secret places, under starlit skies and in the pouring rain, talking with silhouettes in the dark—making plans to take a house. Tools and materials to board up the building have been stored nearby. The scout group has been watching the abandoned building for weeks now. Three floors, entrance through the cellar.

Someone is nervous. After the last meeting, a guy listening to police radio heard them talk about a large group of activists. Are they on to us, do they know our plans? People are drinking tea and coffee, getting ready to leave. We leave spare clothes and personal belongings at the apartment. It’s time. The scout group has already left to see if there are any police by the building. We get the call—the coast is clear. Let’s go.

We meet up with the scout group in a back yard a few blocks away. The occupation of this second Ungdomshuset has been planned to take place during a demonstration demanding that Ungdomshuset be left alone. The protest is set to start at 2, so we have a few hours to board up the house as well as we can. The protest will end at a nearby square; fliers will be handed out about the new squat, and the plan is that people will seem to disperse and then make their way up to the new second squat. The protest has started; we grab our gear and make our way towards the house. If the cops spot us now, they’ll just think we’re on our way to the protest. However, we’re carrying some pretty large stuff packed onto our bikes: banners, two-by-fours, tools and boards.

We get to the house. No cops. Now! Go, go—the door into the cellar has been pried open a few days before. Inside, everybody knows what to do. Banner people upstairs, lookout to the window, barricade people to the doors.

Every window was boarded up when the building was left behind, which gives us some cover, but the noise from the stolen power tools and swinging hammers gives us away. Once the house is boarded up, we wait. The giant banner is ready. Everyone has found a crack somewhere in the boarded up windows. A call comes in: the protest has “ended,” but the crowd has started moving towards our location together, not in small groups as planned. We wait.

Oh no. The police have either found a flier or tapped someone's phone. They arrive in their vans before the protesters do. They form a line, put on their helmets, and attempt to use a moveable fence there to block the entrance. Now the protest arrives. Banner out the window, reading "Now we have two." Standstill. The cops have forgotten about the back side of the building, and we help people climb ropes to get in. Seconds later, police cars come racing around the corner; cops jump out, put on their helmets, and starts pushing people away.

In front of the building, people have started to confront the police. They pull down the fence the police have put up—some make a run for it and get past the police line into the building. Fights break out between protesters and the police, and suddenly a tear gas grenade is fired. None of the cops have their gas masks on; some cop must have gotten trigger-happy. The protesters pull back, but after a few minutes everyone pushes forward again. The cops have given an ultimatum to us: if we leave now, we won't be arrested. A handful of people with unpaid fines and arrest warrants start to get ready to leave. As the door is barricaded behind them, the cops suddenly get into their vans and leave.

Too good to be true! More than a thousand people scream in victory. Everyone rushes to the door. A party has started. This is Friday. We hold the house until the cops come back to evict us Monday morning. In just forty-eight hours, the house is transformed into a place with electricity, a concert hall, workshops, and info points. People work on reinforcing the barricades constantly, build chairs and tables in the workshop, and bring in furniture from waste dumps and food from the local supermarket's dumpster. We held it for only forty-eight hours, but in that short period of time we witnessed the amazing results of what can happen when people work together.

Ungdomshuset, March 1, 2007, 7 am

I wake up to someone screaming: "EVICTION!"

For the past months, people from all over the world have been on watch in shifts. Seven in the morning is the end of the night shift and people are tired from the strain of being on constant alert. We know that the house is going to be evicted at some point as both the police and government have promised, but the waiting game has drained a lot of our energy and in a strange way some of us are actually looking forward to it happening. The barricades separating each floor have been reinforced in every possible way we could think of. Huge plates of metal on wood, packed with wool to fuck up their chainsaws. Every window is boarded up with strong metal netting to prevent the pigs from shooting tear gas through the windows.

I've been living here since the international call went out announcing the protest in December on the original date of the eviction. The protest was a show of force, a taste of what was to come if they evicted the house. Thousands of people from all over the world came, and as the black bloc of two thousand people started to march, we only made it three hundred yards before the police blocked the road and all hell broke lose. The riots lasted for hours and several hundred people were arrested.

I sit up in my sleeping bag and almost immediately my eyes start to burn from the tear gas that has been fired from the roof. I reach for the gas mask next to me and get up. Some people are running up the stairs and some are running down them. People are yelling everywhere. Someone is fighting off cops on the floor above. I am having problems getting my mask on. I spot my friend coming down the stairs. It's getting hard to see anything as grenade after grenade

of tear gas explodes inside the building, now on every floor it seems. He helps me with my mask. My eyes burn and my lungs hurt. Last night, there was a concert, and a local band missed their train, so they slept in the house. We divide into two groups: a group that will sit and wait for the cops, since they are not really there to defend the house, and a group that will see what we can do to hold it as long as possible.

To the roof! Not possible. OK. Barricades closed. Where are they? Explosions seem to be going off everywhere. Further down the back stairs, peep through the door on the second floor. Shit, they're everywhere. Even further down: a hole in the wall—so we *did* hear something last weekend! To the basement, board up the door. Nowhere else to go. They're outside the door. We can hear the group that sat down to wait behind the bar start to scream. Fuck, what are they doing to them? Fucking pigs.

They start to break down the door. We back into a small room in the back of the basement and close the door. They have broken through the outer door. Final showdown. No way out. "Let's give 'em hell!" Everyone screams as they start to break through the last door. Total chaos. A huge fight breaks out in a cramped basement full of tear gas. A cop screams. I can't tell what is happening until I am being beaten to the ground with a blow to the head from what feels like police baton.

They sit us down in a row and rip off our gas masks. People are starting to throw up, screaming for air; a few pass out. A young guy is being lifted up and carried out by four anti-terror police officers. He is no longer conscious; some of the cops beat him unconscious in the fight. They let us sit there in the basement filled with tear gas long enough for a few of us to sustain lung damage; more of us temporarily lose our sight.

They take us one by one out to their transport police bus, which is parked in the beautiful trashed backyard behind the building. Police are everywhere. I look back at the house and I can't even focus on the building. It isn't until hours later that I regain my eyesight, and it's several days before I can breathe normally.

I never saw the house again, only on television from my prison cell as they tore it down, my heart filled with anger and sorrow.

Copenhagen, March 1–4, 2007

Everyone has their story about the days. I've heard the most amazing tales of victories and great escapes, and there is no way I can pass on all that happened during the first few days of March. We had two days in freedom, during which the police were fought off and we held the streets, even though we didn't get to take back the house. I can only tell my own story.

Thursday

I moved to Copenhagen in November to organize for a possible eviction. I've hoped all along that the city council would change their minds and find a solution to the situation—but since my faith in the state is really non-existent, I prepared for an eviction.

I meet with my friends as soon as I hear about the eviction. I have to get in contact with a lot of people and write some indy news updates, but my friends go as close as they can get to check out the situation. They come back a few hours later to tell me that so far it's very unorganized, there are massive numbers of police, and they seem to have the upper hand.

So we wait until 5 pm. We meet up with the rest of our group at Blaaards Plads, where the protest is to begin. I can't believe my own eyes. For the past months, there have been more and more people showing up at the protests to save Ungdomshuset, but this is completely insane. I would say there are more than 5000 people gathered here today. Many masked and in their affinity groups. We have not been the only ones waiting for this. Let's take back our house! Tonight we will celebrate in Ungdomshuset once again. We start to move down the small street that leads to the main road. As the protest turns the corner onto the main road, three police vans are parked across the road in an optimistic attempt to block 5000 people. We don't even get into throwing range before the first stones and bottles fly through the air. The front of the protest starts to run towards the police vans, and they quickly turn around to get away.

What the fuck—there are Nazis on the sidewalk about a hundred yards down the street! 200 people charge the 20 Nazis, who run like they have never run before. The police vans have blocked off the street a little further down. The march speeds up moving towards them. Rocks and bottles smash down upon the front windows and they start to back up slowly down the street. Charge! A few hundred protesters from the front attack the police cars and chase them further down the street. Oh no, it's a trap—police vans have been waiting in a street off the main road. "PULL BACK!" Everyone starts to run back, but the police capture about 70 people—mostly bystanders, press, and some young kids. Still, they bragged of this as a great success on the evening news, though afterwards they were not able to convict any of the people caught in this maneuver.

Barricades now! The cops keep driving straight through them, so set them on fire. Block the streets to the main road. Bounce cars out on the road. They are not going to catch any of us in a trap with that tactic again. Check out the graveyard along Jagtvej. Break the locks. Damn, there are a lot of cops in there. Police dogs. No good. Move back a little. Stash the bags. Get out the map. OK, two construction sites nearby. Three parks. Remember, in the back of every block of buildings there are big trash containers. Let's get them out. Bottle recycling container: tilt it, get it open. Who has the screwdriver? Dig out the dirt around the paving stones. Let's get them out there. Get some crates and shopping carts from that supermarket. OK. We can get through the blocks *here* and *here*. This building is locked, but X— has a key. Down this street, just ring the doors, people hate the pigs here—they will help us.

Can't wait until it gets dark.

The protest has been fighting the police back and forth for some hours now. Bouncing cars out onto the road is a great way to block off the street—but if tear gas is fired or people leave to go fight somewhere else, the cops just bounce the cars back and regain control of the street. People have started to set the cars on fire to prevent this. They may have 25 police vans, but they only have a couple fire trucks—and those have to be guided by police vans, and they can't do anything until people are gone.

They want us off the street. They have started shooting tear gas at every crowd of more than 20 people. On our way back to our bags, we are hit by a huge cloud of tear gas. No time for maps. We can't run since we can't see. We dive into a courtyard behind a building—the gate is locked. We can hear the cops exiting their vehicles. A door opens a few meters from us: "In here," a man says. In this part of town you can almost always trust people, as most people living here really hate the police.

We crawl through the doorway into a basement. All around us, people are lying on the floor with tears in their eyes and gas in their lungs. Break out the lemon water, pass it around. It helps

a bit. We start to breathe again. After ten minutes, the guy leads us through the basement and into the courtyard. “Use these,” he says, pointing to the trash containers. We peek out of the gate at the main street: the cops are further down the street—busy trying to get away from a huge crowd! Into the streets with the containers. People everywhere. The containers are set on fire. From where we are standing now, we can see more than five burning barricades. We need a break. We go back and get our bags, then head for the park. We need to get something to drink, rest for a while, and make plans.

Constant sirens, exploding tear-gas grenades, fireworks being shot back. Back onto the streets. Fires everywhere. Flashing lights. It’s getting late. Tomorrow another protest is planned. We start to head back. All the streets connecting to the main street have flaming barricades and burning cars in them. We heard rumors that the fighting has spread to other parts of the city to draw the police away from Nørrebro. At Christiania, about a thousand people have built barricades and are now battling police. We need more information. Back to the house. Phones, internet, television. Constant updates; the news shows the police losing control of the situation. My favorite clip shows the chief of operations telling an interviewer that everything is under control while people are screaming in his face that he should get the fuck out of their neighborhood and explosions are going off in the background. We hear that people from all over the country are on their way. The protest tomorrow could be even bigger than the one today.

We go dumpster diving to get something to eat; we hear constant sirens and explosions from the other side of the railroad tracks while we visit our favorite dumpsters. We get back, quickly cook up a meal, and eat. We can’t stay here, we have to go see what’s going down. We check up on friends to see who has been arrested and who is still at large. Oh no—some of our friends were on watch as they stormed the house this morning, so a few of ours have been arrested.

We hop on our bikes and ride the short distance to the Nørrebro train station at the end of the street. Even all the way down at this end of the street there are burning barricades. We park our bikes behind a building. The cops are once again driving up and down the street at top speed to confuse people. It’s not really working. We get some information from people coming down the street: further up, a group of several hundred people is trying to reach Ungdomshuset, and is fighting the cops close to Runddelen. Look out for undercover cops—they roam the streets in large groups. Luckily for us, those bastards are usually easy to spot.

There are people everywhere. Many have come to see what is going on, and since it’s Thursday, also known as Little Friday, there are lots of drunk people out. They have quickly learned that the police only race back and forth, so they’ve joined in building barricades, throwing rocks, and bouncing cars.

The police are mostly at Runddelen square, trying to fight off the many groups trying to get there. We have to take the backstreets. Every street we pass has burning cars and barricades in it or firefighters trying to put them out—but not much police. We turn off the streetlights as we advance by kicking the light posts so they go out—we might need to hide. We spot about 50 people running around the corner with three police vans close behind. *In here!* We have this building marked as having an unlocked gate into the courtyard. Everyone inside. Get out a bike lock: gate is locked. The cops come running but they can’t get in. The tool they need to cut the lock is in a special van that is nowhere around. “Shit!” the cop at the gate yells. Someone throws a bottle at the gate; the cop shrieks and runs back to the van with his colleagues. They drive off. They might try to get around the building. Let’s go.

We don't get far before we spot a group of people sitting on benches at the far end of the courtyard. Some of them have gotten up to see who we are, and we see they're holding clubs and baseball bats. "Too bad—it's not the cops," one of them says. These guys had locked three out of four gates and were waiting for police to enter the courtyard so they could beat them up. They help us out through the back of the building and out onto the street again. People have changed clothes.

The street is dark. We head for the main road. There we go. More than a thousand people have reclaimed a large part of the main street between two barricades too big for the police vans to smash through. Banners supporting Ungdomshuset hang from windows, people are holding their ground, defending the barricades with pieces of pavement every time a police van comes too close. The police have changed tactics: instead of driving really fast up and down the street, they've now retreated to just defending the Runddelen square.

After hours, the fighting seems to have died out a bit. People share stories of the day, affinity groups huddle up, there is a people's kitchen in the middle of the street. We help gather rocks by the barricades, handing out sweets we found in the dumpsters earlier. Someone is jumping around on a barricade that is not yet burning—on a unicycle! We pass out information about the info points to everyone we hear speaking languages other than Danish. We start to head back to our bikes, turning off the streetlights as we go. Almost every backstreet still has burning cars and barricades, not much police down here.

As I lay down with the TV still on, there is a special bulletin: police have been fought back outside Christiania. Damn, I can't sleep, I wish were there. The activist news ticker is constantly updated on the computer. I finally fall asleep.

Friday

Get up. We eat and talk about yesterday. We all have things to do this afternoon before the big protest this evening. On the television, the police chief of operations tells us that everything is now under control, hundreds have been arrested, he thinks people have given up. Oh my, if he only knew. They show scenes of burnt cars, bourgeois citizens talking about how horrible it was with big smiles on their faces. They loved it, you can see it in their eyes: finally something happened. I have to help out by the info point this afternoon and help out with the internet update afterwards. We plan to meet up later. Police are still everywhere. They look tired. The theme for today's protest is "follow the green flag." I can't wait.

I take the bus, and I can't help smiling every time the bus hits a bump in the road from where one of yesterday's burning barricades left a deep scar in the asphalt. I hear amazing tales at the info point. Dozens of people were unarrested last night, even more made a run for it with their hands cuffed behind their backs with plastic strips. Three or four police vans were damaged by upside down benches with their legs at an angle. Cement in the exhaust pipes of other police vans. I help the Food Not Bombs group prepare for dinner. Thousands of people from all over the country and the rest of the world.

I meet up with my group at Sankt Hans Torv, not far from where Ungdomshuset is. We talk about the events that took place here in 1993, when the police fired 113 shots at unarmed protesters after a rigged second vote to begin the European Union. As we turn the corner, we can't believe our eyes: we are a half an hour early, and the square is already filled with people.

Police vans are all around down every backstreet. We share a beer; I brought some food from the kitchen for my friends.

5 pm. The square is not big enough to hold all the people that have arrived. The protest van is playing music. Suddenly, plainclothes cops are trying to arrest someone wearing a mask. They get bottles thrown at them and quickly make their escape. Police vans start to move in. Tear gas—plenty of it. Part of the crowd pulls back a bit; folks with kids are helped down the only backstreet without police in it and are given lemon water. The police van closest to the square is starting to move forward when a brave soul hurls a Molotov at the front windshield. Two more follow soon after. More gas. Rocks and bottles hit every van in sight. Bottles full of paint hit the police vans in an attempt to blind them. Even more tear gas grenades go off above the crowd. We run into the surrounding streets. There's the green flag. Let's go.

Towards the main street. If the cops thought the gas would make people give up and go home, they have another thing coming. Some people have scattered into the smaller streets behind the main street; we are in the main part of the protest that remains as we turn out into the main street.

The second we get to the main street, a barricade of huge trash cans, a few bikes, and two benches turned upside down is built to block the police from attacking the back of the protest. We bounce two cars out onto the road just before we reach the main street. We walk towards Ungdomshuset. We can see it behind the trees of the cemetery just next to it. It's right there, just behind those 500 police officers with helmets and batons at the corner of the street. We hear an explosion nearby. Is it gas? No, must have been fireworks or a car set on fire. More police vans speed in down at the corner. They know if we get past them, the house is ours again. The protest stops just in front of the police line. They are wearing gas masks. BOOM! Gas fills the streets. So do rocks from the pavement. Screwdriver between the stones of the sidewalk. Dig up the dirt; when one stone is removed, every other stone can be picked up. Folk science passed down for generations.

Masks on. We knew it wasn't going to be easy. Someone spots plainclothes police inside 7-11. They always guard those fucked up shops. Rocks shatter the windows. More gas. People start to run. Cops move in. Let's go!

We run back a bit. Just as we pass a building, a woman in her forties pops her head out the gate to the courtyard. "In here," she says. Furniture that has been thrown out and about six garbage containers. Furniture into the containers—go, go. Out on the street. We smile and thank the woman for helping. "Give 'em hell boys," she says before closing the gate again. A simple lighter won't set this ablaze. Two people who helped get the stuff out on the street run to the next 7-11 down the street. "Be careful, check for cops!" we yell after them. The store has boards over every window but is still open. If someone steals a bottle of flammable liquid tonight no cops are going to come stop them. There are people everywhere. Mostly protesters, but also a lot of people using the riots as a night on the town. People nearby cheer as the flames ignite the living-room-themed barricade. We need to find a larger and tighter group of people so we can do what we came here for and take back Ungdomshuset.

Blaagards Plads, a square in the middle of social project housing—there we go. More than a thousand people have gathered here, burning barricades with flames reaching up three stories in the air. We snatched a few bike chains earlier. Time to turn out the streetlights. After a few attempts, the bike chain wraps around the wires on the pole. Sparks. Darkness. Here come the cops. The van stops, the door opens, and more than twenty rocks hit it. The door closes. "Don't

let them get out to fire gas,” someone yells. People move forward. Let’s get them out of here. More vans arrive. Same deal. The cops drive a bit down the road and turn to try to flank us.

In this part of town, we have kids with cellular phones on every corner, so we are constantly updated on where the cops are, as it is shouted out whenever someone gets a call. We pass on the information in English, calling out directions in place of street names. They can’t get through the end of the street we’re on, so we head back as the cops try to get up to the other end of the road. As the first van turns the corner up the street, a Molotov hits the street right in front of it. It stops just long enough for rocks to start flying. They back off. No gas yet. A lot of the locals have no interest in taking back the house; they want to stay and fight the cops here. Fair enough.

By yelling, we gather a few hundred people that want to try to take back Ungdomshuset. Where is everyone else? Some think people have gathered in Folkets Park (“People’s Park”) just on the other side of the buildings next to us. Some think they are out in the streets blocking them off, in smaller groups.

Let’s go. First Folkets Park. Sure enough, a big crowd has taken hold here. The streets are blocked by burning barricades and people are making plans around a big fire in the middle of the dark park. We can’t go through the cemetery—earlier today there were hundreds of cops hiding in there, some with police dogs. All the gates are locked and we need to move a lot of people fast if we are to have a chance. No good. What’s left? There are the main streets on either side of the cemetery, with a lot of cops in them; their tactic is still to speed up and down the streets and shoot gas at crowds of people. The backstreets then. The lights are off in most of them. There are a lot of places to hide and escape through, and hopefully other people there as well. So far, we have mostly seen people building barricades and defending them when the cops come rather than gathering to try to take back the house.

Off we go. We pass the main street. Six or seven burning barricades have sprung up since we were last here. Down the backstreets. We meet smaller groups of people; most are doing their own thing and have no interest in joining us. We lose some people that want to stay behind, hoping for a larger group to show up. We need more people. No cops here. We can hear their sirens out on the main street as we move through the darkness. A trail of bounced cars and hasty barricades appears behind us as we move. We get to the other side of the Runddelen square right next to Ungdomshuset. Still no sign of the several thousand people that were in the protest when it started. Well, there are people everywhere, but not in a large group.

Here, police are using a different tactic: they drive their vans down the street, and when they get close to a large group they jump out and start to run towards them. Then people start to run—that is, at least the first couple times. We discover that they are not really doing anything but running a bit, then returning to their vans.

No gas so far. We hope that they haven’t run out. Last time that happened, in 1993, they started shooting people instead. Still no sign of the crowd—until we get a call about people gathering back where we just came from. Damn. We hold a meeting in the middle of the street, mostly with people we’ve never met before. We share our information, as we’ve noticed that police are no longer driving up and down the street but instead have positioned themselves at Runddelen next to Ungdomshuset. In case some of the people we are meeting with are cops, we are all masked; some help out translating the meeting into English for the many activists from outside the country.

We decide to take the direct route towards the place we just came from, hoping that the people gathered there are starting to move towards us from the other end of the main street. The

cops have parked their cars front to front blocking the street; at least they won't suddenly come speeding towards us. A few people stay at the corners of the streets we pass on our way to the main street, in case there are other cop cars trying to creep up behind us. We're getting closer. BOOM! That was the gas. The wind is at our backs, so since they shot it over us it has no effect. I climb a street sign to see if there are people moving in from the other side of the police line. No luck. Now what? The cops outnumber us big time. From where we stand we can see some cops starting to throw something at us. They have been known to throw rocks before. But as their small tear gas hand grenades goes off, we know this is not the case. No escaping the gas this time.

Hard to breathe, no eyesight. We know they have more than one kind. This kind is really bad. Back up. Stay together. People help the ones that were gassed the worst. The cops are staying put; guess they just thought we got too close. Time out. Breathe easy. Rinse with lemon water. We need to find more people. Don't use phones. Some people want to go back to other rally points. We need a top view of the city. We find a scaffold down a street and climb to a rooftop.

My heart skips a beat when I take in the view: there are barricades burning everywhere, all over the city. The blue flashing lights are now only down at the square near Ungdomshuset. We can see people everywhere, but no larger crowd prepared to follow the original plan of taking back the house. We share a beer and a cigarette here on top of the world. No one says much. We just take in the sight. Never before in my life have I seen something as beautiful as this. We are all tired. We head home for the night.

The TV is on. Tonight people took back the streets all over the city. At the free town Christiania, the police were beaten back with rocks, paint bombs, and huge burning barricades. As I fall asleep, I think of my friends who were inside the house. I hope they are OK. The TV showed some images of unconscious people being carried out of Ungdomshuset yesterday by anti-terror police as they evicted the house.

Saturday and Sunday

I wake up late. My phone is ringing. The cops have attacked ten places looking for foreign activists. They kicked in the door and tear-gassed the legal "Bumzen" squat. More than a hundred arrested. The total count is more than 600 now.

The cops lost a lot of police vans last night, so now they have brought in extra vans from Sweden and Holland and extra police from the entire country. Last night, the police really lost control. There was a chance—if only we had been able to stick together and take back the house. It seems the police are really organizing towards not letting people take back the streets today. All through the morning, we get more and more news. The police are now driving around the streets in masks and arresting anyone they think looks like an activist.

We continue following the updates. So many people arrested, so many more cops. It doesn't look good. Early in the evening, we head towards Folkets Park. We get a few kilometers up the main street and by that time we have already seen two people pulled into police vans. There are plainclothes cops everywhere. We decide that we don't want to take the chance right now. We exit the main street, move across the railroad tracks, and head back home. Unless we know we have a gathering of some kind to go to, we will not go anywhere. The police are pissed about getting their asses kicked last night, so tonight they take it out on everybody they see. Some political parties want to put the army on the streets.

Saturday night brings a few rocks and barricades, more arrests, but nothing like the previous two days. Sunday brings a strange calm in the city. Images of charred cars, smashed windows, and broken police vans are all over the news. I return to help out at the info point. The stories people have to tell really scare me. The leader of Faderhuset went to inspect Ungdomshuset. Cops have already been tearing out windows and things from inside the building. The sect has decided to tear it down, and the demolition begins. The square nearby is filled with people crying, the cemetery wall has “REVENGE” written all over it.

Six Months Later

When the building lay in ruins, everyone agreed that that was just the beginning. And it has been. Since the eviction, there have been weekly protests demanding a new house, and at the beginning of September, on the six-month anniversary of the eviction, the entire city was hit by riots again. The movement has exploded in numbers, and now counts thousands from all over the country and the world.

Nothing is over. It has only just begun.

Interview with a Participant: The Organizing behind the Riots

We carried out this interview with an anonymous organizer from Ungdomshuset in the months between the eviction of Jagtvej 69 and the establishment of a new social center at Dortheavej 61.

Describe the organizing that went into the defense of Ungdomshuset. Was it centralized or decentralized? What was the security culture around it?

First of all, this is my version. Since the meetings are still going on and need secrecy now more than ever, I’m going to be very general. It’s kind of a touchy subject, but here goes.

The organization grew out of the weekly Monday meetings, where most things are decided in large groups. They used to be mostly about who would handle the sound system and stand at the entrance for concerts, things like that. But as the situation got worse and worse, they ended up being almost only about the coming eviction and how to deal with it.

Many groups used the Monday meetings to present ideas and ask for help or advice. In the months leading up to the eviction, “touchy subjects” were brought up in the meetings by masked people, since the press had sneaked in a few times.

The Monday meetings are closed meetings, in that you don’t talk about what is going on at the meetings unless it’s something really trivial. Such things are never spoken of on the phone or online. This is a level of security that has been generally agreed upon after years of experience. So the organization is closed, but still open to most people. Sometimes smaller groups meet separately, too.

The Monday meetings are still going strong now without Ungdomshuset.

Were there conflicts over tactics? How were they handled?

There were no conflicts inside the group itself. Everyone pretty much agreed upon the line that was chosen. The disagreements that occurred were handled in the Monday meetings. These sometimes took all night, when there were heavy decisions on the agenda.

What can you say about the defense strategy?

Plans were made for several scenarios of what might follow the eviction. I can't get into the plans themselves or how people were organized inside or outside the house, as many are still on trial.

No one thought the house could actually be defended—everyone agreed that if the cops wanted to get in, they would get in. All those who chose to stay and defend the house could do was buy people outside a little time. The fortifications were the best they could have been; they would have held off a “normal” eviction attempt long enough for people to show up and fight off the police, but it was the biggest joint police and military action in Danish history.

The attempt to take the house back after the eviction got close. But there were more people distracting police and defending barricades than trying to get to the house. On the night after the eviction, the police lost all mobility for some hours and had to retreat to the square beside Ungdomshuset to keep it from being taken back. More “official” organization towards retaking the house after the eviction might have had another result.

One German organizer, asked whether the defense of Ungdomshuset helped create momentum for the 2007 G8 protests in Heiligendamm, claimed that in fact the eviction was met with so much resistance because of the mobilization building up to the G8. What do you think about the connection between the two?

Any connection is news to me. The only connection I could imagine is that there might have been more people from outside Denmark to resist the eviction, although it was not my experience. My guess is that there were more people from outside Denmark at the big protest on December 16, 2006, the date originally scheduled for eviction, than during the eviction itself. There were many protesters from outside the country, but the vast majority of demonstrators were from Denmark.

What kind of preparation led up to the eviction? Why do you think so many people got involved? Is there is a new momentum for resistance in Denmark now?

The movement around free spaces has exploded in form and numbers, but as far as I know it was not a planned event or strategy that got people involved. It was as if people had been waiting for a cause, and the threat of eviction was some kind of spark.

In my opinion, a lot of different factors contributed to the resistance reaching the scale it did. Denmark has a long history of social-democratic rule. This in itself is not a good thing, but it did provide a sort of political vacuum, a standstill that was ended when the liberals came into power along with the most racist political party this country has ever seen. For years now, they have cracked down on alternative subcultures and spaces, “civil rights,” schools, welfare institutions, and immigrants and asylum seekers. This created a volatile social situation.

Ungdomshuset had been used by thousands of people over its twenty-four-year existence. My older sister helped squat houses in the 1980s and was one of the people who received the keys to the building. I've spent many years of my life eating, socializing, and playing music there.

So the building has been important to a great many people—and even though many of them now work high-paying jobs or have moved on in their lives, they never forgot that part of their lives. This was the majority of protestors: people from around sixteen to their early forties who had a direct connection to the house or a political opposition to the eviction. Another segment of the defenders were there not so much to protect Ungdomshuset as to get back at the racist and intolerant state and police—and they fought tooth and nail, too.

Denmark has a few freetowns, such as Christiania; they aren't totally free, but they are self-controlled and self-organized. There is a connection between Christiania and Ungdomshuset, a sort of common counterculture. And even more people have a connection to Christiania than to Ungdomshuset, due to the fact that for many years marijuana was practically legal there. This is sad in that self-organization should be reason enough to form a connection with the place, but it's better than nothing. The point is, there exists a popular understanding of and respect for places like Christiania and Ungdomshuset. Don't get me wrong—most people are raised to work, buy, and die here as well—but it's something.

People gained a lot of experience in the year leading up to the eviction. There was a series of pirate parties, in which abandoned buildings were squatted for a night to party in; every time, the police showed up after some hours and riots broke out. Many of the protests in the year leading up to the eviction had resulted in the same thing—so many people had learned, firsthand, a great deal about the slow and heavy arm of the law.

In the months leading up to the eviction, a festival was held that included skill-shares such as how to build tripods and how to move cars into the road by “bouncing” them. I'm pretty sure it was an American that taught the workshop on tripods; one was used in a squatting action this past weekend, in fact. As for the cars, when people saw the police just got out of their vans and bounced them back, they started setting them on fire too.

Since the eviction, there is a protest every week. Just this weekend, hundreds of people went to stop the annual Nazi protest for Rudolf Hess, and hundreds more squatted a building two days in a row. The fight has become a battle of resources, and the police are having a really hard time. Some days ago, the spokesmen of the police unions said that they are having serious problems maintaining a constant state of readiness. Cops are having their days off revoked, and there are strict laws against that. They are also having problems keeping up with the massive manpower needed to control the weekly protests and the late-night actions organized by text messaging.

The paper ran an article the other day based on a police investigation, stating that the movement for a new Ungdomshus and the anti-authoritarian counterculture has exploded since the eviction—so now it is thousands of people, whereas the police originally had believed that the movement would die out in a few months.

Account: A Multi-Generational Space

I've visited the new Ungdomshus at Dortheavej 61 several times now—once just to see the place, once to play a show, and a few times since then to speak on revolutionary politics. Most recently, I dropped by during the K-town festival to offer a presentation. With all the attendees around us fitted out in their best punk rock finery, my traveling companion felt awkward: “People are going to look at us and think we're not punks!” It was true—anywhere else, we would have looked pretty punk, but in that company, we looked positively square.

“Are you kidding?” I answered. “There's only one reason people who aren't punks would be in a space like this. They'll see us dressed like this, like we have nothing to prove, and they'll know immediately that we're *dangerous anarchists!*”

Several young punk rockers participated in the discussion following the presentation. There was also one older gentleman in a tie-dyed shirt who didn't seem to have much in common with the others. At first, I assumed he had just walked in off the street at random.

Afterwards, I realized that no one just walks in randomly off the street during the K-town festival. I went back to find him and start a conversation. It turned out that he was part of the original generation that participated in the movement that won control of the building at Jagtvej 69 in the beginning of the 1980s. When it comes to judging people by their fashion, I should have listened to my own advice. Almost 40 years later, he was still involved, hanging out at the punk festival.

Lessons for US Anarchists

There are major differences between the Denmark of two decades ago and the US of 2019. Social movements in Europe benefit from relative continuity, in contrast to the disconnection between generations that characterizes the USA. Police repression in the United States also tends to be harsher than in northern Europe—not only because the punishments are more draconian, but also because the social fabric that supports defendants is looser.

It's important to understand that spaces like Ungdomshuset remain as the remnants of powerful autonomous movements that peaked decades ago, before the latest cycle of gentrification made the inner cities so valuable to capitalists. Many of these social centers are now situated in thoroughly gentrified neighborhoods, far from the underprivileged communities they exist to serve. Likewise, victory made the movements around some of these spaces complacent, leaving the participants focused mostly on maintaining their little bubbles of autonomy rather than attempting to change the world.

Still, now that most anti-authoritarian movements no longer focus on defending specific autonomous spaces but rather seek to attack elements of the ruling order, it's a good time to see what we could learn from the past to strengthen our current practice.

Direct Action and Diversity of Tactics

The defenders of Ungdomshuset offered a broad array of options for those who wanted to participate. There were nonviolent marches, decentralized militant actions, and multiple organizing structures, and by and large these complemented each other. This meant that people from many generations and walks of life were able to participate without getting distracted by conflicts over tactics.

The success they had in delaying the eviction and forcing the mayor to invite them to the negotiating table shows once again that direct action is the most efficient and effective way to exert leverage on governments and other unaccountable forces. By standing up for themselves, the occupants gave their claims to Jagtvej 69 a legitimacy they would never otherwise have had in the public eye. Had they politely asked to keep the building, they would have gotten nowhere; had they inquired of the general public whether or not it was OK to defend it with militant tactics, they would have been urged to submit to the rule of law, however unjust. Only by presenting militant defense of the building as a foregone conclusion were they able to compel others to take them seriously.

In doing so, they bought themselves more time to make their case to the world, and forced the bureaucrats to figure the tremendous costs of a violent eviction into the city budget. This had the effect of winning public support for a peaceable, just solution to the conflict, rather than scaring away potential supporters the way hardline pacifists allege militant tactics always do.

Seeking leverage on governments doesn't necessarily legitimize government itself—so long as such leverage is obtained by direct action and would-be leaders are not permitted to hijack it, this is simply a survival strategy in a world in which governments still hold a lot of power. We can halt the destructive effects of hierarchical power only to the extent to which we are able to manifest a horizontal counter-power. The more we do so, the more freedom we win for ourselves and others. The riots in Copenhagen not only secured the squatting movement another building—they also provided a deterrent for other European governments considering whether to evict other squatted social centers, protecting many other longstanding autonomous projects for several more years.

Maintain Institutions

The story of Ungdomshuset shows the power of sustained radical projects in which people develop common reference points and trust. Long-running autonomous spaces offer positive examples of what we're fighting for; many people find these more motivating than purely oppositional struggles.

Between increasing reliance on the internet and a penchant for reactive one-off events, US anarchists often underestimate the importance of having consistent physical spaces to gather in. When such spaces incarnate generations of radical history, they can be incredibly focusing and inspiring.

Cultivate Confrontational Subcultures

Subculture and collective creative activity played a fundamental role in setting the stage for the defense of Ungdomshuset. It would be impossible to imagine the eviction riots without the preceding decades of Danish squatting, punk rock, hip-hop, and youth culture. The conventional critique of radical subcultures is that they isolate dissent, but in this case they provided fertile soil for it to germinate, ultimately catalyzing an upheaval that extended beyond their frontiers. Perhaps this was possible in this case because the subcultures in question draw the resources that sustain them from their *confrontations* with capitalism, not their *participation* in it. There's a big difference between do-it-yourself punk shows in squatted buildings and would-be rock stars playing for-profit clubs.

An idle critic might charge that by defining the terms of the struggle around the defense of a cultural center, the subcultures of the participants ended up limited the scope of the uprising. Even if this is true, people who have not had the empowering experience of using direct action in a specific struggle are unlikely to attempt to use it to change the whole of society all at once. Limited conflicts like the struggle around Ungdomshuset enable people to develop a sense of their own power so they will eventually be ready to fight for even more ambitious goals.

Act Locally

The battle for Ungdomshuset offers a localized example of the kind of mass confrontations usually associated with summit protests like the G20, yet it lacked many of the shortcomings critics cite in the latter. Summit protests often seem to occur in a vacuum, drawing people from disconnected communities to participate in a spectacle that doesn't directly contribute to ongoing local efforts; in contrast, most of those who threw rocks and set fires in Copenhagen were building existing relationships, contributing to an ongoing project that continued after the smoke cleared.

Organize Globally

The organizers astutely used international support for Ungdomshuset to create a situation that radicalized local participants. By inviting anarchists from all around the world for the march on December 16, they succeeded in setting a tone for pitched confrontation that carried over to the eviction the following spring—even though fewer internationals were present then to swell the numbers of avowed anarchists.¹ Just as the role Ungdomshuset itself played in igniting widespread social struggle shows that the cultivation of subculture can sometimes catalyze resistance, this demonstrates that radicals can sometimes help to trigger generalized revolt despite being quarantined in the “radical ghetto.”

Account: Like a Phoenix from the Ashes

The second time I visited Ungdomshuset, back in 1999, we arrived early, long before the show was to begin. My friend and I sat in the candlelit bar, listening uncomprehendingly to the squatters' weekly meeting in Danish. At one point, the grizzled veteran nearest us noticed that the candle beside him had burned down to the mouth of the glass bottle that held it. We watched as he absentmindedly took a new candle and held the base of it over the sputtering flame until the wax was soft. Then he turned it around, lit the wick with the last dim flame of the old candle, and pushed the softened end of the new candle into the mouth of the bottle.

It was a simple, distracted gesture, but the two of us watched in awe. We didn't speak of it at the time, but years later we discovered that both of us had experienced it as a profound image of renewal.

The police reduced that building to dust, a vacant lot. From its ashes rose another autonomous space and new social struggles and new adventure stories—even here on the other side of the Atlantic, dear reader, if you so desire.

Further Reading

- A Story of Punk & Resistance: The Battle for Ungdomshuset—The report from the #52/53 double issue of the classic anarch@-punk magazine, *Profane Existence*.

¹ The strategy of raising expectations with a series of escalating actions has been used effectively in the United States as well—for example, in 2005, in the series of anti-G8 solidarity demonstrations in the Bay Area.

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