

THE SQUATTERS.

For these Montreal residents
it is not only a political statement,
but a matter of survival.

By Ken Burke



Illustration: Rick Janson, Dal Gazette

DOMINIQUE RICHOT looks at her neighbourhood in Montreal's Centre-Sud area and everything seems clear. She sees the poverty; about 65 per cent of the residents on some form of social assistance, the age and decay of the buildings, and now, the condominiums.

"I watch the condo's pop up all over the neighbourhood," she says, tracing out the all-too-familiar pattern in her head. "The landlords let a building's condition run down, throw the tenants out, then convert it to condos and charge five or six hundred dollars a month rent. I know that's what is happening to my apartment building."

But now Dominique Richot is fighting back.

She and a group of Montreal citizens are standing up for what they consider a basic right — the right to have a place to live. And they're doing it through direct action, not quiet lobbying, by starting the first organized squatters' movement in Canada.

Under the name of the Montreal Citizens for Direct Housing (MCDH), the group's members are working together to reclaim abandoned but inhabitable buildings. They plan to do this by squatting — entering buildings and living their without the permission of the owner. For Richot, it means taking control of her life. "You find your house, enter it, and you really take possession of it," she says. "You sweep it, try to get electricity, water...you're organising for yourself."

In Canada, the lack of any previous organized squatters' movement together with the law's emphasis on protection of "private property" has meant squatters attempting to organize face a steep uphill battle. Once discovered, people can be evicted or arrested immediately by the police; in this instance, they have no rights. Because of this, occupations have remained clandestine affairs, furtive and small scale to avoid detection.

The increasing crisis in low-cost housing in Montreal is one of the main factors in the creation of a genuine squatters movement. Squats have existed in Montreal as long as homeless people chose overnight lodgings in abandoned buildings rather than freezing to death in the street. The number of homeless in Montreal is now estimated at 10,000 by the city's own social care centres.

Aside from the large number of homeless, others on social assistance are finding themselves displaced by the onslaught of condominium developments in poor neighbourhoods. Up to 40 per cent of the rooms for rent in the city have been swallowed up through condo development over the last five years. The MCDH is organizing to change this.

To launch the movement, they chose to stage an underground squat, then announce their presence and use the publicity to gain support and new members. After spending some time looking for a building to best serve their purposes, they found it — in the abandoned brooding presence of Strathern School on Jeanne-Mance street in the downtown area.

No building could better express the

frustration with Montreal's civic planning than Strathern School. Since 1979, the school's halls have been empty save for periodic vandals and the homeless coming in to stay for a while. While the city holds title to the property, for the last five years they have not responded to proposals made by the local community for use of the structure. These proposals include creation of a daycare centre, facilities for women's groups and the handicapped, and low-cost housing in the building's four stories. "These ideas got lost in the bureaucratic shuffle," says Richot.

The squat lasted five days in mid-November until the police stumbled onto it late one night and broke it up, arresting MCDH member Denis Jean while two others managed to escape arrest. For many in the group, it was their first squat. For all who participated, it was an intense experience.

"You could see your breath in the building," says Doug Imerie, who spent three nights in the building. "Still, it was all right. People who had down sleeping bags got to sleep okay."

Once inside the building, the squatters set to the business of reclaiming the property. They examined all the floors, began cleaning the accumulated dirt and destruction of five years, and picked three rooms to centre their living and meeting space around. "What struck me inside the place was how large it was," says Imerie. "You could see its potential. That place could be used for damn near anything."

The following days were a concentrated rush of window patching, strategy meetings by candlelight and during the day, and choking on dust released into the air during the cleaning. Even before the police surprised them, the squat wasn't without drama as well.

"We were visited the second morning by a group of kids who vandalised the place," says Imerie. "They found we had barred the door, so they ran along the side of the school, yelling, and throwing chunks of concrete slabs through the windows. Some of the windows they broke were in rooms we were staying in."

Altogether, about 30 people participated in the squat, sleeping overnight, occupying the school during the day, and bringing food and supplies.

Much of the inspiration for the MCDH comes from the squatting movement in Europe. There are an estimated 35,000 people living in squats in London, England, with similarly large numbers in cities like West Berlin or Amsterdam. The squats range from small sets of row houses to building complexes with hundreds of people, creating their own communal stores, daycare centres, bookstores, and other community services. There is a squatters' union and advice service along with magazines with names like *Crowbar* and *Radikal*.

"In Europe, most of the squatters are young people, people on welfare, waiting on a housing list, or have no fixed address so they can't get welfare," says Denis Jean. Without any access to an income, squatting is their only means of survival. There, the squatters have fought for the legal rights which make long occupations possible.

"Over there, if you get through the

door without getting caught, it takes about six months of legal proceedings to get people out," says Jean. "Here, you can be evicted immediately."

For Imerie, Jean, Richot, and others in the group, their interest in squatting as political action comes directly from their own experience of being trapped in the poverty cycle. "I can remember times when my rent was higher than my welfare cheque," says Richot.

Another form of squatting the MCDH refers to is refusing to pay while continuing to live in the apartment, with or without the landlord's knowledge. Imerie recalls an experience of his in an apartment when just such a squat would have been called for: "There was no kitchen floor — plywood just covered a big hole there. The pipes froze in the winter and I had to keep the taps on all the time to keep them from freezing again. And when the guy upstairs flushed his toilet, it would end up in my bathtub..." he says, his voice trailing off in disgust.

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I paid \$95 a month for that. The idea that poor people actually have to pay somebody to live in a place like that is obscene," he says.

Now that the movement has gone public, the next step MCDH activists see is continuing to expand their network of support and organise towards one of their first goals — to set up a permanent squat on a large scale. "We'll need more support for that — altogether in the hundreds," says Denis Jean. "Support people would have to help with supplies, participate in picket lines outside the structure so the police won't be able to evict; there's a lot to do," he says.

To get to this stage, they plan to increase the number of underground squats linked to the movement, then gradually make them public. So far, expanding contact with existing squats has proven to be a frustrating task. "There are many squatters in Montreal but we can't find most of them because they can't advertise," says Richot. "Here, if the cops find you, you're out right then. They can't put up a sign saying, 'We're squatting to save this building.'"

Even so, Richot is encouraged by signs that others are organizing on a large scale in the city. She has heard of a squat ongoing somewhere in the city — consisting of an entire block of houses — half not paying their rent and the other half occupying abandoned buildings.

An acceleration in squats is expected to be matched by an increase in "attention" from police and city authorities. "I expect them to react violently to any attack on what they see as their property," says Imerie.

"It's also a political statement by the poor — like a public announcement — that here's the housing, you can take it if you want," he says.

Shawn Woods agrees. Once there's enough people together it really gets possible. If there's 10,000 squatters in Montreal, you can't just squash it in a moment."