

WHAT ARE THE SQUATTING TECHNIQUES IN FRANCE?

(2024 - English)



Many people resort to squatting at some time or another: the homeless or the poorly housed, travelers, activists challenging the principle of private property, precarious people in need of collective space...

Warning: under French law, "entering and remaining in a dwelling, commercial, agricultural or professional premises", "degradation" and "home invasion" are offenses punishable by arrest, fine or even imprisonment. Inciting or facilitating squatting is also a crime, which is why this text is for information purposes only.

This booklet and more info about squats are available online:

<https://en.squat.net/>

Spotting

In general, the longer a building has been out of use, the less likely it is that squatters will get into trouble by occupying it. So they look for houses, buildings, apartments or other premises that look as if they've been abandoned for a while: dust on the windows, overgrown vegetation, doors and windows sealed with wooden or metal plates, mailboxes overflowing with mail... Some people put pieces of paper in the doorways of different buildings to make sure that no one enters, then look later to see if the pieces of paper have fallen out.

Squatters sometimes use Internet tools:

- GoogleMaps in StreetView mode allows them to see the evolution over time, to find out how long the building has been abandoned, and what it was used for before.
- <https://cadastre.squat.net/> allows them to identify the owner, but only for a public building or a company.
- <https://geoportail.gouv.fr/> the government website, on which some people create an account with a false identity to ask who the owner of a plot of land is, and generally get the answer by e-mail within a few days.

Often, before settling in, squatters seek out as much information as possible about a building and its owner: on the Internet, in letterboxes, on posters on the facade... Squatting in a private home or in a business premises is more risky: there's a greater chance that the owner will find out about it, and that there will be legal proceedings for "trespassing". If a renovation project is planned for the building in the near future, occupants are less likely to stay for long. On the contrary, squatting in a public or long-abandoned building can increase their chances of staying for a while.

Installation

To get in, squatters look for an opening: an open door or window, a place that's easy to climb... They generally try not to break anything, or to make it as inconspicuous as possible, because if the police see anything broken they can charge them with "degradations" and arrest them. If there's no way of getting in without breaking something, squatters try to break something that can easily be repaired: for example, by ripping out or drilling a lock, they can put another lock in its place, which also allows them to open and close easily. Often, if they make a noise, for example by breaking a window or an alarm, the squatters leave for a few hours in case the police arrive.

Sometimes there are alarms: some are noisy, others silent, some call security or the police, others not, some are indicated at the entrance or not... Most alarms are triggered when they detect a change in temperature. To avoid triggering them, some squatters move forward slowly, curled up on all fours and covering themselves with as many clothes as possible or a survival blanket.

When they set up, squatters usually choose a few entrances to the building that they want to use for their entrances and exits, then barricade the other entrances so that the police or other malicious persons can't use them.

To be visible or not

Some choose to squat as discreetly as possible, hoping that no one will see them. To do this, they look for a place far enough away from other dwellings, with few neighbors. They try to avoid being seen or heard by neighbors, especially at night when there's less noise and lights are more visible. For those who need to go back and forth between the inside and outside of the squat on a regular basis, they try to find discreet access: neighbors who see them coming in through a window or wall are likely to call the police. Others prefer to squat in small groups and only go in and out at night, to limit the risk of being seen.

Others prefer to make their squat visible. Trying to appear as "normal" as possible (e.g if the entrance is through a door and the building isn't too dilapidated), some people pass themselves off as new tenants to the neighbors, hoping that they won't call the police. It's a bluff that risks precipitating the eviction, but may allow them to stay a long time without having to hide if it works. Sometimes, when the cops come, squatters make them believe they've paid to live there, e.g by showing them a false contract indicating the sum paid, the date, the address of the place and the imaginary name of the fictitious "lessor"! It's not certain that this will work, but if the cops believe them, the squatters may be recognized as victims of fraud, and the eviction procedure may take longer. But it could also get them charged and convicted for "production and use of false documents".

Another technique for making squats visible is to try and prove that the squat has been the squatters' main residence for several days, e.g by posting on the door dated photos of their installation, testimonials from neighbors confirming that they live there, receipts for pizza delivered to the squat address in the occupants' name (fictitious or real), a copy of an electricity contract...

Defense

In theory, in France, eviction proceedings are supposed to go through the court, which generally takes several months, sometimes less, sometimes more. Before any court hearing, a bailiff has to record the occupation: by giving the bailiff one or more names, even a false one, the occupiers can be informed of the date and place of the hearing. Going to the hearing gives them information about the possibility of eviction. Those who fear that the bailiff will come in their absence put their names on the door or mailbox. When they receive a summons to attend court, some squatters even contact a lawyer: it is possible to save time with the court, by requesting postponements of the hearing and/or a delay that can be granted to people who are precarious and without housing.

Sometimes eviction attempts are made without waiting for a court hearing. That's why squatters barricade themselves in and systematically refuse to open their doors to the police, bailiffs, landlords, workers or council officers. By preventing them from entering and giving them as less information as possible, this complicates eviction attempts.

In the event of eviction, some people move back into the squat, hoping that the police and owners will eventually give up. But sometimes the police and landlords reinforce the security of the building (alarms, barricades, surveillance, etc.) after an eviction.

Sometimes landlords who discover a squat agree to give the occupiers a delay before leaving: in this case, some squatters demand that they sign an agreement, to protect themselves if the landlord later changes his mind.

TO GO FURTHER...

This text is not very detailed. For a better understanding of how squats work in France, other documents exist on the Internet, often published by the squatters themselves:



- The brochure “*Le Squat de A à Z*” (*Squatting from A to Z*) talks about locating, opening, how to get the water and electricity back on and legal procedures (but it has not been updated since the anti-squatting law of 2023).
- <https://loi-kasbarian.squat.net/> publishes news about the anti-squatting law of 2023.
- “*Toutes les portes s'ouvrent*” (*All doors can be opened*) teaches locksmith techniques.
- “*Le piratage de l'élec de A à S*” (*Hacking electricity from A to S*) explains how to steal electricity.

These documents are only in French, but you can translate them by copying and pasting them into an online translator. The brochures are available at <https://infokiosques.net/squat>.