Chapter 12.

Lessons From the Movements: Small acts of *Homefull* resistance

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Biography:

Håvard Aaslund is a social worker and Associate Professor at Oslo Metropolitan University with a PhD in social work and social policy. He is particularly involved in housing research, action research and collective approaches in social work. Aaslund is editor-in-chief of the Journal of Mental Health Work.

Abstract:

The relationship between social work and social movements has a long history but has also, at times, been disenfranchised, at least in a Nordic welfare state context. The knowledge and experiences from innovative collective actions are seldom included in the formal knowledge base of social work or social housing studies. In this chapter, the author draws on literature about homeless mobilisation, field notes and an interview to explore the space between social work and social movements when it comes to housing. Here, social work is reconceptualised in a framework of collective action and contributions to *Homefullness* from contenders, activists, squatters and peer supporters in Norway are scrutinised. The aim is to reflect on future possibilities for *Homefullness* in the margins, unmediated by the state.

<Chapter text starts here>

> *I arrive a bit after the party has started. I'm unsure if it is a garden party, so I first walk around the large stone house, where two cars are parked. Since I hear voices, I stand for a moment in the gateway. A woman exits with a garbage bag and asks in English what I'm wondering about. I say that I am invited by the manager. The woman asks me to follow her, and we go into the garden and up onto the patio. There, 5-6 women are*

chatting. We enter through the garden door to what looks like a makeshift office, and I am greeted by a Golden Retriever. The woman calls for the leader, who lights up when he sees me. He says, 'Here's a song to announce your arrival,' and puts on music. A song called 'Two Drunk Men' streams out of the speakers. He asks if I want a beer and introduces me to an administrative staff member. We joke a bit and talk about the project I am going to undertake. Around me are about 10 women and 5-6 men. I guess from appearances that most people around me seem to be those without experience with drugs or sex work. Most people who look like they have lived a rougher life are sitting outside on the patio smoking. The leader comes with a beer for me and says, 'We're done discussing that alcohol stuff. There's much worse stuff around here.' (the author's field notes, August 2014)

The excerpt above is from fieldwork notes taken during my first encounter with a shelter in Oslo. I was invited to the residents summer party to say hello to the guests and workers. The shelter was started by social workers and sex workers in collaboration, and the women spending nights there also worked as staff together with other social workers. The excerpt clearly reveals my social worker gaze as I focus on 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2003); the dog, the beer and the women being in charge. At the same time, I also observed some kind of distinction between the women and the employees, even though they tried hard to maintain egalitarian relationships.
A bold manifesto of *Homefullness* calls for bold and innovative inspirations from a broad understanding of social justice and the struggle for human rights. The relationship between social work and social movements has a long history but has been disenfranchised, at least in a Nordic welfare state context (Ferguson, 2017; Ågotnes & Barua, 2022). Nevertheless, during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, we saw a soar internationally in communities taking part in mutual aid, nontraditional social work, mirroring of professional social work and revitalization of traditional informal support systems (Aaslund, 2021; Bell, 2021; Perone, 2021). The knowledge and experiences from such innovative actions are seldom included in the formal knowledge base of social work or social housing studies. In this chapter, I aim to reconceptualize social work in a framework of collective action and scrutinise some contributions to *Homefullness* from contenders, activists, squatters and peer supporters in Norway.

The housing sector in Norway is more market-oriented than the other Nordic countries, and dominated by homeownership (77%). The rental sector is small and considered a temporary stopover (Sørvoll, 2018). Also social rented housing differs from neighbouring countries by being strongly means-tested, significantly smaller in proportion to overall housing stock (4%) and with residents having much weaker political strength and residential democracy (Sørvoll et al., 2024). In addition, voluntary organisations are an essential part of political housing support strategies, yet their role is unclear (Ervik & Lindén, 2016). Voluntary religious organizations have long played a central role in social housing work offering 50 percent of the institution-based work in substance-use care in Norway (Dyb & Lid, 2017). The majority of this work is funded by the public sector, although executed by voluntary organizations (Ervik & Lindén, 2016).

The chapter is based on different sources: Firstly, an extensive literature review of newspaper articles, pamphlets, flyers, interviews and research articles conducted in relation to my PhD thesis about the self-organization of homeless people. Secondly, field conversations, observations and interviews completed over the last ten years. These observations stem from different research projects but have been conducted in a broadly similar field of people lacking housing and the different services they use. At the same time, I have had sporadic relationships in the margins of different housing activist scenes for the last 20 years. Surprisingly, these fields seldom seem to overlap with each other. My analytical strategy has been to look for these rare overlaps to see what knowledge there is to gain in the intersection between social housing work and housing movements. My position in this field is complex. I first encountered the housing activist scene as a first-year social work student in field placement. Although I had been attending concerts, demonstrations and other activities in the squatter scene as a teenager, I had never considered myself part of the scene, more of a fan. Nevertheless, I sympathised with and understood the activist organisation's cause, aims and means more strongly than my fellow social work students. At approximately the same time I started working as a social worker in a homeless shelter in Oslo. Later, as an academic, I have had roles as a participatory observer, action researcher, educator or consultant. Some actions have been initiated or supported by me, through my professional position. As an action researcher, I see all practice as parts of a recurrent circle of acting, observing and reflecting (Mathiesen, 2011).

My first encounter with these overlaps was through a man named John. In his fifties, John has been living a 'street-life' between sleeping rough and temporary housing, for as long as he can remember. When he was 13 years old, he got a small flat in a deprived neighborhood from the child protection service. Each week, he went down to the Child Protection Service to collect money for food for himself and his younger brother. He was a part of the *Skippergata* squat in 1981, one of Norway's first and most famous squatting actions, which later led to the autonomous youth house Blitz (Solli, 2019). In the following years, he was part of many other squats. I met John in 2016, in the basement of a farm far out in the countryside, rehabilitating from substances. We talked about a project he planned to participate in, that I was researching. The project aimed to establish an autonomous housing facility for houseless people, with social entrepreneurship to create jobs for the tenants. According to John, this project was nothing new:

> *We started ARBO in '84, a place where you work and live simultaneously. The same concept. Many have had the idea before. It's impossible to achieve such a thing without competence and support. When we were active, it was just squatting. We had the state against us; the idea was not highlighted. Back then, we managed it ourselves without professionals or employees. The difference now is that we can develop it without the state being against us. We have people who are on our side. We can prove that we have something to offer. The difference is that now we are allowed to do it. That is the entire difference. We defended ourselves. When the police came, we had to leave the house and find a new house to take. Back then, everything was just fun and games. We were young guys. I told the project manager about ARBO. This idea has been around for a long time. Nothing new. It's an old wish. If it works in our project, maybe it will work in a squat, too. I don't think this will be the only one. Not because we need more places, but we need different houses that go in different directions, with different opinions. I've been looking for this for a long time. Work, housing and an idea. The three things. Work and housing first and foremost. But the idea that they came up with was what made me feel that this might be something bigger.*

John was certainly not the only one within the scene of substance use who has experience squatting. Many people experiencing homelessness or substance use sleep in empty buildings for shorter or longer periods, and some of these develop into secret squats, like the squat *Olagate* portrayed in the excellent ethnography of Geir Moshuus (2005). In addition, John had experience from the more political and high-profile squatter scene that emerged in the early 1980s as a response to police harassment of young people using drugs in public spaces. The scene developed into several different squats, most organised around art, ecological or alternative lifestyles and protests against capitalism and housing policy, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. A wide array of young people participated in the early scene, even though it started with protesting police violence against substance users. Many of the young people later became prominent within culture or business, others stayed activists, and others again stayed in the streets of Oslo.

The housing activism that emerged in the early 1980s was initially aimed at establishing self-managed youth houses and criticizing market-driven housing policies, in cooperation and solidarity with the international squatting movement (Solli, 2019). The group *Boligaksjonen [The Housing Action]* supported squats with the aim of alternative housing and as criticism of municipal and private property speculation. They organized demonstrations, mobilized for solidarity, and experimented with urban ecological alternatives (Gansmo, 2014; Løken, 2019; Riise, 2013; Sørgjerd & Bjørhovde, 2015). The group initiated an umbrella organisation for disadvantaged people in the housing market in the 2000s. This umbrella organization, *AktBo*, was primarily aimed at economically disadvantaged people and had activist and self-help-oriented goals based on resource focus, collective models, self-management, self-effort, and lowered housing standards (Boligaksjonen, 2001; Dyb, 2003). *AktBo* gathered support from organizations, institutions, and public agencies and realised several alternative housing projects, although the results were not as significant as the ambitions suggested (Dyb, 2003, 2005). Some of the projects still exist today even though the association has been dissolved. *Enebakkveien 37* and *Ormsundveien 14* were given the status of urban ecological pilot projects with a ‘high degree of user control/user participation’ by the Oslo City Council in 2007, and they received funding from the State Housing Bank. *Hausmannsgate 40* existed as a squat from 1999 until 2019, when the resident association signed a lease with the property owner. Perhaps the most well-known

and successful example in Norway is *Svartlamon* in Trondheim, which started with a squat but today is a resident association and housing foundation with over one hundred residents. Self-organization, participation, business activities, and urban ecology characterise the entire neighborhood. *Svartlamon* has also won an architecture award and received international interest (Aakervik, 2006; Semb & Klem, 2012). *Svartlamon* accommodates both people with economic or social challenges and people with significant resources. A recent study highlights four central dimensions of *Svartlamon's* neighborhood community: meeting places and activities – time to do things together; relationships and interaction – time to be seen; slow time – for participation and self-determination; and the possibility of long-term rental (Hammer et al., 2020).

For John, the new project activated some of the skills and interests he had been carrying for many years while living on the streets of Oslo. He wanted a home and work, but there was something more with this idea that he liked. He wanted to be a *part* of this idea. It resonated with something in his history, and it made him feel and think that he would make some vital contributions to such a project. Several of the participants who entered the project had experiences in activism, although not in the same way as John. Some had experience working in service user organizations, and others had experience working in national and international anti-poverty networks. These were not the initiators of the projects, but they came along when they heard about the initiative. In social movement theory, this is often called the 'demand of protest'. The demand is affected by whether people think the group is in line with the person's identity, history and interests. Whether the person believes the group will be successful and whether the person thinks he or she will have a say in the matters of the group (Klandermans, 2013). This, again, is all affected by the collective action framing, which includes aims, means and acceptable strategies (Benford & Snow, 2000). So, what was this idea that made John feel that there was something bigger? What is the story that he wanted to be part of? To answer that, we must rewind and revisit my field notes from the first shelter:

> *It is early autumn, and in an old house in the part of Oslo known as the perfect blend of East and West, a small staff group is having a meeting. The house is an old stone villa, dating from the large development in the area in the 1890s. Several villas in the area now serve as temporary housing for the homeless, following donations to the municipality or*

voluntary organizations. This villa has served as an emergency shelter for women since 1990. The staff meeting consists of four employees: A leader and three nightshift workers. In addition, two researchers were present at the meeting today. The meeting takes place in the living room of the big house. The living room looks like a sort of messy version of a well-kept grandmother's living room. A large leather sofa and an armchair are placed in front of the TV, with a small table in front. A beautifully carved coffee table has had to make way a bit and is placed under the window with lace curtains, with some chairs around it. From the room, there is a door to the kitchen and a door to what once was the foyer with an exit to the garden. Now it functions as an office and staff room with two PCs on desks along the walls and a simple sofa. At first glance, there is nothing to reveal that we are sitting in an emergency shelter, but if you go through the staff room, you come out into the entrance hall where the bulletin board informs about hepatitis tests and other services for people with drug and sex work experience. In the small toilet off the entrance hall, there is a yellow box for syringes.

'Now, we have pushed user participation as far as we can. If [the NGO owning the shelter] doesn't do something now, they are contributing to keeping people in poverty and distress,' says the head of the shelter. The staff discuss an initiative from the women living in the shelter for a project about resident-managed housing. Over the past two years, the shelter has experienced rapid development, but now, it has come to a crossroads. Many of the former residents are now working and have reduced or stopped drug use while actively participating in the management of the house. Everyone has to leave every morning; they sleep in shared rooms with other women using drugs in the room. Several of them also have severe mental health symptoms. It is a demanding environment to stay drug-free in. There is a need for a new home. (the author's field notes, September 2014)

The women initiating the project had made start-ups, run the shelter and advocated for the idea, but they also needed help for the idea to reach John. Social movements for the homeless have been less prominent in a Nordic context, but in the USA, homelessness has been the subject of large demonstrations, occupations, protests, movements, and various types of action groups

(Cress & Snow, 1996, 2000; Lemke, 2016; Snow et al., 2005; Stuart, 2016; Wagner & Cohen, 1991). American and European research on self-organisation, collective action, and social movements among the homeless highlights the need to find a language and a position from which to be heard (Middleton, 2014; Misetics, 2017; Vilenica, 2017). A particular focus of homeless research has been trying to explain the 'puzzle' of homeless mobilisation (Corrigall-Brown et al., 2009). Mobilisation for social movements and collective action are resource-intensive processes that, in many cases, depend on resources the homeless lack. Most new organisations arise in collaboration with already-established organisations (Cress & Snow, 1996, 2000) that can help with the necessary expertise, premises, and resources to establish a new movement (Olsson, 1998). Social movements among the homeless in the USA are characterised by a particular emphasis on independence and self-governance while also being able to connect with resource-giving organisations in the voluntary sector and forging ties between activist environments and the homeless (Lemke, 2016; Smith et al., 2012; Wagner & Cohen, 1991). Participation in social movements among the homeless has led to increased resource access afterwards (Wagner & Cohen, 1991), but challenges with police reprisals or loss of lodging have also been documented (Stuart, 2016; Thanem, 2012; Williams, 2005). In addition to protests and advocacy, there have been several examples of self-organised solutions to homelessness, such as self-managed aftercare homes, temporary accommodations, and alternative forms of housing. Researchers have pointed to squatting, cooperatives, and self-managed shelters as arenas for empowerment and new forms of political influence (Aureli & Mudu, 2017; Huber et al., 2019; Ploštajner, 2017). Movements around *Tent Cities* and the *Tiny House Movement* are, despite relatively low standards, characterised by a combination of independence and networks with resource-giving organisations. Their model has often been to establish support associations with a clear organisational distinction, where professionals, activists, and philanthropists can engage. This has allowed them to maintain a high degree of self-governance, continuity, and independence without the risk of co-option (Heben, 2014). In these processes, participants have reported feelings of empowerment, increased dignity, autonomy, and a sense of community, though power struggles have also occurred (Molinar, 2018; Mosher, 2010). For John, the importance of self-governance is high:

We are different types of people. We must learn structure if we are going into a project like this. It is important that we help make those rules so that we can relate to them. I think that is very important. We had rules in Skippergata too. You can't avoid that. I have lived with a lot of punks who had good manners. They are just as decent as us. There shouldn't always be consequences if you make rules that you feel you shouldn't break. As soon as you make a rule that you think would be fun to challenge, then it becomes something else. If you make rules that you think you won't break, then it's not difficult.

For me, there are no challenges with this, but we must mind how people feel treated. That we don't get a clique, which doesn't include others … The drugs are what we may have to watch out for. It can happen if we are not inclusive. I believe that there should be room for … If you are out and getting high, whether it is because of grief or because you just want to, you should be able to come back and feel that you are accepted and that you can continue. That is very important. We have been drug addicts; I have been since I was 13, and I know many people who get high, but there are completely different reasons. Then there are also many reasons why people fall back.

John's main worry is about drug use. The analysis of *Olagate* and the drug environment around it shows the social dynamics in a residential environment characterized by substance use (Moshuus, 2005), but there are other challenges as well. Nazima Kadir's multi-year ethnography describes authoritarianism, sexism, classism and racism permeating the Dutch squatter scene (Kadir, 2016). Although other participants in similar scenes do not share these experiences, power relations around gender, mental health or ethnicity can reproduce in self-organized projects or actions. John also worries about age:

I'm 51 years old, and I have a lot of old friends in the community, too. And they're not treated well. The older you get, the more you're taken advantage of by the younger ones. The environment has become fucking brutal. In '86 and '87, there were prison riots. I was in two of the three. It was to get better prison conditions. What we didn't see then was that when we got it right in prison, the guys didn't stand together anymore. Then it spread to the outside. People gave each other the fuck up both inside and outside. Before the

riots, people had that kind of thing; it was hard to serve time, and the guys stood together. Afterward, it became easy to serve time, and the guys stood together no more. It was taken out into the scene. Nobody had any honor anymore. It happened in the '80s. I saw it very clearly that it happened. Before the riots, we had fun. We could come up with things without making a fuss and fighting and cutting each other down. After we turned on each other inside and people didn't think anything of it, people started to snitch and hustle, and all this spread widely, and then things got bad outside as well. That's how it's been ever since. However, some older prisoners have been thinking about making the prison conditions harsh. But it's not dangerous anymore. Serving time in Norway is child's play because the prison system is so liberalized as it is.

John has a point, although his solution that an external enemy is good for solidarity might sound drastic. A part of the collective action framing is about knowing who the allies are – and the contenders or enemies (Benford & Snow, 2000). This is an essential part also of establishing a collective identity (Melucci, 1995). Compared to the USA, collective actions and protests among the homeless in Norway have been few and small. The examples of the co-existence of housing activism and housing social work are rare, random and, at times, even unlikely. As the researchers of *Svartlamon* suggest, such projects develop in spite of public policy, not because of it (Hammer et al., 2020). It could thus be relevant to compare these acts to the French philosopher Rancière's concept of 'politics'. For Rancière, politics is not an arena or a field. It is a disruption under the presumption of equality. These disruptions are always at risk of being swallowed by the consensus (Rancière, 2015).

The lessons from the movements suggest the need for establishing broad coalitions of solidarity to form effective actions against homelessness, gain necessary resources and not lose sight of who the contenders are that benefit from the current status quo. People have done it before. Such coalitions must consist of people in difficult housing situations themselves, along with artists, activists, journalists, social workers, researchers and many others, a similar diverse mix to the book you are reading right now. These collective actions are important to advocate for an end to the housing crisis and to progress towards cities of *Homefullness*. By working together, by acknowledging the dignity, resources and power of all citizens, by addressing the needs and

differences of all individuals in our societies and by building creative and innovative solutions to housing problems, these collective actions also become acts of *Homefullness* in themselves. Therein lies the potential to become a moving target rather than an established consensus. Therein lies the potential for change.

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