

Captions:

DAMIEN'S PARADISE

Photographic essay by
Véronique FRUCHARD

Between March 14 and December 20, 2014
Near the Park de La Villette - Paris 19^{ème}



Photo 01- Damien, Christian and Jacqueline (left to right) in front of the entrance to the squat that they share. Squeezed in between high flats and the Ourcq Canal, the place is hidden behind a fence of bits of wood and metal scavenged from various building sites.



Photo 02- Behind the fence, Damien's Paradise; his little house made of brick and brack, a courtyard and a vegetable patch. Bushes, plants and flowers are everywhere, both real and artificial. Everything is recycled, pallets and bits of string, but everything is organised and functional. Whenever the weather permits, everything happens outdoors. Damien and Christian enjoy a glass of wine while the meat cooks away on the barbecue.



Photo 03- Jacqueline comes in to take shelter in Damien's kitchen. If it is cold outside, the temperature inside is hardly any higher. No electricity, no heating, the place is dark and cold. The generator and the little stove run only when they have the means to buy fuel.....and that happens rarely!



Photo 04- "No money no problem!" is written on the Charlie Chaplin poster in the kitchen. Damien takes inspiration from this old saying to find solutions for his lack of everything. Apart from recovering what he finds in skips on building sites, he always keeps an eye on people moving house to recuperate furniture, dishes and other useful things, as well as decorative elements.

The sink in the kitchen has no taps; without being connected to the mains water supply, it is of no use. Dishes and food are washed with bottled water.



Photo 05- As there is no bathroom in the squat, Damien built a cabin and installed a toilet and wash basin with a mirror. The water connections were carried out during public works in the area. A bucket of canal water is on hand to flush the toilet and bottled water is used for brushing teeth and washing. As for the bathroom, the showers at the nearby public baths do the job.



Photo 06- "Better drink a good a glass of wine at home rather than vinegar at the pub" ... that is Damien's maxim. That doesn't stop him from going to the bar to meet his friends whenever he has some change in his wallet; there he keeps up to date with the local news and keeps a link with society.

Damien's mobile phone, charging on the table, is an important means of contact for him with the world. Even if he cannot make calls, it allows him to be contacted if anyone needs him.



Photo 07- Damien shares his "bedroom", very basic and without lighting, with his little dog, Ellia, and the huge teddies that he loves.

In winter, the temperature in the bedroom can go below zero. To avoid the risk of fire and to save money, they don't use any heating at night.



Photo 08- Under plastic covers, souvenir photos and newspaper articles cover the walls, and teddies cover the new couch that they found in the street. Some of them were gifts, but most were saved from a deliberate end of life in a bin. Damien boasts of having had up to 150. He repairs them, cleans them and gives them to an association for children.



Photo 09- Damien got Tyson when he was 4; now he is 17. He takes great care of his animals, two dogs and a cat, and would not leave them for anything. He brings them regularly to one of the Brigitte Bardot Foundation centres where vaccinations and other veterinary care is given free of charge.



Photo10- Jacqueline is in poor form; winter and the uncomfortable living conditions that make it worse take their toll. She has suffered from alcoholism since she was 13 but at times like this she falls lower than normal. She spends hours slouched in an armchair and when Damien passes by in the courtyard, he covers her with a blanket. He doesn't like it when she is in that state; he gives out to her and his words are sharp. They argue frequently but it never lasts long.



Photo11- Jacqueline coming out of her bedroom; the door has no lock so for a minimum of security she leans a shutter against the door to hide it. Damien built this shelter for Jacqueline when he took her in off the street. When her companion died, five years ago, she could not keep up with the rent payment. The landlord threw her out. She spent a few weeks sleeping on the landing of her former apartment before ending up out on the street.



Photo12- Jacqueline goes begging at the market whenever she feels up to it. She always goes to the same place on the footpath, in the cold and the shade. She cannot change for a better place, as any better spots all “belong” to a group of Roma people who have already molested Jacqueline to steal her meagre takings. Life on the street is hard for everyone.



Photo13- Christian moved in here at the same time as Damien. He himself built this shelter in which he has slept for the past thirteen years. While his cabin may be better designed than the other “buildings” in the squat, he has no more amenities than the others: no electricity, no heating, no running water; but at least it is his home. He added a low wall and plants which serve to mark off his private space.



Photo14- There is space in Christian’s cabin only for a little bed, a chest of drawers and some shelves. There are no windows and the use of candles is ruled out for fire safety reasons. Christian keeps his little place clean and tidy and he takes care to lock it whenever he’s not there.



Photo15- With the keys of his paradise as always hanging around his neck, Damien prepares dinner inside on this December day. He is worried thinking at how he and Jacqueline will manage to survive yet another winter. With neither electricity nor heating, Damien’s Paradise turns to hell.

As he gets older, perhaps reason will outweigh the fear of losing the freedom that his current lifestyle permits him to enjoy; after nearly fifteen years living in his shantytown, he dreams of a genuine lodgement with a little comfort.



Photo16- Jacqueline and Damien dine together in the kitchen, forced by the cold to keep their coats and hats on. To honour today's guest, there is a pretty tablecloth and the servings are more generous than normal.



Photo17- Damien used to work in a small bistro; he liked his work and the atmosphere there, but it closed down. It was no surprise then that he hung up this sign that he recovered while helping to empty a restaurant that was closing down. He is very proud of his find, especially as he enjoys having friends around for dinner like as if they were in his bistro.



Photo18- When the weather is good, Damien brings out the barbecue and the parasol. But for the apartment blocks in the background, you would think you were in the countryside. Even though life is hard, the smiles are back on their faces : winter is over.



Photo19- The friends savour a quiche that one of the neighbours cooked for them. Old and alone, she lives high up in neighbouring apartment building. Damien regularly does her shopping for her, and in thanks, she cooks meals for him that he always shares.

He knows how to make himself useful; people know and appreciate him in the neighbourhood. Another neighbour does the washing and ironing for five euros. They all look after each other and enjoy each other's presence.



Photo20- Since she was attacked, Jacqueline doesn't dare come home alone on the days she has been begging. "She was well knocked up", says Damien; "she must have insulted the guys so they beat her up". From now on, Damien and Christian take care of her safety. Before midday, they go to pick her up at her usual place on Avenue de Flandre. Despite the warmth of this April day, Jacqueline stays well wrapped up; she spent the whole morning sitting in the shade without moving.



Photo21- On the way back from the market where Jacqueline had been begging, the three companions go shopping with the morning's takings. Jacqueline insists on going to the one minimarket where they stock the only brand of rosé that she drinks. Apart from the bottle of rosé, some bread, a bottle of red wine and two cans of beer for the men make up the day's shopping. Jacqueline complains "they're going to eat up all my money!"



Photo22- Damien maintains the area around the squat, as he likes it to be clean. It also gives him the opportunity to talk to the passers-by. Anyone going for a stroll along the Ourcq Canal couldn't miss Damien brushing the bridge that leads to his paradise.



Photo23- An aerial view of the place where Damien and his friends live. To the left of the courtyard, Jacqueline's shelter with the green roof. Christian's cabin and Damien's little house are hidden under by the springtime growth. This view is not to the taste of several inhabitants of the building from which this photo was taken. They initiate regular actions to have the site evacuated.