



# No Trespassing!: Squatting, Rent Strikes, and Land Struggles Worldwide

By Anders Corr

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## No Trespassing!: Squatting, Rent Strikes, and Land Struggles Worldwide

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### An Excerpt from *No Trespassing!* By Anders Corr

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#### Chapter 1

Homes Not Jails:

The Secret Success of a Squatting Movement to House the Homeless


Benjamin volunteered to open the vacant building on Shotwell and 22nd, and said I could follow. He had squatted it before the landlord kicked him out, but now lived in a sleazy downtown hotel. We walked up to the alley door, and just as Benjamin produced his crowbar, a very large guy (much smaller than Benjamin and much bigger than me) walked up to his own door just a few feet away. Benjamin thought quick and pretended legitimacy by knocking. "Whatcha knockin for?" the neighbor asked. His eyes narrowed. "Nobody lives there."

Benjamin has broken into hundreds of buildings with Homes Not Jails and knew when to lead a tactical retreat. But undaunted, he circled the building and easily lifted his seven-foot frame over a fence and into the backyard. From my

cowardly vantage I could see a weak flashlight flickering at us from a window in the second story of the next-door flat. Was it the neighbor who confronted us? Did he have a gun? Again, Benjamin either failed to notice the flashlight-wielding neighbor or cared little. He climbed the back stairs, jimmied the door, walked out the alley and returned with two homeless people who needed a place to stay. After letting the two into the squat, Benjamin promised to help change the lock if they stayed for a week. Afterwards I skipped to keep pace as, with a crowbar dangling from his pinkie, Benjamin lumbered about the neighborhood in search of more squats.

*Homelessness and the Growth of U.S. Squatting*

Homes Not Jails began with the wave of other homeless activist gro

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*By Anders Corr*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"An extraordinary and ingenious work, looking at the heroic efforts of squatters all over the world who defy the laws of 'private property' where such laws deny the right of human beings to have a place to live. No Trespassing! is an invaluable resource for activists everywhere, at the same time instructive and inspiring." Howard Zinn, author of *Marx in Soho*, and *A People's History of the United States*) -- (*Howard Zinn, author of Marx in Soho, and a People's History of the United States*)

"Anders Corr's No Trespassing convinces me that committed activism, smart radical scholarship, and perceptive social thought are alive and well. A boon to squatters everywhere and to the radical tradition of non-violent direct action. A gold mine of movement histories, brimming with tactical and strategic political insights." -- *James C. Scott, director, Yale University Program in Agrarian Studies; author, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*

"No Trespassing! is an informed account of a worldwide challenge to property. A squatter's manifesto is at hand." -- *Charles Geisler, Professor of Rural Sociology, Cornell University*

"No Trespassing! is not only thoughtful and thoroughly researched, it's also an exhilarating read. I learned that there are solutions to the ever more dire housing shortage-at least for those who are bold and adventurous enough to try them!" -- *Barbara Ehrenreich, author of Blood Rites*

"Squatters of the world, arise! This inspiring book tells the rarely-chronicled story of your struggles. From landless peasants in Brazil to rent strikers in the Bronx, communities have resisted eviction and repression. Anders Corr, an experienced participant as well as a scholar of such movements, tells how they are organized, what makes them just, and what lessons can be learned to make them more effective." -- *Jeremy Brecher, co-author of Global Village or Global Pillage, Second Edition*

"Tough, erudite.... There is much to admire in this...rich mixture of reportage, philosophical rigor, and concrete advice for action." -- *In These Times*

#### About the Author

About the Author Anders Corr's writing and photography on the subject of land and housing movements have been published in the San Francisco Examiner, San Francisco Bay Guardian, San Francisco Weekly, Z Magazine, the Progressive, the Independent, Everybody's News (Cincinnati), Anarchy Magazine, Fifth Estate, Slingshot, Kick It Over, Land and Liberty, Squat Beautiful, Tenant Times, Street Spirit, and Spare Change. A former squatter himself, he co-founded the Santa Cruz Union of the Homeless. About the Author Anders Corr's writing and photography on the subject of land and housing movements have been published in the San Francisco Examiner, San Francisco Bay Guardian, San Francisco Weekly, Z Magazine, the Progressive, the Independent, Everybody's News (Cincinnati), Anarchy Magazine, Fifth Estate, Slingshot, Kick It Over, Land and Liberty, Squat Beautiful, Tenant Times, Street Spirit, and Spare Change. A former squatter himself, he co-founded the Santa Cruz Union of the Homeless.

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Homelessness and the Growth of U.S. Squatting Homes Not Jails began with the wave of other homeless activist groups that sprouted nation-wide following the economic recession of the 1980s. As a result of soaring rents, small-business failures, and massive corporate layoffs, landlords evicted thousands onto the streets. These new homeless, who were often well-educated, drug and alcohol free, mentally stable and middle class, joined the traditional homeless population that more often suffered mental or substance-abuse problems. Hundreds of homeless organizations sprouted across the nation that used squatting as a tactic, like Community on the Move Homesteaders Association in the Bronx, Mad Housers in Atlanta and Chicago, Drop in Center in Cincinnati, Homes Not Jails in San Francisco, and similar groups in almost every major U.S. urban area. Groups in New York, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Oakland successfully acquired title to several squatted properties. By opening vacant buildings like the one on Shotwell and 22nd, Homes Not Jails hopes to provide at least some shelter for the growing number of homeless. Between 1992 and 1998, available housing in San Francisco fell from a high of 6,500 vacant buildings (enough to house the City's entire homeless population) to less than one percent of the total housing stock. In 1994, estimates of San Francisco's homeless population were as high as 14,000, and through 1996, the number grew by 300 per month. One hundred and fifty homeless people died on the streets of San Francisco that year. Between the last quarter of 1996 and the first quarter of 1997, the number of San Francisco homeless families doubled. Boston, where Homes Not Jails is also active, has thousands of vacant buildings that could solve the City's homeless problem. In December 1995, less than three weeks after the first HNJ Boston action, the Boston Emergency Shelter Commission counted 4,896 homeless people. Many homeless advocates placed the number much higher. According to HNJ Boston, there are "thousands of residential units-largely derelict or foreclosed-which lie vacant and could be used for low-income housing or homesteading." The Power and Ethics of Media-Savvy Squatters Homes Not Jails describes itself as an all-volunteer organization committed to housing homeless people through direct action. "It is clear to me that it is possible to house everybody in San Francisco," said Miguel Wooding, a member of HNJ and volunteer tenant counselor at the San Francisco Tenants Union. "It is clear that by pressing on the issues of abandoned, vacant, tax-default buildings, we can make housing a right to which everyone has access." With the power that public takeovers provide HNJ's media spokespersons, HNJ drives their message home to the general public. "Which Do You Believe?" questions one Homes Not Jails Flyer. "1) People Who Are Homeless Should Fix Up & Live in Vacant Buildings. 2) Leave Buildings Boarded Up & Vacant; People Can Sleep Outside." HNJ's tongue in cheek rhetorical question sums-up their philosophy: common sense demands that vacant homes should house the homeless. But common sense is not so common, wrote some big-name philosopher. Even many homeless people consider squatting ethically or morally questionable, not to mention police, landlords, government figures and members of the general public. "People are scared to go open houses." said Connie, a 21 year-old who ran away from home at age fourteen in Israel and started squatting with a gang of other Israeli kids. "Squatting is a violation of everyone's basic idea of society. Property is sacred. When you open a building you are violating someone's property." When I asked Graham, who quit his office job to become a full-time homeless activist and squatter, how he would react to landlords

calling him a thief, he flung that epithet right back. "For them to say that we steal their unused property, while they speculate on the rental market, is criminal. They steal when they charge us rent, as opposed to us stealing when we squat. We should not ask whether it is a crime to 'steal' a piece of property, but whether it is a crime to charge rent."

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Antonio Duncan:**

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#### **Jeffrey Nathanson:**

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