

Take Back Mokum

Squatting and the housing struggle in Amsterdam



TAKE BACK MOKUM

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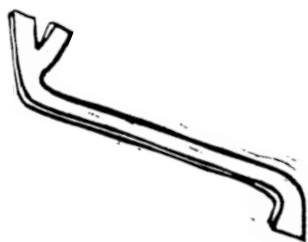
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SPOOKSTAD

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A FEW WORDS FOR THOSE NOT FAMILIAR
WITH OUR CONTEXT

The squatting movement has a long and rich tradition in Amsterdam. In its heyday, in the 1980s, tens of thousands of people were living in squats. More than a subculture, it had the traits of a parallel society. And more than a parallel society, it gave the city a sense of what it can mean to live differently together. A lot of the city's cultural infrastructure, including its most famous music venues, have their roots in the movement. The same goes for most of the remaining alternative (social, political and cultural) spaces, as well as the prevalence of social housing in the city centre. In a more immaterial sense, if there was ever any truth to the image of Amsterdam as a city that allowed a particularly high degree of freedom, experimentation and alternative culture, it is due in big part to the historical squatting movement.

But times have changed. The movement has been marginalised and repressed, and has had to doggedly fight back just to survive, while a massive housing crisis has exacerbated class differences and relegated ever increasing numbers of people to a life of precarity. Housing inequality is now a major fault line in society. The housing struggle – the subject of this book – is a response to this inequality. But it entails more: the housing struggle is about reclaiming the power to give shape and meaning to urban life.

In this struggle for the right to the city, squatting has a particular role to play, especially under current conditions. By breaking the law to reclaim space, it prefigures the abolition of the private property regime. It prefigures the changed ways of living together that become possible through this abolition. By linking the practice of squatting to other forms of housing activism and social movements, we have sought to foreground this sense of the possible.

It is also why we use the word Mokum: originally the affectionate nickname of Amsterdam, to us it signifies the possibility of a transformed city.

We believe that despite the deeply local character of this book, the desires that motivate it and the practices it portrays can be shared beyond its context. To this end, we provided some clarifications in this translation, especially when it comes to technical or policy terms and jargon specific to our country, city and movement. Where we weren't able to do so in the text itself, we provided translator's or editors' notes in square brackets.

Lastly, this book captures a moment in time. Some of the squats featured in this book have been evicted, while new ones have been created. Squatters in Amsterdam continue to forge alliances with other movements, such as the movement for sex workers' rights, and, significantly, the Palestine solidarity movement. But we decided not to update the book. We trust that it remains able to convey the radical idea that the city – whichever city, wherever – belongs to all of us, as we belong to it.

INTRODUCTION

Take Back Mokum. Those were the words on the colossal banner that we dropped from the roof of an empty hotel on Amsterdam's Marnixstraat – it was October 2021 and we had just squatted the building. Under the watch of astonished cops and cheered on by hundreds of people participating in the annual ADEV street rave, we announced that the building had been taken over. By us and for us, but equally for the city and with the city. *Hotel Mokum* was born. And our call radiated from the facade, aimed at everyone willing to read it. Take back all of it, it screamed: the neglected and dilapidated buildings, the sold-off social housing, the buildings listed for demolition, the gentrified neighbourhoods, the defunded community centres, the vacant lots, the abandoned night clubs, all of Mokum, all of the city. The time of asking for permission was over (it wouldn't be granted anyway), the moment of reclaiming what had always been ours had come.

By squatting Hotel Mokum we took back an empty building for the city, as an alternative space outside and against the commercialisation of everything. It became a political, social and cultural centre, a favoured meeting place for seasoned activists and newcomers alike. It became a refuge for everyone condemned by the housing crisis to powerless anger, allowing that anger to be transformed into a new form of power: the power of squatting, of mutual aid, of free political imagination, of the joy and creativity set loose by engaging in direct action. The power of realising that everything is possible. Only the rules and laws of the police and politicians stand in our way.

We squatted in protest against the most severe housing crisis since the Second World War, and against everything related to it. The housing crisis did not fall from the sky. It is the outcome of a decades-long process of transforming

urban space into an infrastructure for capital. Gentrification, mass tourism, the expansion of the city's business district, the real estate boom – all these developments have made the right to housing conditional. But the problem runs deeper. The 2010 squatting ban has led to the repression of autonomous alternatives and of the possibility of resistance. In a deeper sense, as inhabitants of this city we have lost the capacity to give shape and meaning to urban life from the bottom up, according to our own needs and desires.

Take Back Mokum is the acknowledgement of that loss and simultaneously the call to undo it. It is a call to pick up a crowbar and break open not just doors, but the imagination. It is a call to reclaim the city as the collective right of those who give it shape and life, against the privatisation and commodification of urban space. It is a call not to wait for policy makers to tame the monster they created themselves, but to start something new in the here and now.

This book is about what that means. It is a collective search for what is needed to reclaim the city. And it is a shared exploration of life as it could be in a reclaimed Mokum.

Mokum is Amsterdam's affectionate nickname. It brings to mind the "authentic Amsterdammer", the "Jordanees" who knows every regular in his favourite pub. But the history of the word goes back much further. Mokum is the Yiddish word for place or city. As the name for various towns where diasporic Jewish communities found a place to live, it also acquired the connotation of *safe haven*. As such it became the unofficial name of Amsterdam, signifying urban life that escapes the established order, where those with no other home could find refuge.

In this sense, reclaiming Mokum has nothing to do with nostalgia, but is more relevant than ever.

In today's Amsterdam, urban development systematically pushes people to the margins. The outskirts, where social housing has been deliberately neglected, are being gentrified. Undocumented migrants are obstructed from accessing basic needs such as shelter, work and health-care. City marketers love to promote Amsterdam as Pride Capital, while violence against queer people is still the order of the day. The idea that Amsterdam is a free and open city lives on only in the history books and the hallucinations of stoned tourists. The municipality gladly touts the word Mokum, but in reality fewer and fewer people feel like the city is there for them.

Take Back Mokum, then, is not about reconstructing an image of what the city once (and probably never) was, but about the creation of a new communal refuge. It is about reclaiming the city as a commons, a shared space with no owner. The city belongs to no one and is for everyone, because it is continually made and remade by the people living in it. What is at stake in taking back Mokum, in short, is *the right to the city*: the right of inhabitants to shape urban life.

This is why we squat. By squatting, we do away with the absurdity of having to pay for shelter. We want to abolish private property, so that everything is for everyone. We want all space to be public space. We want undocumented people to have the unconditional right to shelter, work, education and healthcare. We want no one to be unhoused who does not want to be, and to end the persecution of those who do. We want an end to the racist, segregating process of gentrification. We don't want official culture harmlessly embellishing the city, but cheap culture making it stranger, wilder and freer.

Taking back Mokum is about building the structures we need to live autonomously, in community, in resistance.

There are representative councils for the unhoused, there are activist groups of undocumented people, there are neighbourhood organisations mobilising against demolition and redevelopment plans, there are squatting assistance hours. And they are always active. It's never quiet. This isn't a matter of politics as a battle for influence playing out in a parliamentary arena. It is a constant struggle, in countless forms, for a place we can call our own. And anyone can join in, at any point.

Take Back Mokum is not a command or an order. It is a call to action and a proposition: you don't *have* to accept the status quo, you *can* refuse the deal you're offered and find out what possibilities open up. And even though we cannot tell you what will happen then, we can promise: you won't be alone. We don't owe the established order anything – we only owe each other. That is what we learn in taking back Mokum.

After six weeks, Hotel Mokum was evicted. In its unrelenting battle against squatting, the public prosecutor's office ordered an eviction and the municipality rallied half of Amsterdam's police force to quash the experiment. The banner was taken down and the building was left to its earlier state of vacancy and uselessness, in which it remains to this day. No longer does the building hurl the words Take Back Mokum at passers-by. Now, a vacant hotel once more confronts the city with its looming soullessness.

But squatting goes on. After Hotel Mokum, we united with the collective *Kinderen van Mokum* (Mokum's children) and formed a new group: under the name Mokum Kraakt, we transformed an abandoned laundromat into a home, while in the city centre we temporarily turned a ruined building into a political and cultural centre. At the

same time, a variety of other groups have carried out many squatting actions. A new generation has risen up that pays no heed to the existing prohibitions and the years-long (ultra)right-wing smear campaign against squatters. Whether it's about creating free spaces, social and political centres, shelter for undocumented people, or shelter for ourselves; whether we're facing housing associations selling off the city's social housing, Russian oligarchs, or multinational real estate investors: squatters are back on the frontline in the struggle for the city.

And we are not alone. The housing struggle is waged by a broad movement consisting of a great variety of groups and activists, all reacting to the multi-headed monster that is the housing crisis.

Take Back Mokum centres their perspectives and experiences. This book has emerged from the practice of squatting, and it starts there. But it fans out over a multitude of activists, thinkers, individuals, collectives and groups who each in their own way are part of the housing struggle. If you have this book in your hands, it is because you have started asking what it could mean to take back the city. To find some hope, or new resources for your own activism, or a point of connection or departure. The writers, collectives and interviewees who have made this book possible offer that, and much more.

This book was made by dozens of people. We, the editorial collective of Mokum Kraakt, have put it together and edited it, and are responsible for the end result (the pieces we wrote ourselves are marked "EC"). We are infinitely grateful to everyone who contributed and has made this work possible. We hope to do justice to the housing movement and the great diversity of perspectives and experiences it contains. At the same time, we are aware that this work is incomplete, and is so by necessity. There is no perspective from, or form in which, the housing struggle

can be rendered in its totality. Why? Because the outcome is still undecided. The ending is unwritten. There is still space for your stories, your actions.

It is because we are situated here, and because of the tough love we cherish for this city, that Amsterdam is the subject and the point of departure of this work, not because we believe that squatting and the housing struggle only take place here. And insofar as Mokum is its true destination – a communal refuge that could really be anywhere – we hope it will offer inspiration to anyone, regardless of location, sharing our problems and our desires.

Take Back Mokum consists of three parts. The first, *What's not allowed can still be done*, maps out what is at stake in squatting today. It does so via an interview with the feminist squatting group AFGA, an essay and short graphic novel about (the history of) the undocumented migrant-squatters of We Are Here, a personal essay about the famous free space ADM, a history of the origins of the squatting movement in Amsterdam, and a philosophical critique of property rights.

The second part, *Whose streets?* centres the lived experience of individuals and groups put under pressure by the housing crisis, and their struggle for the right to the city. It contains a story about the personal consequences of gentrification in Amsterdam-Nieuw-West, an analysis of the causes of the current housing crisis, a visual essay about the housing struggle through the years, the story of a homeless person fighting for the rights of the unhoused, a defence of the right to the city for undocumented people, and an account of queer activists' struggle against the commercialisation of Pride. Bookending this part you'll find an overview, in the form of short interviews and

photos, of (the majority of) the currently existing free spaces and squats in Amsterdam.

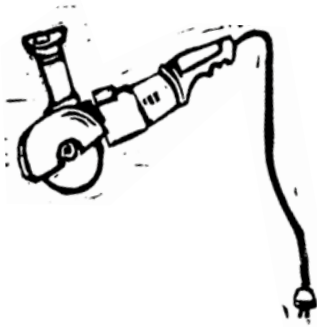
The third part, *The housing struggle continues*, investigates existing and possible links between the squatting movement and other forms of housing activism, as well as the future of the housing struggle. It starts off with a how-to guide for organising a rent strike, continues with an interview with the ecological land squatters of Green Tribe, a review of the counter-cultural exhibition *Piep, knars, krijts, kraak*, an essay about the obstacles and possibilities of squatting in contemporary Amsterdam, an essay about the position of underage activists in the squatting movement, and ends with a group discussion about the possibilities for alliances between squatters and anti-gentrification activists.

But you can read this book any way you like, in any order. Take from it what you want. There are no answers or solutions. The possibilities, however, are endless.

The editorial collective:

Björn, Boris, Juji, Lente, Lev, Penny, Puk, Vincent

I
**What's not allowed
can still be done**



Against patriarchy and the state: AFGA and the feminist squatting wave *an interview with Alice*

“What’s not allowed can still be done” – this is the slogan squatters have continually used to encourage themselves since the 2010 squatting ban. And they have acted accordingly. Despite the eviction of hundreds of squats in Amsterdam since the ban went into effect, and despite increasingly repressive laws and the incessant indignation of (far-)right political parties, the practice of squatting was never completely quashed. But one effect the increased criminalisation of squatting has undoubtedly had, is the reduced visibility of the movement and its political influence on housing policy. It is not a coincidence that in those same years – the previous decade – Amsterdam has slowly but surely been transformed into a paradise for real estate investors and large corporations, a sanitised city without space for the marginalised.

As a result, we are facing an unprecedented housing crisis. The government, whether at the municipal or national level, has proven incapable of guaranteeing the basic need that is housing for everyone. But precisely for this reason, the squatting movement has regained its public relevance and legitimacy. After years of leading a more or less underground existence, beneath the shiny surfaces of the gentrified city, in the remaining margins, on hidden islands of alternative culture, squatting is now happening out in the open again, unapologetically and with explicit political aims.

If there is one squatting collective that has played a crucial role in this revival of squatting, it is AFGA, the

Anarcha-Feminist Group Amsterdam. Founded in 2020, not only has the group carried out dozens of squatting and other actions themselves, they have persistently encouraged and supported new groups. Despite a wave of evictions the group has managed to preserve a number of squats that are now part of the city's network of autonomous spaces.

In this interview, we speak with Alice, who helped start the group and is still active in it (she emphasises that she will only speak for herself and not for the collective). In our conversation, we discuss her personal motivations for starting to squat and the organisational structure and aims of AFGA, but we also talk about the meaning and relevance of anarchism today, about revolution, hope, and the necessity of developing a way of life beyond capitalism and the state. "We are truly living in a pivotal moment," she says: "things can start to become very different."

ORGANISING A SQUATTING GROUP

Alice, could you explain to us what AFGA is?

AFGA stands for Anarcha-Feminist Group Amsterdam. We started as a squatting group, with people who were in need of housing. We squatted a building on Ringdijk, for example, where people are still living now. Since then, we have been organising events, working groups, and of course, protests. What AFGA exactly is, is hard to say. It's not really a movement, but rather a group that organises things within the movement.

Can you give an example of what you do?

[Shows flyer] This is a project that I'm very excited about. We have a social justice working group. It focuses on

informing and organising people who could benefit from knowing their rights better. This flyer is an example of that. It contains information about your rights when you get stopped and searched by the police or experience racial profiling as a person of colour. The flyer also addresses questions like: what are your rights when you film the police? How can you safely intervene and inform someone about their rights? That's one of the things AFGA is working on a lot at the moment.

How should we understand those working groups?

Our structure is as follows: we have an open assembly every two weeks. Anyone who doesn't identify as a cis man and agrees with our values is welcome to join. The open assembly is where we make important decisions. We also introduce new people to the different working groups and anyone can join them. We have a media working group, a fiction writing working group, a squatting working group, a reading group, a feminist library, etc. Assemblies take place twice a month. We have an open general assembly and two weeks after we organise a themed assembly. Themed assemblies focus on a specific topic. For instance, recently we had one about *dual power*. Dual power is all about building structures under capitalism that demonstrate that the state and capitalism are not actually necessary. Think for example about the social services that the state normally provides, like child care, food, you name it. Where the state falls short, we see if we can provide those things ourselves so that people start to realise that the state doesn't do much for us. From this session a working group emerged – a dual power working group – with which we distribute skipped food [discarded food that is still edible] and those kinds of things. I hope this gives you an idea of some of the projects we are working on. We do a lot.

Sometimes things work out and prove sustainable; other times they don't and that's too bad. But that's how it goes.

Is ASS also a working group of AFGA?

ASS stands for Autonomous Student Struggle and did in fact start as a working group of AFGA. So that's why it may seem at times that we are the same group, as there used to be a connection. We still help each other a lot, but ASS is now a completely independent group. This also shows how our structure works: we often initiate new groups and encourage them to organise themselves, and ultimately they have to do it themselves. It's one of the main pillars of anarchism, that people should be able to work autonomously. We facilitate that. Some new squatting groups also got help from us, like RAAK. They no longer exist as a group, but many of them are still active and help out within AFGA and ASS.

AN INTERSECTIONAL GROUP

Maybe we can go a bit more into the history of AFGA and some of your ideals and principles. How did it all start?

The first big AFGA squatting action was on Spuistraat. This was an action against gentrification. We also squatted a building on Oudezijds Voorburgwal. That eviction was very intense, and it was an illegal eviction at that. We had been there for a week and had clearly established *huisvrede* ["house peace", a legal protection against eviction without court order]. The police violently beat up people on the street, even people who just happened to walk by. One person from our collective was put into a life-threatening situation. They tried to escape to another building nearby, but when the police showed up there too, they tried to go back.

We held onto them while they were hanging out of the window; and while we tried to pull them back in we got pulled away by the cops. They fell three storeys down. Luckily, they fell on a small platform below the window, but that was incredibly frightening. Still we decided to continue squatting. In the Pijp neighbourhood, we squatted a building owned by Blackstone; and then, in the same neighbourhood, a social housing unit that was put up for sale. Eventually, we squatted Ringdijk, a monumental building from the nineteenth century that was going to be demolished. We are still there. The very first action, however, was a small squat in Amsterdam-West, in the Kinkerbuurt neighbourhood. We organised the action together with another collective. There was a bit of a conflict, which is not very relevant to elaborate on now, but this was the reason we started a group without cis men.

Why did you feel that need?

I believe that being an anarchist automatically also means that you are against the patriarchy and sexism. Many agree with that, but sometimes it's seen as a secondary issue. Moreover, I think there's a lot to be said for having a space to organise with people who understand the specific intersection of your oppression. And it's not that as AFGA we don't organise with cis men at all, it is just that our assemblies are without cis guys. We wanted to have a space without them, so we have a place where we can organise ourselves the way we want: as people who experience the repression of patriarchy in a certain way, so that we can determine how to fight it ourselves. I think that's important. But that doesn't mean that we think cis men are not needed in the struggle. And it's not like we invented this structure either. Various groups experiencing oppression in a certain way operate like this too. The most famous

example is the Black Panther Party from the 1960s. They organised without white people. Nowadays, you have many queer and trans groups that make their decisions without cis people. We use a similar structure.

But that structure didn't really exist in Amsterdam in the squatting or anarchist movement when you started. So it really must have felt like something that was needed?

Groups like ours did exist in the past, of course. I think the movement is just much smaller now. That might be why this structure wasn't there yet when we started. Or maybe it did exist and I just didn't know about it. As a side note, it's important to be critical of the word "movement," since squatting is a method. Anyone can squat, fascists can too. That we engage in the same tactic doesn't mean we have the same ideological understanding. That's also why we felt the need to have our political conviction stated in our name, so that it's hard to ignore.

SQUATTING AS A METHOD

Why is squatting so fundamental to your struggle? Is it mainly about providing housing for people, or is it more than that?

Good question. I don't think squatting is the thing that will bring about the revolution. I don't think we're going to live in some utopia just because we squatted a house – of course not. But it was a solution to certain needs we had. To start with people obviously needed space to live, but squatting fulfils other needs as well. We needed a place where we could organise, where we could host events, where we could give away free food, where we could support each other. Squatting is also a form of direct action through which we convey a certain message: against gentrification

for example. That's what we did on Spuistraat. The building we squatted was a former brothel that had to make way for an artists' group, which we saw as a form of gentrification. If you can obtain a place you can use for organising, provide housing for people that need it and also fight back against gentrification and the poor treatment of sex workers, I think that makes for a very strong action.

It's true that squatting can do many things at once. About the Spuistraat action: in the statement about that action you said that you are against gentrification and against vrijplaatsen ["free spaces", often former, legalised squats with a cultural function]. Anti-gentrification is self-explanatory, but a group that is against free spaces is surprising. Can you explain why you are against free spaces? Or are there good and bad kinds?

When the squatting movement was in its heyday, the state tried to suppress it by making certain concessions. People could buy their squat for a symbolic amount of money, or rules were made by the government allowing some sort of artistic "freedom," but only within the framework of the law. As far as we're concerned, the current free spaces agreement is very similar. It is a new arrangement from the municipality to give artists a place in the city – for a fee. Often, the municipality does this in working-class neighbourhoods, to make those neighbourhoods more attractive. By doing so as an artist, you participate in gentrification, and often you are still evicted afterwards anyway. You are begging the state to throw you some crumbs and make yourself dependent, while you could also just squat. Moreover, I find the concept of a free space a bit annoying. What is a free space within a capitalist system? Are you trying to obtain freedom only for yourself, or for a select few, and do you stop once you've secured your place? That's privilege, not freedom.

So do you think that squatting has played a dubious role in urban development in Amsterdam?

Yes, I think there is definitely an uncomfortable relationship between gentrification and squatting, and certainly “artistic squatters” in Amsterdam.

But you said earlier that squatting is a way for you to do things you otherwise couldn't do. So in that sense, by squatting you create a free space for yourself.

I feel that free spaces can be very isolating. Like: we are free in our little space and that's it. Instead I think we, as a movement, need to go outside. We need to expand outwards. And not: we just want a place for ourselves where we can feel free and comfortable and say “fuck the rest”. For us it's important that squatting is a starting point to expand from in order to bring about change. It's the opposite of creating your own space and then getting stuck in it.

One thing we find very important is to make squatting accessible to people. You have to be careful with squatting, of course, it's illegal, you don't want sensitive information to leak, et cetera. But concerns about security can also unintentionally have the effect of gatekeeping. We actually want to welcome new people, because we think everyone benefits if there are more squats around. We can't exclude people if we want to grow as a movement.

Is this a more conscious choice than at the beginning?

Yes, this has certainly become our tactic, more so than at the beginning. At one point, we realised that we had become a group of friends and this could also lead to excluding people. We are now more consciously working to welcome new people and to make sure they feel comfortable.

I hope it's working, I think it is. It has helped. But more generally, the autonomous left is growing. Simply because material conditions have deteriorated, and people are more willing to do something and take action. I don't know if that's really because of us. But still, we have to make an effort to actually include people who are interested. With ASS, for example, we have a project called "find your squatting buddy," with which we want to facilitate people finding others to squat with. It's super fun. If you want to squat but don't know anyone, it can be hard to get involved. So we want to support that and then also help them do it themselves. So that people don't just come to join us, but start their own groups.

And how do you deal with people who come forward who haven't (yet) embraced all the anarchist ideas, so for example, don't know the "right" terms yet or don't know exactly what intersectionality means?

With AFGA, we have our "aims and principles." These are fairly broad and we use them as a starting point for our group. For example, we believe that spaces should be used to educate people, to promote discussions, and that they should be safe for everyone. These are fairly accessible points of departure, and anyone who agrees with them can organise and take action with us or in our name. If someone needs a place to sleep or wants to squat, that's also fine. You don't have to be an anarchist to come to our events. Everyone is welcome.

ANARCHA-FEMINISM

Although all kinds of people are welcome, you yourselves are explicitly anarchist. What does anarchism mean to you?

Anarchism is a bit of a tricky term because it can encompass so much. What anarchism means to me doesn't necessarily have to be the same as what it means to you. Most people have the idea that anarchism equates to chaos, a sort of lawless society, where anything goes. That's not true. Anarchism starts from the belief that people should be able to be self-sufficient, without being dependent on the state. Usually, you need some form of organisation for that.

The beauty of anarchism is that it shows people that they can create direct solutions for the problems in their lives. Instead of telling people what they should think, believe, or do, it's much more effective to show people that they can do it themselves. The moment you feel this kind of collective power is a very important moment of developing political consciousness – when you realise that by collaborating and organising with others, you can get things done that you thought were impossible. For example, improving your living conditions through organising a rent strike, or when you need a house, just squatting one and living in it. Then you find out that you don't have to wait for the state to finally give you something.

You said there are different forms of anarchism. How would you describe your form?

Anarcha-feminism means that, in addition to fighting oppression from the state, we also emphasise the fight against patriarchy. The starting point of an intersectional practice is your class position. That's where it starts, and other forms of oppression come on top of that. Different people and groups experience oppression in different ways. We don't want to wait for some hypothetical revolution before we can feel our liberation from patriarchy. We expect our comrades to do something about it now. That's what we wanted to make explicit with AFGA. We organise

without cis men because we want to lead the fight against our own oppression ourselves. We believe we can do that, and more generally, that every oppressed group should be able to choose the form and manner in which to fight against oppression. In this way, we combine anarchist autonomy with intersectional feminism.

How did you come to anarchism yourself? There are many different currents on the left, why give preference to anarchism?

I think everyone has their own political journey. For me, it has to do partly with the circumstances in which I grew up, but also to a large extent with the state of the world today. Climate change, for example, shows how destructive capitalism is and how little time we have. For me, anarchism is an answer to that, because I think that people themselves can determine how they want to live, that they don't need "leaders" and that we don't need a ruling class who claims all this wealth and resources for themselves. I think self-governance is the solution.

The starting point is the belief that another, better world is possible. I really believe that. A world without inequality, without colonialism, without exploitation. Capitalism is something that will necessarily come to an end. We have had many different economic systems in the past. It's not true either that we're living at the end of history, so let's fight for something good to come out of this, instead of something worse.

A commonly used argument against anarchism is that it's quite idealistic and not very practical. Is anarchism, or squatting, a realistic way to change the world?

I think it's always important to remain humble. As AFGA we're really not going to change the whole world.

Squatting isn't even, in my opinion, the best way to solve the housing crisis. For many people, it's too dangerous and too precarious. What we're interested in is trying out alternatives within our society. You can't create a completely new world overnight and we don't want to wait for a revolution.

But we are living in a truly pivotal moment. Things can start to become very different. That's going to happen anyway, but it's our responsibility to make the right analysis and contribute to creating change for the better, instead of, for example, the fascists using the same circumstances to make things even worse. What we want to do is provide a space for people to discuss, to learn new methods, and to stand up for themselves.

Are you hopeful? Do you feel that what you stand for is catching on?

I think that we find ourselves in a moment in time – not because of AFGA – where a lot can and will change. And I have to have hope. What's the alternative? Regardless of what happens, I don't think as an activist you should expect that you will ever fully "succeed." I'm an anarchist not because I think I will succeed, but because I know I'm doing the right thing, regardless of whether we win or not. Maybe I won't experience success in my lifetime, but I can contribute to getting us a little closer. And that makes it worthwhile.

Lente & Vincent (EC)

We Are Here: on squatters, migrants, and the right to inhabit the planet

Here in The Netherlands, our existence is systematically denied. Yet, this does not negate our existence. We are here. We live on the streets or in temporary shelters. We exist in a political and legal void – a void that can only be filled by acknowledging our situation and our needs. Our lives are on pause due to lack of documentation, but we refuse to be ignored any longer. We refuse to stay invisible. We refuse to remain victims. We demand a structural solution for everyone in our situation and for all who may find themselves in the same political and legal void. We demand recognition of our existence. We demand our existence be recognised in official policies and laws. We are here and we will stay here.

– We Are Here Manifesto

Over ten years ago, something remarkable happened in Amsterdam. In the autumn of 2012, a group of undocumented refugees gathered in an encampment in the garden of the Protestantse Diaconie in Amsterdam-West. Their asylum requests had been rejected by the IND [Immigration and Naturalisation Service] or they were stuck in limbo between various legal procedures. Their right to stay in the Netherlands was made extremely precarious. But instead of accepting the rejection of their asylum applications, they chose to fight for their rights. Inspired by the Arab Spring and previous protest encampments, they decided to make their struggle visible.¹ They chose to protest. We Are Here was born.

SQUATTERS, MIGRANTS, SQUATTING MIGRANTS

You decide to go to Amsterdam this time. There, you meet others in the same situation as you. You feel somewhat relieved to know you are not alone. Until now, you have always hidden, fearing the consequences. But these people do not hide. You think about it: hiding has brought you nothing so far. Perhaps it's better to tell people about your situation. If people hear your story, they will understand, and then perhaps something will change.²

What is the story of We Are Here? It's a story of rightlessness and precarity. But it is more than that. The people of We Are Here refused to be seen only as victims. The dehumanising effect of the Dutch asylum system deprives people of agency over their fate. It subjects them to bureaucratic procedures and rules, reducing people to their papers – or lack thereof. Having to constantly prove the legality of one's presence in the country, which is constantly put in doubt by mistrustful state institutions, severely hampers a person's autonomy and independence. The story of We Are Here is a story of resistance against this devaluation of human existence.

We Are Here chose a tactic of visibility. Instead of passively enduring the more or less random developments in their asylum procedures, and instead of accepting the ultimately arbitrary distinction between legal and illegal individuals as an immutable fact, the group decided to make themselves heard. We Are Here sought ways to no longer be ignored. They formed a social movement and started carrying out actions, calling out the society that excluded them and asserting their presence. And the most significant form of direct action they undertook, the tactic most associated with We Are Here, was squatting.

Activist and academic Deanna Dadusc, who was involved at the time, describes the importance of squatting for undocumented migrants:

[L]iving in squatted buildings has been used by undocumented migrants as a tool of protest and to gain visibility, but also to open collective spaces where it becomes possible to organise their struggles in a systematic manner, to intervene in the way they are supposed to experience their everyday lives, and to take their basic rights into their own hands, thereby overcoming the structural denial of juridical rights.³

Even so, squatting is not an obvious method of action. Since it was banned by law in 2010, squatting has become an illegalised and thus precarious practice, fraught with significant risks. This applies to people with papers and even more so to those without papers, who must live with the fact that every aspect of their existence is (potentially) criminalised.⁴ That a group of rejected asylum seekers – legally speaking an extremely vulnerable group – adopted this practice is thus not self-evident. Squatters and (illegalised) migrants both face social stigma, prejudices and a kind of general hostility from ordinary bourgeois society. As a combination, squatting migrants are like “space invaders”:⁵ people “from outside” claiming space that society, for its sense of security and the certainty that the state only provides protection to a dominant, privileged group, desperately wants to exclude them from.

But squatting is what We Are Here did, extensively and on a large scale: the group carried out about sixty squatting actions in just under eight years. In doing so, We Are Here has perhaps been the most recognisable squatting group in Amsterdam in recent years. It also led to the group being at the centre of multiple political, social, and economic debates. Or rather, the group operated at the intersection of a multitude of political struggles, systems of oppression, and forms of protest, resistance, and self-determination. Ten years after its founding, it remains relevant to explore these intersections. The mobilisation of some of the most

marginalised individuals in the Netherlands in a group like We Are Here exposed fundamental dilemmas and contradictions in the way urban society functions. They disrupted the illusion, and the self-image, that Amsterdam is a free city where there is a place for everyone. And at the same time, they pointed to the desire and necessity to make freedom, safety, and equality the guiding principles of the city and of the community that shapes it.

So why did We Are Here squat? Why did the squatting movement come to their aid? How did We Are Here's struggle relate to the fight for the right to the city? And what structural developments did this struggle clash with?

IN LIMBO IN THE NETHERLANDS

We are not here for a fridge or a car, or because we like it so much here. If our country were safe, then we would be there. If we could study and work there! If we could choose to marry and start a family... If we didn't run the risk of being locked up... If we could live safely we wouldn't have left everything behind. Would we have left all our family, friends, and acquaintances for money? For a country we didn't even know? A country thousands of kilometres from our own?⁶

If asylum seekers in the Netherlands can't count on a warm welcome and often end up in procedures that can last years – during which their lives are usually put on hold – it is even more unwelcoming for rejected asylum seekers. The members of We Are Here belonged (mostly) to this group. For various reasons, their asylum claims were denied. Not necessarily because they had no documents or were not refugees, but largely due to the unattainable bureaucratic requirements set by the Dutch government, such as unrealistically strict standards for official documents. And along with this, a general institutionalised mistrust of

asylum seekers, the suspicion that migrants are not “real” refugees but merely “fortune seekers.” The members of We Are Here were not allowed to stay in the Netherlands, but they weren’t able to return to their countries of origin either. Either because of war, because of barely functioning governments unable to issue papers, or because their countries of origin refused to cooperate on repatriation.

The people who formed We Are Here had fallen into this “asylum gap.” Virtually all available routes to a stable and legal existence were closed to them. They could not continue their asylum procedures, they could not try in another European country because of EU regulations, they could not return to their countries of origin, and they had no claim to public assistance or benefits.

Adam, from Sudan, was in this situation. “In 2011, I was in Ter Apel [the main asylum centre in the Netherlands]. There was a protest camp set up with about five hundred people protesting against the rejection of their asylum applications. For about two to three weeks there were protests. The IND wanted us to stop and go back inside, but we refused. Almost everyone got arrested. After that, I was transferred to an asylum centre in Arnhem. It was there that I heard about We Are Here. I started going to their actions while still living in Arnhem. But when I was told by the DT&V [Repatriation and Departure Service] that I had to leave the Netherlands, I went to Amsterdam and joined We Are Here.”

In Arnhem, Adam met Helen, a refugee from Eritrea. Her asylum application had also been rejected. We Are Here had just been founded. “I came to Amsterdam because of We Are Here. I didn’t have anywhere else to go, I knew no one. In Amsterdam, I could join We Are Here. No one asked me where I came from, who I was, what I was doing there. I was accepted as a human being. Since then, I have been part of the group.”

The group's fame quickly spread. After the first encampment in the garden of the Diakonie, they set up their second one on Notweg in Osdorp. When this camp was cleared, a series of squatting actions followed. In a year, the group squatted a church (Vluchtkerk), an empty apartment building (Vluchtflat), and an office (Vluchtkantoor) in the centre of the city, opposite the Rijksmuseum. Demonstrations were organised and support was sought – and found – among Amsterdammers.

“We Are Here became a social movement,” Adam states. “We fought for the rights of everyone, regardless of where they came from. More and more people whose asylum applications had been rejected joined us.”

That the squatting movement played a prominent supporting role was a fairly organic development. “Many anarchists, and this includes squatters, support freedom of movement and are against borders,” says Joyce, who became involved with We Are Here as an activist and squatter. “For example, I already had experience with actions against detention centres. At the activist festival 2.Dh5, in 2012, We Are Here was invited because they were considered an activist group. When they were asked there what other activists could do for them, they asked for support, solidarity, and protection.”

From that moment on, a collaboration began between Amsterdam activists and squatters and the people of We Are Here that would last for years.

SQUATTING IN FORTRESS EUROPE

Migrants and squatters put two worlds together: the world where rights are valid and the world where they are not. They put the two worlds in one through practices that represent an incubator of different global relations opposed to any form of exploitation.⁷

The existence of We Are Here was extraordinary but not unique, since harsh asylum policies are not limited to the Netherlands but are part of a general European trend. Fortress Europe has been under construction for decades. Neoliberal globalisation, of which the EU is one of the main drivers, has cemented fundamental inequality in the world economy. While multinationals exploit the global South through trade and tax treaties, the right to movement of ordinary, often poor people is subjected to increased restrictions and surveillance. The dangerous journey migrants are forced to take from countries in Africa and the Middle East to reach Europe is the first consequence of this.

The second consequence is the legal limbo they find themselves in once they reach the border. In the years that We Are Here emerged, this was the case all over Europe. In cities like Hamburg, Athens, Rome, and Madrid, collaborations between local activists and illegalised migrants emerged. Such collaborations defy the image of Europe as an impenetrable fortress: the image that Europe is enclosed by external borders that mercilessly keep “foreigners” out, while the area within the borders is a smooth, seamlessly functioning space where the same rights (and obligations) apply to everyone. Although the borders are certainly guarded, they are not hermetically sealed – the newcomers can ultimately also be deployed as cheap and dependent labour, as often happens in the agricultural sector.⁸ The area within the borders – the European or national territory – is far from being a smooth and transparent surface but is shaped by political and social conflicts. And as long as a truly free and equal society is not created, those conflicts will continue to flare up.

The first years in which We Are Here was active coincided with the first period after the squatting ban. Squatters were faced with further criminalisation. Obviously

this doesn't constitute a direct comparison with the fate of rejected asylum seekers. But solidarity often arises from the realisation that different groups suffer from the same mechanisms of oppression. In the historical context in which *We Are Here* emerged, squatters and migrants shared the experience of criminalisation, exclusion, police violence, and oppression. Both groups could not abide by the ruling order. Both groups experienced the need to imagine a different world, to form social relations different from the capitalist norm, and to not submit to the political winds that had turned against them.

EVICCTIONS AND SPLITS

Because it was such a centrally located building, in the middle of a touristic area, it was of great importance to the mayor to evict the *Vluchtkantoor* quickly. By then, *We Are Here* had become a very visible and vocal group that received a lot of media attention, initiated lawsuits, and triggered a society-wide discussion about the harshness of Dutch asylum policy (which eventually even led to a government crisis in 2015). The then mayor of Amsterdam, Eberhard van der Laan, sought ways to defuse the conflict, that is to say, to neutralise the group and their political message.

The eviction of the *Vluchtkantoor* was an example of this tactic. Part of the group (the part that had previously lived in the *Vluchtkerk*) was offered temporary but official accommodation at *Havenstraat*, provided they let themselves be registered by the government. For fear of ending up on the streets in the middle of winter – it was December – the group, after extensive deliberation, decided to accept the offer and moved into the *Vluchthaven* for six months. This split the group and subjected the residents of the *Vluchthaven* to the opaque and individualising procedures of the asylum process once more, while

the part of the group that had not received the offer had to look for shelter elsewhere.

“The focus of the struggle,” says Joyce, “became blurred at that time, also under the influence of various external parties. It became more about the right to shelter than the right to papers and legal residence, without the group wanting this. The mayor also tried to delegitimise our political activities on the one hand, but on the other hand tolerated squatting because it was an easy solution for the municipality’s own negligence, namely providing shelter for this group.”

We Are Here’s journey through the city continued with the squatting of an empty garage in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, which was named the Vluchtgarage. Although the group could stay there relatively long, almost a year and a half, the many moves, squatting actions, and evictions also took their toll.

Helen: “It was hard to find or make a home somewhere. Sometimes we were evicted after a day or a week. In some places, there was privacy and hygiene, but in other places not at all. We would make walls out of cardboard and there were rats. You were always worried about how long you could stay and what would happen next.”

“And if something went wrong,” says Adam, “then people got angry at the leaders of the group. The leaders, who went looking for buildings with the squatters, were given a lot of responsibility from the rest, but also got complaints if the building turned out to be unsuitable.”

“Sometimes the pressure was too much for them,” adds Joyce. “And strange rumours circulated. That they, but also the squatters, were somehow making money from We Are Here.”

At the same time, the mayor promoted the narrative that there was a distinction between “Dutch political activists” – who had their own agenda: agitating against the

state – and the refugees who were more or less passive victims and had no self-determination.⁹ In reality, the members of We Are Here had developed their own political subjectivity: they were migrant squatters and identified themselves, like Helen and Adam, wholeheartedly as activists. In the period of the Vluchtgarage, they travelled by bus to Brussels for an international action week. They participated in a protest march from Strasbourg to the Belgian capital, started a football team, participated in a play and a dance performance, and carried out dozens of other projects.¹⁰ In a world where being human has been made conditional, to claim recognition of their humanity is a permanent and thoroughly political struggle for the oppressed and marginalised. We Are Here was driven by that necessity.

But the fact that the people of We Are Here had to rely on a criminalised practice like squatting made their situation even more precarious, even though it did give them a certain degree of agency. After a little more than a year, the Vluchtgarage was evicted, and the group, whose composition was always changing, lost its unity through multiple splits (which ended up also having its advantages: self-organisation and organising actions was easier in smaller groups). First, the women split off, resulting in a men's group and a women's group. Later, other groups emerged based on differences in place of origin and/or tactics. And while there were actions happening continuously, the government, under pressure from the far right, hardened its stance against asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants. As far as they were concerned, there could be no collective solution.

MARGINALISATION IN THE SMOOTH CITY

At the same time, the city of Amsterdam, after a few cautious years, began to accelerate the process of making the

city squat-free. If in 2010 there were still hundreds of squats in Amsterdam, by the end of the decade there were only a handful left.¹¹ In 2014, Valreep was evicted. A year later, it was the Spuistraat's turn. The last symbol of counter-culture, radical politics, and the squatting tradition in the inner city was destroyed: the Slangenpand and the Tabakspannen were evicted. Not long after, they were demolished. With the sale of the university building Bungehuis (which became SoHo House, a luxury retreat for upper-class creatives), and the arrival of two new hotels, the public character of the Spuistraat was erased and replaced by that frictionless commercialisation so characteristic of globalised cities today. In 2019, ADM was evicted. After twenty years, the commune lost its self-built world to a shipbuilder planning to build luxury yachts for the super-rich.

In a relatively short time, Amsterdam went through drastic changes. Entirely in line with the dominant neo-liberal ideology of recent decades, the transformation of the city took place under the pressure of a top-down class struggle. The squatting ban cannot be seen as separate from the desire of right-wing parties to break any resistance to their anti-democratic housing agenda. Central to this was the abandonment of public housing as a collective good, as something that falls under the state's responsibility, and replacing it with a liberalised housing market where investors have free rein. The decrease in the stock of social housing (from 50 per cent in 2010 to 37 per cent now)¹² was part of the same agenda, as was the introduction of temporary rental contracts and anti-squat contracts, which contributed to the erosion of tenants' rights. The construction of hotels and the increase in tourism went hand in hand with these developments. The consequence of these policies is gentrification, which has led to the transformation of the city into a collection of services

for the wealthy, and the marginalisation of everyone who does not belong to that class. The result is what researcher and activist René Boer calls the smooth city:

A highly normative, controlling and arguably oppressive environment, in which gradually all opportunities for productive friction, sudden transitions or subversive transgressions have been eliminated.¹³

The rise and activities of We Are Here took place in the same period that the completion of the smooth city was finalised. A direct consequence for the group was that they experienced, quite basically, an increased lack of available (i.e. vacant) buildings to squat. After the Vluchtgemeente in 2016, it became more and more difficult to squat buildings where the group could stay for longer periods of time. Neoliberal urban development was in full swing and left literally no space for those it had marginalised. We Are Here's struggle for recognition and for a legal, dignified existence, overlapped at this point with the housing struggle of those who were being gentrified out of the city. In other words: their struggle for papers, difficult enough in itself under the prevailing political circumstances, was made even more difficult by the intensified class struggle fought out in the arena of housing. The reactionary politics that turned people on the move into illegalised strangers coincided with a takeover of the city by capital, and, to secure that takeover, the suppression of the activists who rose up against it.

THE RIGHT TO INHABIT THE PLANET

But above all the gap in the asylum system is proven by all the refugees that receive their status. Every document is a small party. The number passes 60. A lot of people who were once called "out of procedure" finally got their

rights. The lost time is never paid back, however. And many more are still in the hopeless situation of waiting and proof not being accepted.¹⁴

Today the housing crisis is more severe than ever. So is the asylum crisis. Neither fell from the sky. They are the result of the deliberate dismantling of public institutions. Since the neoliberal turn of the eighties and nineties, politicians from almost all parties have contributed to this. But it was not until the previous decade that their project really reached its completion. To achieve that goal, it was necessary to neutralise squatting, a practice in which the utopia of shared ownership and non-hierarchical self-organisation still shines through. And the most precarious members of society – asylum seekers in limbo as well as the unhoused – had to be painted as a problem of public order so as to ignore the problem of a society that refuses to provide care and safety to everyone.

Looking back, it's easy to be pessimistic. Helen and Adam are not. "We have shown our humanity," says Adam. "We have shown that we can work together and live together despite our different backgrounds. It was like a school where you could learn to overcome differences, and learn how to survive."

Helen also thinks they managed to achieve a lot: "Many people, maybe more than half of the group, eventually got legal papers. Over the years, many people left the Netherlands, but many also stayed, even though they didn't have papers. They are still here. And they are not alone."

They wouldn't have done it any differently than they did. They would advise new groups to adopt their tactics: stick together, take up space, claim attention. Meanwhile, We Are Here itself no longer exists as one group or as a squatters' collective. But its members are still there. Some have started new projects, such as the artist group We Sell Reality.¹⁵ Others still devote themselves to the rights of

asylum seekers and refugees without papers, or continue the struggle under the name “We Are Still Here.”¹⁶

The squatting movement has undeniably shrunk since the time We Are Here was established. But the active solidarity it put into practice also politicised its reasons for being in a new way. The exchange and cooperation between squatters and migrants brought the movement to the local frontline of a global struggle against borders, against the illegalisation of people, and against the neoliberal precarisation of life. The movement operated at the intersection of multiple, interlocking conflicts and thereby transcended its own battlefield – that of the housing struggle. It may be clearer now than at the time that the various struggles that were fought – by squatters, migrants, no border activists, anti-fascists, anti-racists, the radical climate struggle – culminated in a universal demand: “the right to inhabit the planet,” as Mudu and Chattopadhyay call it.¹⁷

In the multiple crises we are currently enduring, this demand has lost none of its urgency. While the government in the previous decade was still actively consolidating the neoliberal transformation of society, it is finally becoming clear, even to a largely depoliticised public, that the system does not work to the advantage of the majority of people. Being precarious is starting to become a universal condition of contemporary existence. The dream of a better future has been crushed by the existing order itself. Under these circumstances, it can suddenly become clear that the “ordinary” citizen with legal papers has more in common with a rejected asylum seeker than with the CEO who exploits both. There is no better time to forge new bonds of solidarity.

Vincent (EC)

NOTES

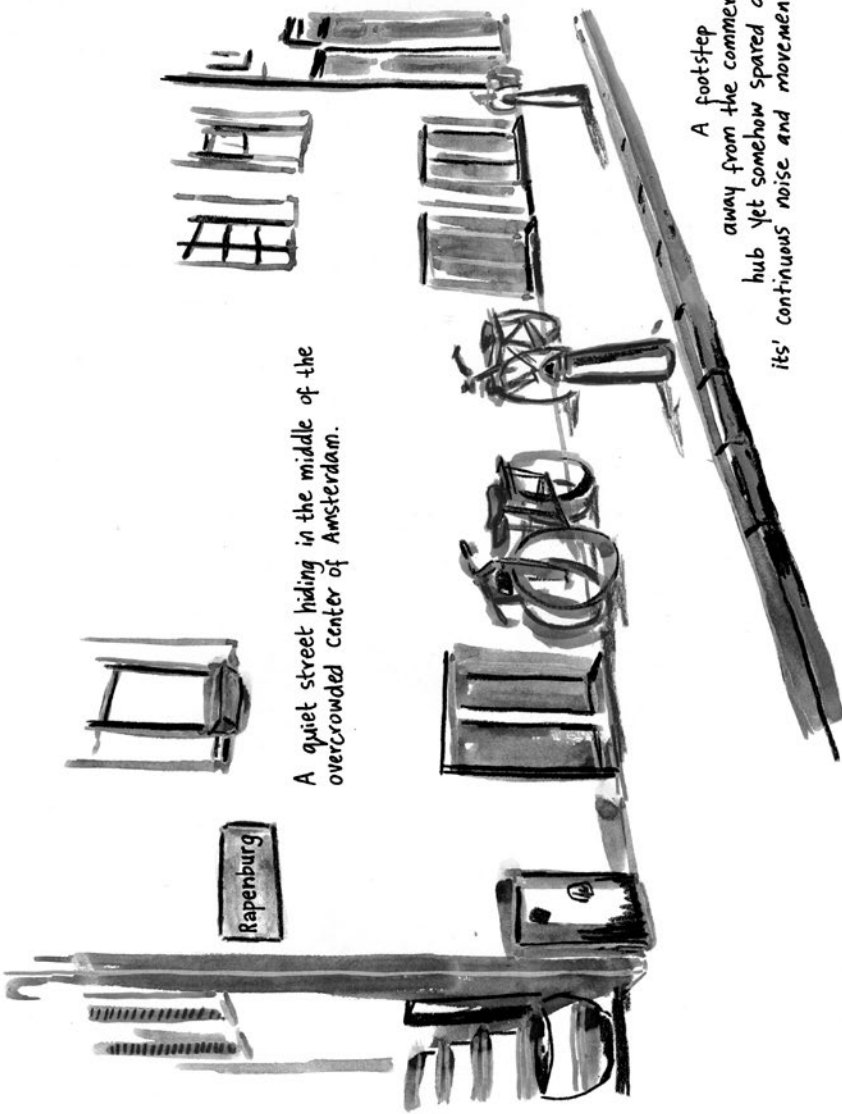
- 1 <http://wijzinhier.org/tijdslijn/geschiedenis-van-wij-zijn-hier/>
- 2 <http://wijzinhier.org/who-we-are/>
- 3 Deanna Dadusc, 'Squatting and the Undocumented Migrants' Struggle in the Netherlands', in *Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy*, ed. P. Mudu and S. Chattopadhyay (New York: Routledge, 2017), 275–276.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 278.
- 5 Stephania Grohman, 'Space Invaders: The 'Migrant-Squatter' As the Ultimate Intruder', in *Ibid.*, 121–129, here: 121.
- 6 <http://wijzinhier.org/over-het-asielgat/illegaal-uitgeprocedeerd-ongedocumenteerd-gelukszoekers-en-asielzoekers/>
- 7 Pierpaolo Mudu and Sutapa Chattopadhyay, 'Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy: Conclusions', in *Ibid.*, 285–287, here: 285.
- 8 Dadusc, 'Squatting', 278.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 282.
- 10 <http://wijzinhier.org/tijdslijn/geschiedenis-van-wij-zijn-hier/>
- 11 <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/waarom-is-amsterdam-tegen-de-nieuwe-kraakwet-en-is-dat-terecht~b6cdere5/>
- 12 <https://onderzoek.amsterdam.nl/artikel/weer-minder-kans-op-betaalbare-woning-in-regio-amsterdam>
- 13 <http://archis.org/volume/smooth-city-is-the-new-urban/>
- 14 <http://wijzinhier.org/tijdslijn/geschiedenis-van-wij-zijn-hier/>
- 15 <https://framerframed.nl/dossier/hoe-collectief-we-sell-reality-licht-schijnt-op-europas-falende-vluchtelingenbeleid/>
- 16 <https://permanentverblijf.org/>
- 17 Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 'Migration', 286.

b. Carrot

We Are Here

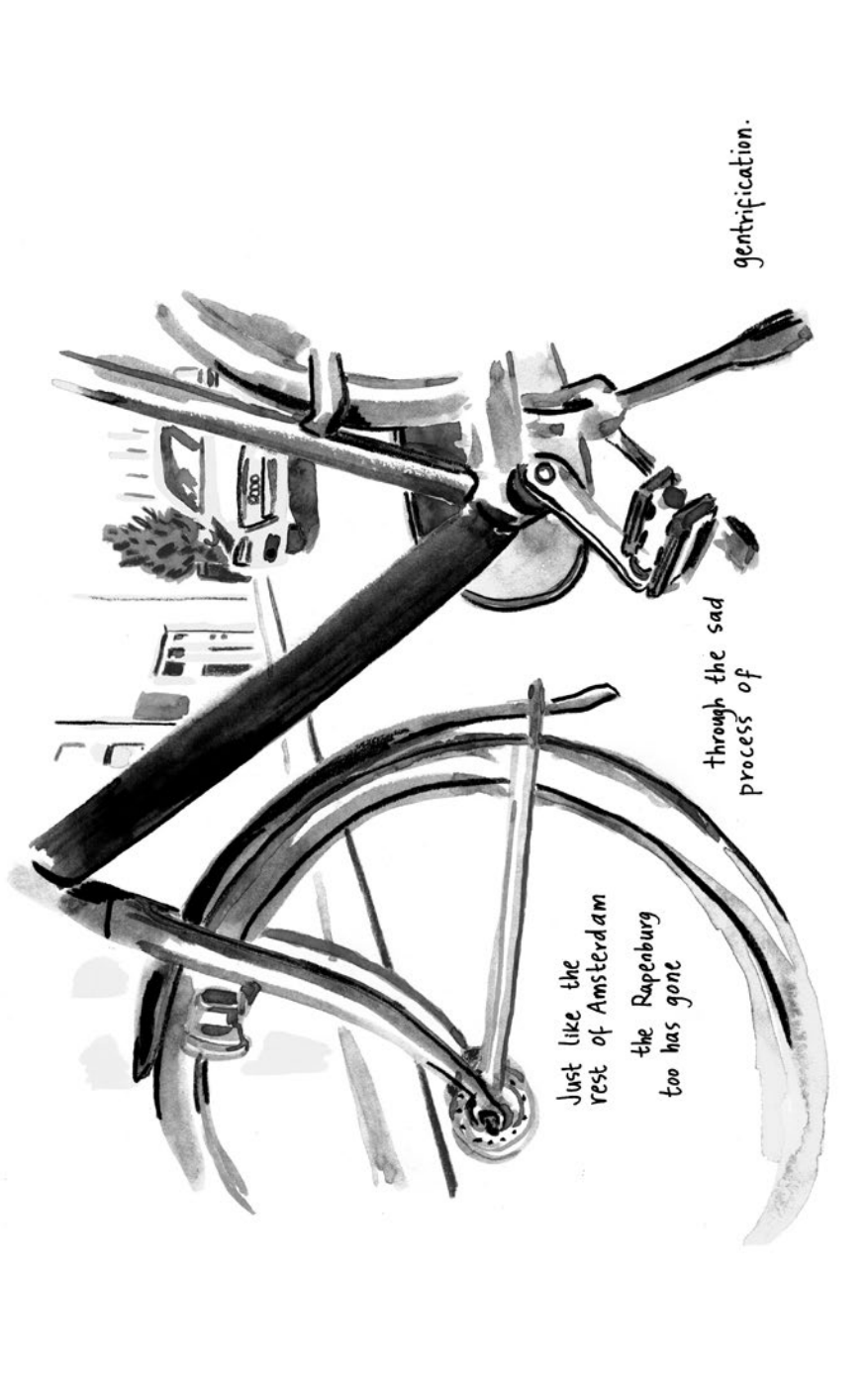
Rapenburg 31-33





A quiet street hiding in the middle of the overcrowded center of Amsterdam.

A footstep away from the commercial hub yet somehow spared of its' continuous noise and movement.



Just like the
rest of Amsterdam
the Rapenburg
too has gone

through the sad
process of

gentrification.

From a ship workers
domicile in the 17th century

to a predominantly Jewish
area between the
18th and 20th
Centuries,

To a socially engaged neighbourhood
in the wild 1980's



A white
middle class
residential
street

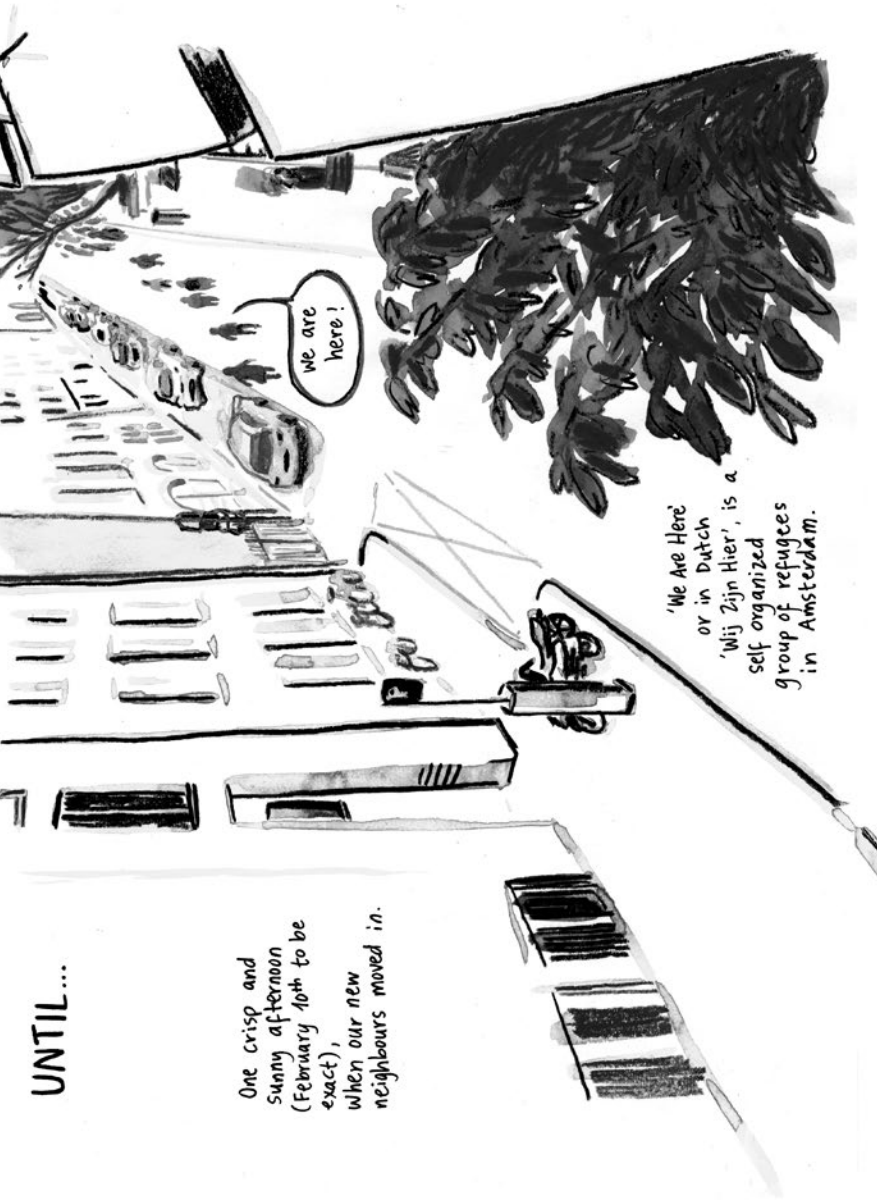


with the diversity
and excitement

of vanilla low-fat soy ice cream.

UNTIL...

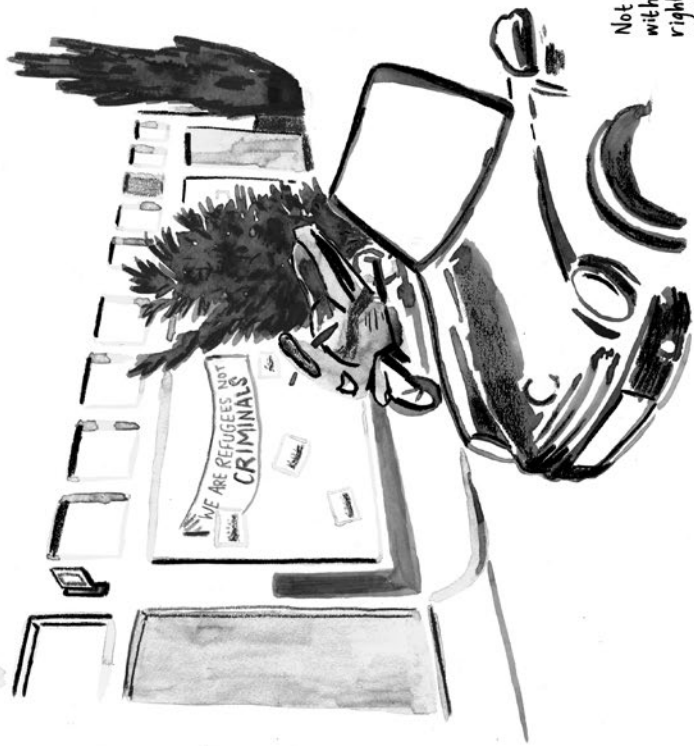
One crisp and sunny afternoon (February 10th to be exact), when our new neighbours moved in.



'We Are Here' or in Dutch 'Wij Zijn Hier', is a self organized group of refugees in Amsterdam.

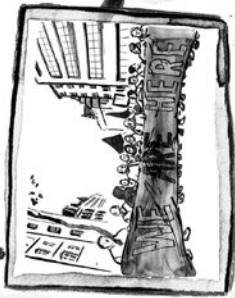
For the past six
years they have
been fighting for
their right

to lead a normal
life.



Not being provided
with housing or a
right to work this
group is forced
to live on the
Street.

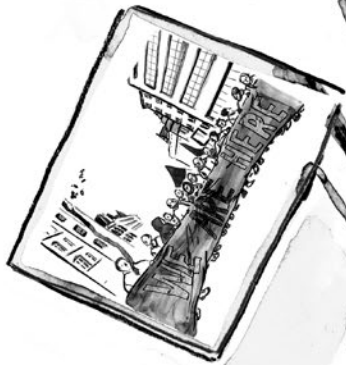
WE ARE REF CRIMIN



In 2012 the group decided to take matters into their own hands and make their situation, and themselves,

VISIBLE
to Dutch society.

They stopped hiding and started to demand attention with the hope that it would lead to a change in their lives and futures.





For years the group organized

ACTIONS

DEMONSTRATIONS

BENEFITS

OPEN DAYS

and LECTURES



They managed to create some pressure and get the attention of the local government.

But alas, the minimal support reluctantly provided by the authorities was insufficient and unsuitable.



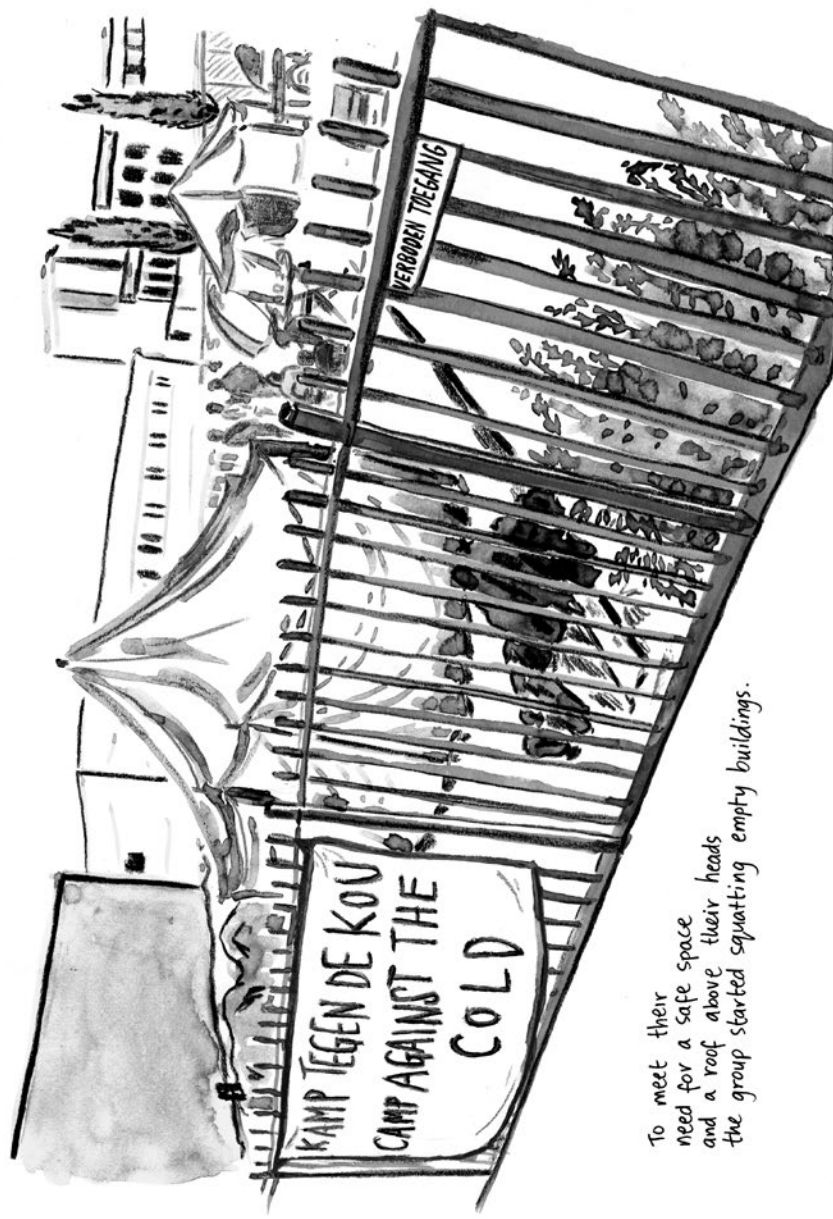
FOR
REFUGEES



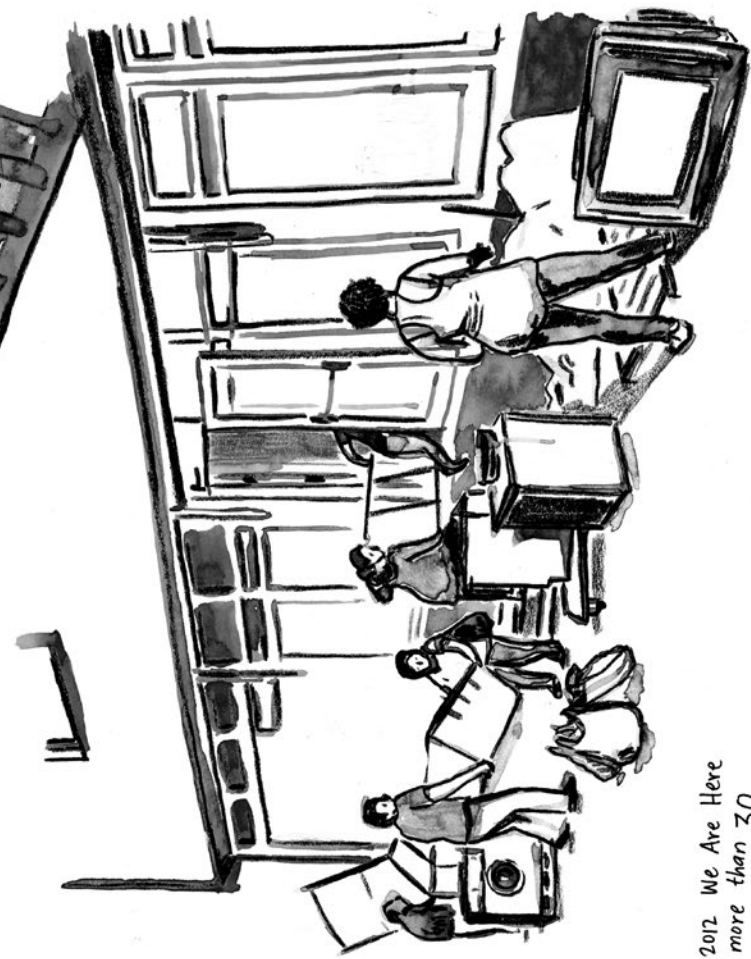
And so
We Are Here
continue to face
an unstable,

harsh,

and precarious existence
until this day.



To meet their need for a safe space and a roof above their heads the group started squatting empty buildings.



Since 2012 We Are Here
squatted more than 30
different houses in Amsterdam.

And got evicted from each and every one.



What other choice do they have but to keep trying?

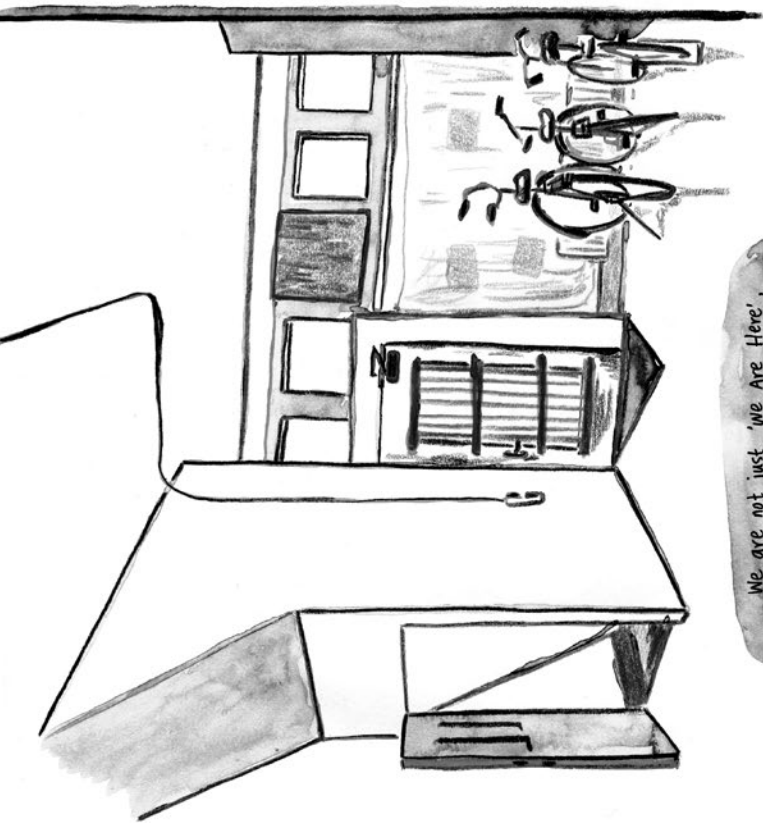
The ground floor of
Rapenburg 31-33
was previously used
by young creatives
as an office space.



After the renters left
the space was left empty and
untenanted for almost six months.

And so We Are Here
squatted it

making it their
temporary home.

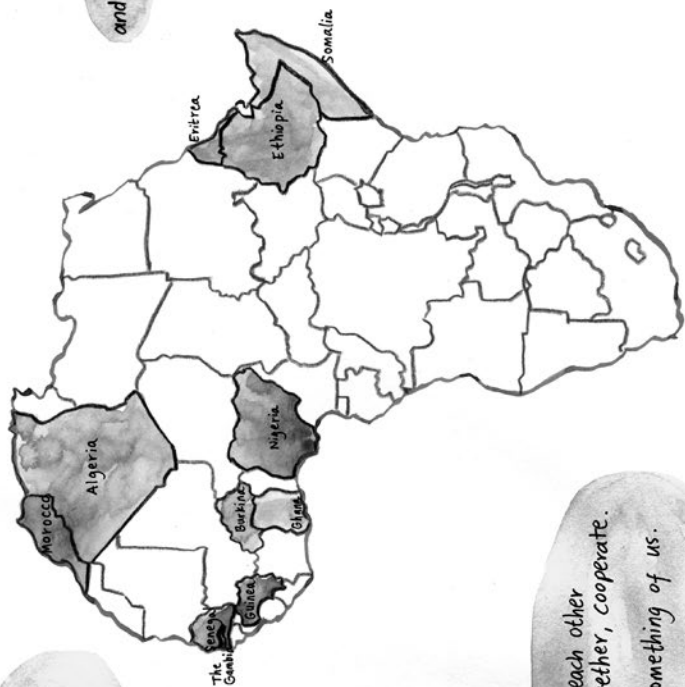


We are not just 'We Are Here',
we are the Unity Group!



During the years the larger We Are Here group slowly split into smaller entities, often based on culture or country of origin.

You see,
we have people
from all different
countries:



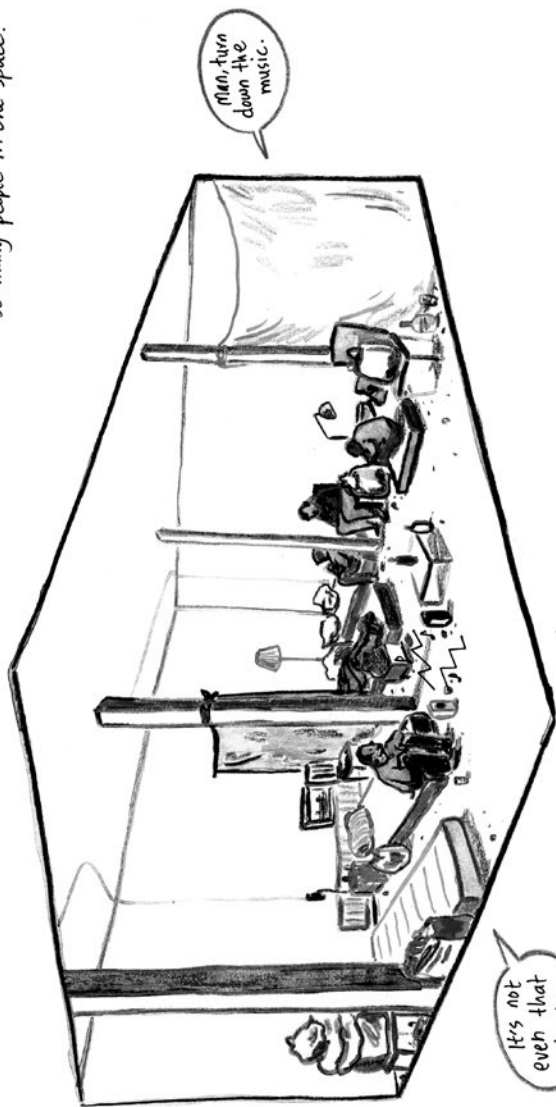
and one Korean!

We respect each other
and work together, cooperate.

All forty - something of us.

At least we try...

It's not always easy getting along,
So many people in one space.



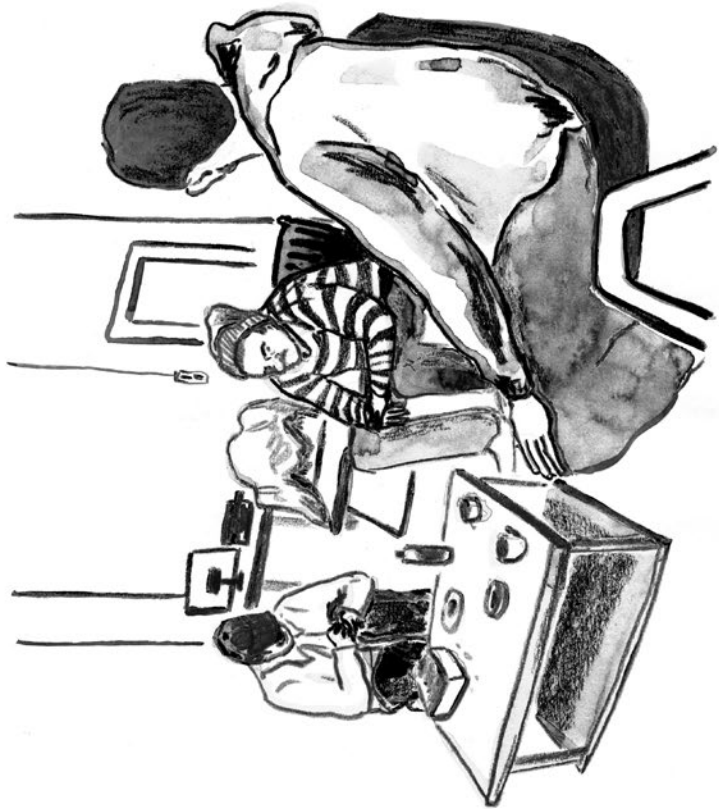
Man, turn down the music.

It's not even that loud!

Just do it man, come on!

People who have been through more than we here in Western Europe could imagine.

People who are facing a reality which gives them little to no prospect.



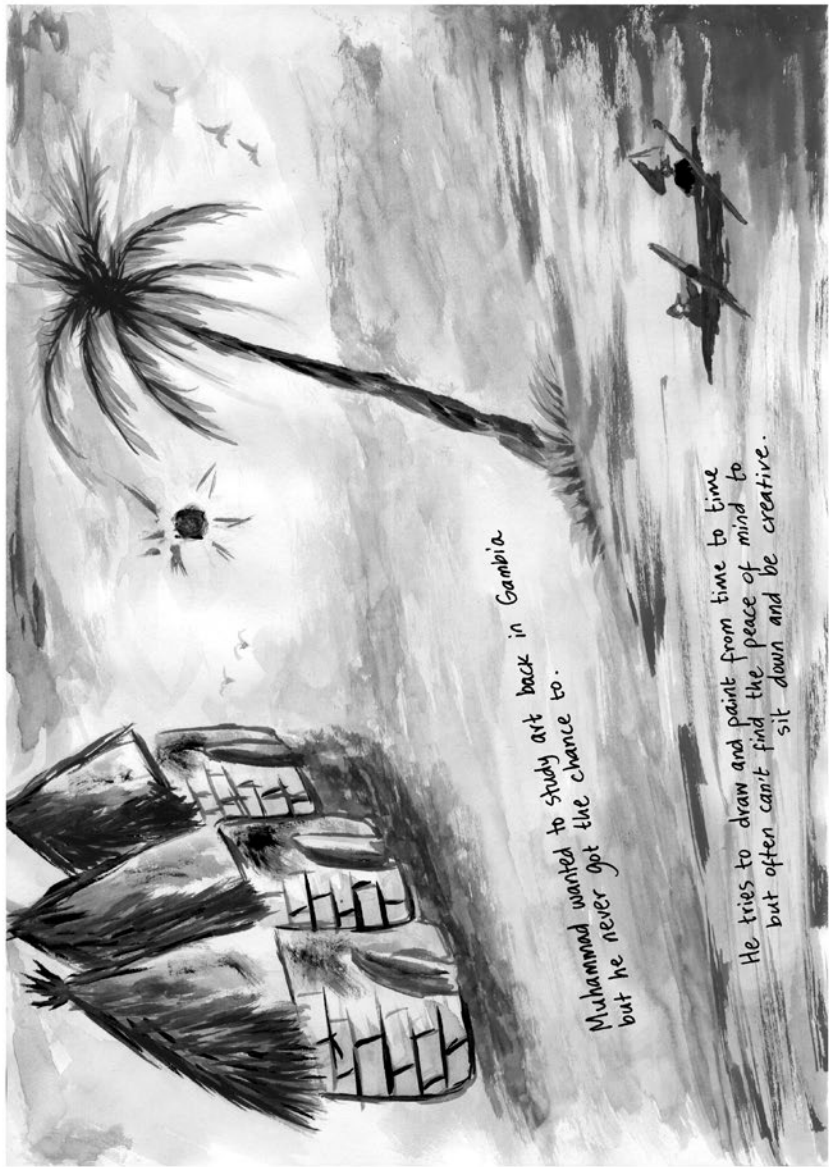
People like Muhammad.

26 years old,
speaks four languages,

and has the most
optimistic smile I have
seen in years.

(He doesn't think so,
but I do.)

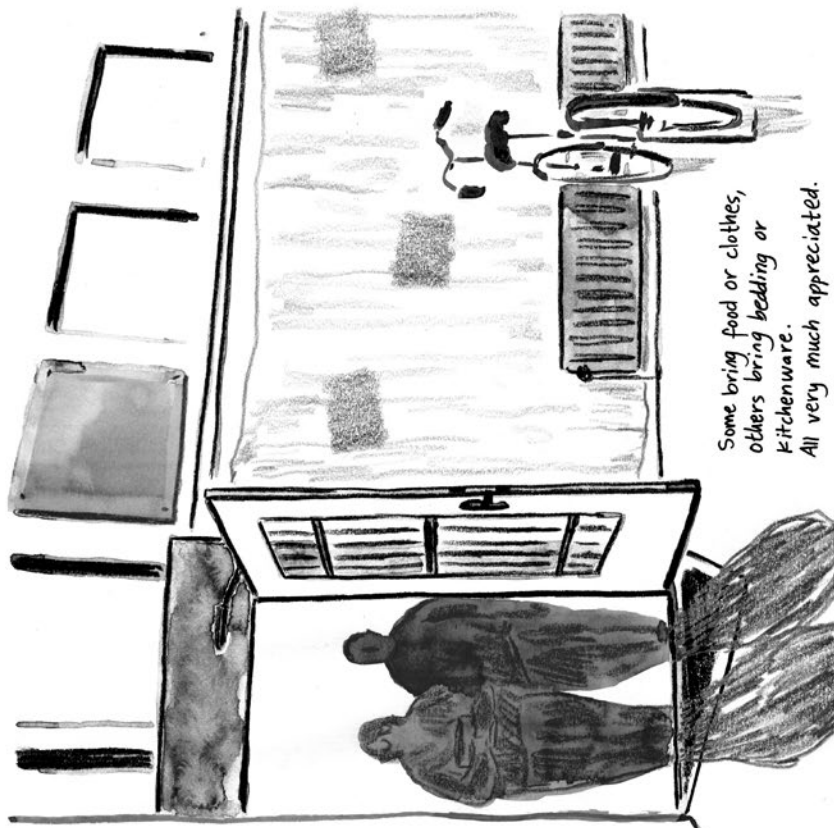




Gambia

Muhammad wanted to study art but he never got the chance to.

He tries to draw and paint from time to time but often can't find the peace of mind to sit down and be creative.

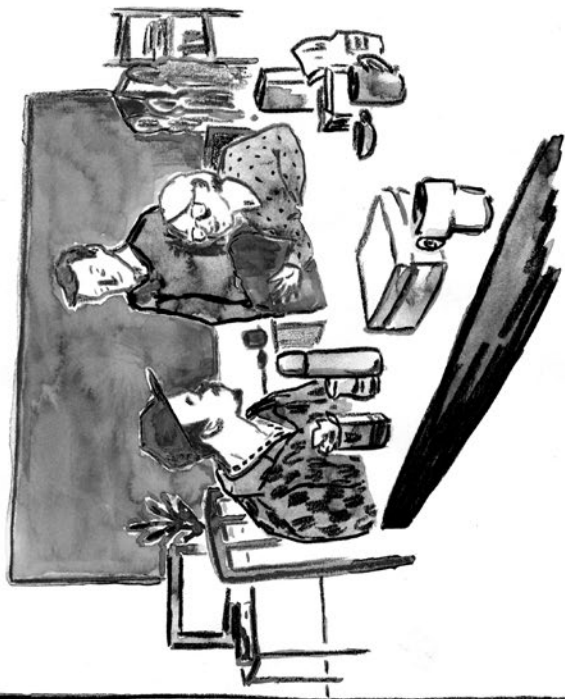


The Unity Group
is quite happy at
the Rapenburg.

Apparently the
neighbours are
welcoming and
supportive.


Some bring food or clothes,
others bring bedding or
kitchenware.
All very much appreciated.

Yet the most important thing they bring is



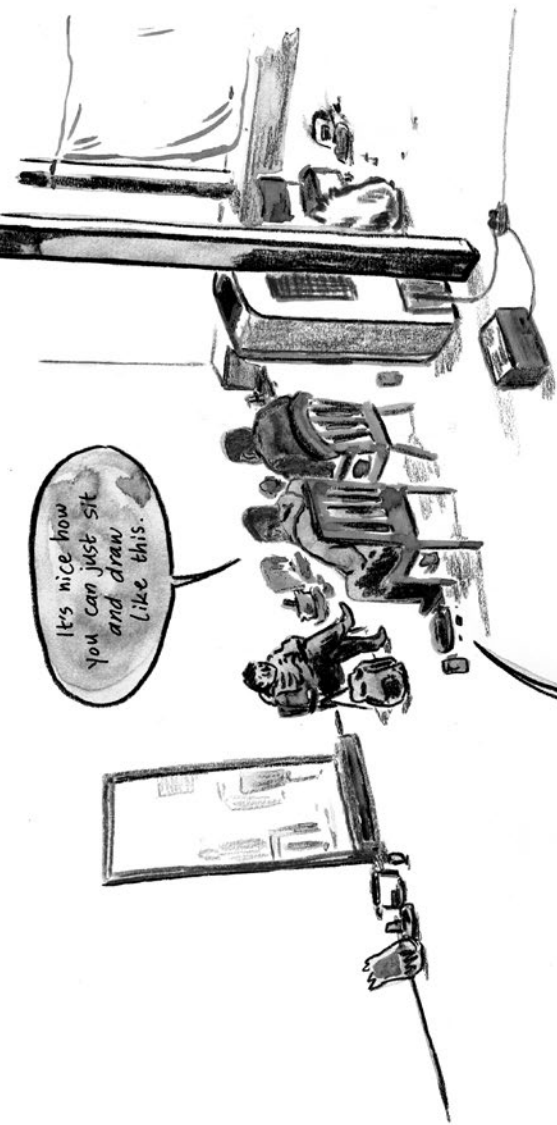
Contact.

Unfortunately the owner of the building
and the local government are nothing but
welcoming or supportive.



We just received the
letter telling us that
we are getting evicted.

And so nights on the street
become a looming threat
once again.



It's nice how
you can just sit
and draw
like this.

It's good to see someone
following their dreams
instead of...
It's just good to see.

But you know,
Sometimes dreams
are like jokes.

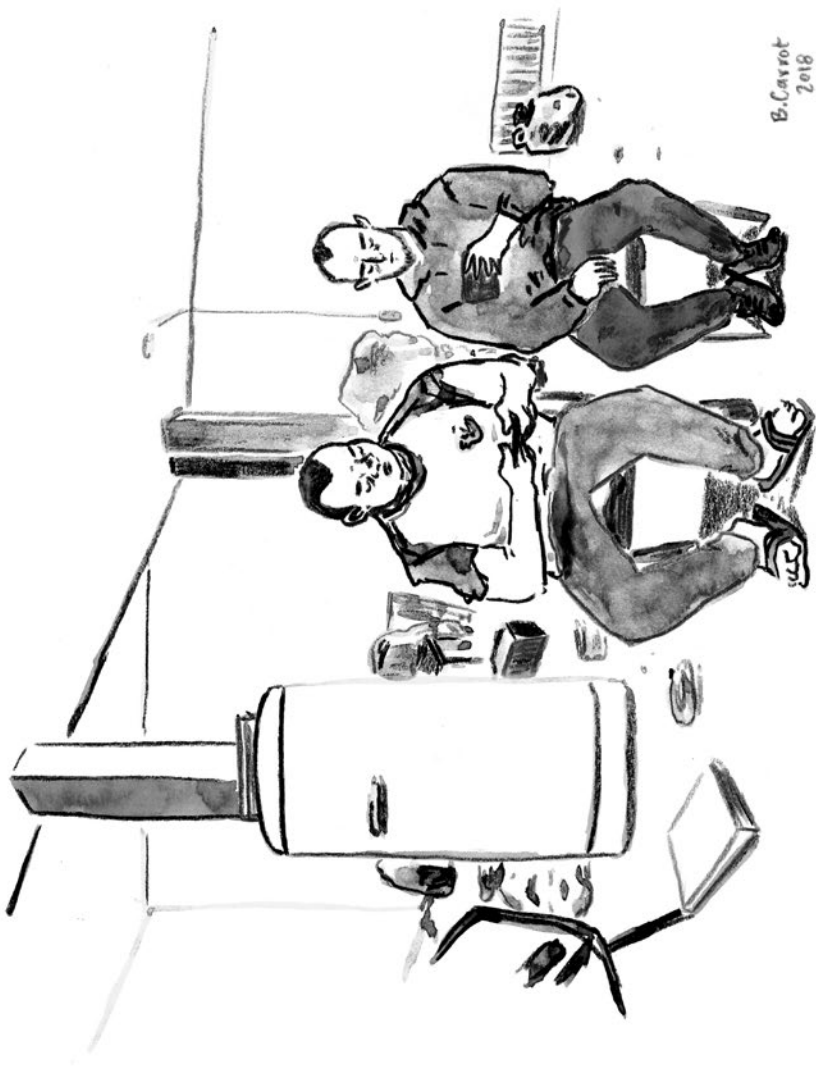
Why do you
say that?



They are like jokes,
dreams.

You can have a dream
but some things you
have to give up and
see what life
gives you.

B. Carrot
2018



Thanks to the Unity Group for letting me
tell their story,
and to Muhammad for his contribution.

For more information about We Are Here: wijzijnhier.org

B.Carrot 2018



Amsterdam Dream Machine: waste collection and the ecstasy of solidarity at ADM *Harriët Bergman*

ADM was squatted in 1997. A space full of art, community, strange welded sculptures, and lush nature in its hundreds of colours. This fringe of the city offered more breathing room for nature and people alike than any “creative hub” thought up by top-down administrators ever could. A plot of land owned by property thug Bertus Lüske in the port of Amsterdam was transformed into a free space that allowed many to discover for the first time the wonder of a life lived differently. That original location was cleared out on the 7th of January 2019. The whole place was immediately torn down. The new home of ADM’s inhabitants is in Amsterdam-Noord. From the ferry at Amsterdam Central Station, it is still a serious trek up. Indeed, the Slibvelden are closer than the previous location in the Western Harbour, but – as it always was – the trek is worth it. This was more than ever the case when the Amsterdamse Droogdok Maatschappij celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, in October 2022.

In these last 25 years, thousands of people have visited the two ADM locations. Hundreds have lived there, while thousands contributed to the creation of a community and supported festivals and events. For a long time ADM (known as The Amsterdam DIY Society, Amsterdamse Doe-Het-Zelf Maatschappij, Amsterdamse Droogdok Maatschappij, Amsterdam Dream Machine) was a distant place for me. Too far to cycle, too few familiar faces, no idea what I could expect there. These thoughts would run

through my mind when I was invited to swing by. Luckily that changed. I am just one of the many people who were touched by ADM, and by no means the most appropriate representative of that experience. And yet I want to write about the transformative experience of emptying out homemade eco-toilets, ploughing through bin bags, and endless dancing. About the daring and the communal, the trying and failing and failing again differently, all while making friends and laughing and feeling alive. To me, that is ADM. In that spirit, here is an attempt, my attempt, for others to paint in a different colour or to put to a beat: a story and an attempt to give meaning, so that others can keep on reinventing the experiment again and again. I initiate something, someone else builds on it, and together we get to somewhere new: this lies at the heart of ADM.

AN ALTERNATIVE WITHIN ARM'S REACH

Looking for worlds to win, people in my academic environment tend to study successful practices in distant pasts or distant lands. Erecting pedestals provides a safe distance. Academics draw hope from the struggle of the Zapatistas in Chiapas or the Kurds in Rojava. Or sure, we'll yank the Paris Commune out of oblivion yet again. Dutch intellectuals may take inspiration from the Maagdenhuis occupation of 1969, but never the occupations of 2015, or 2005, or any of those that came before, nor the occupations by End Fossil: Occupy happening now. Because those failed. They were not successful enough. But most of all, I suspect, it is because they were too tangible, too close. I rarely see engagement from those around me with concrete, existing initiatives – and I used to be just the same.

A squat or an action within reach by bicycle demands self-reflection, commitment and maybe even getting your hands dirty. Literally, in the case of ADM. In the vegetable

garden, with a welding torch, in a waste bin looking for glass and cans to recycle. But also figuratively, by working together with people you do not always agree with, people with different backgrounds and different vocabularies. ADM challenged my ideas of social change and how society should be organised.

EXPERIENCE: CLEARING OUT RUBBISH BINS AT
THE AMSTERDAM DREAM MACHINE

My first time at ADM was a few years ago, towards the end of summer. A friend and I hopped on our bikes and made the trek out there. The plan was to join the “garbage crew” at an anarchist circus festival together with two homeless friends of ours. We decided to go after meeting two crew members at a social space – a squat under a bridge – which had recently been evicted. They would tend the bar and take on the task of collecting empty beer bottles at the end of an event. The four of us wanted to do the same at this festival. Samantha, who lived at ADM, had developed an elaborate system for separating waste into cans, glass and general waste, in combination with doing sweeps across the grounds in which we theatrically collected the trash left behind by visitors. Ours was also the glorious task of rummaging through bin bags for cans and glass. We slept in tents that we brought ourselves, were served delicious meals and got a handful of tokens to get drinks. The whole operation was conducted in glittery party outfits.

After having worked a few shifts in the garbage crew, I read philosopher Jules Evans’ *The Art of Losing Control: A Philosopher’s Search for Ecstatic Experience*.¹ Supporting and contributing to an event, collectively taking responsibility for a space, is an experience that gives the participant purpose and fulfilment. Moreover, Evans writes, music is for many people an excellent method of emotional

regulation. He explains how collective ecstasy contributes to forming bonds with others, forging solidarity and a sense of belonging. What appears most of all through his search for ecstasy is how being absorbed into something bigger than yourself, feeling a connection to others, is an essential part of this form of happiness.

Evans's insights are similar to those of Lynne Segal in her book *Radical Happiness*.² Segal is a socialist-feminist academic and activist. In her book, she reflects on her experiences in the women's movement. She argues that we need to improve on the art of "radical happiness", and learn to put it into practice more effectively. Not in the sense of a preoccupation with self-care and personal wellbeing but as a transformative collective experience of joy. The retreating welfare state is leaving gaps that could be filled by alternative forms of living together and caring for each other. As somewhat of an outsider, it seems to me that ADM has mastered that art. Inhabitants and visitors alike do what they can and support each other – and if there's friction, it only goes to show that the people involved care about what they are doing and about each other. In an article from 2019 about the eviction, ADM is portrayed as a "self-chosen family", a place "that fostered the investigation of what it means to be human, and where spontaneity ruled supreme."³

THE LOST FREE STATE

We were promised a "super left" coalition when the political parties GroenLinks, PvdA, D66 and SP joined forces in the Amsterdam municipality in 2018: "a new spring and a new sound".⁴

The eviction of ADM was the antithesis of the care that its inhabitants had for one another – and certainly not leftist at all. It was the cold and indifferent destruction of

something that had taken years to build. Once everyone was removed from the terrain, everything was ruthlessly torn down. It's all shown in the documentary that local news station AT5 produced about ADM, "*The Lost Free State*" (*De verloren vrijstaat*). People were not even allowed to drive their mobile homes off the premises. As was the case for recent forest occupations – the Sterrebos in Limburg was cut down while occupiers were still up in the trees – the destruction had to be as quick as possible. Before a judge could still side with the occupiers or freethinkers, before people had a chance to come back, personal possessions, homes, everything that had blossomed here and was built up had to be destroyed immediately, along with hope itself. The Human Rights Commission of the UN has spoken out against the eviction of ADM on two occasions, to no avail.

I wept during the eviction. The broader leftist movement remained silent. Just like hopeful and inspiring initiatives, human rights violations are something to be searched for elsewhere. Not here, not right around the corner, not relevant to "us". Too far to bike, too busy, too much, not our struggle. Or perhaps too tangible, too close, too painful when it is smashed to pieces?

DANCING AND XTC

At the twenty-fifth anniversary of ADM, the mobile kitchen of Kollektief Rampenplan is cooking backstage, between the various mobile homes of the inhabitants. There's bread and spreads, soup in enormous pots, and people sitting at beerhall benches and fold-out tables. Tijdelijke Toon, one of my favourite poets, wanders about in a pink dip-dye sweater that matches the outgrown pink dye in his blond hair. "Saturday night live acid tekno with poetry!" he bellows. Despite me having dipped into waste bins multiple times today, he gives me a hug.

The term *acid communism*, coined by the late blogger and philosopher Mark Fisher, offers a good way to describe ADM. *Acid*, as an adjective, points to an attitude of improvised creativity, the belief that a different perspective on the world makes it possible to change the world. It is a liberation of consciousness from the oppressive idea that there is no alternative: LSD alters reality, and an LSD trip isn't always a positive experience. Similarly, acid communism isn't always utopian – it is the radical movement towards something different, something experimental. The term refers to the radical potential in psychedelic drugs, meditation, yoga and other mind-expanding practices, so long as these are embedded within a broader culture of questioning capitalism and political organising. Acid communism, to me, is the feeling of doing things collectively. But also the feeling of admiring how the world fits together and what people are capable of: welding, walking on stilts, making music, composting, cooking food, breathing fire.

MEANING: RUPTURES IN CAPITALISM

I recognise an escapist urge in the people around me. Buying a house or renting at a decent price seems impossible for my generation – an inhabitable planet already seems too much to ask. Dancing and intoxication, then, might seem like the best ways to while away our time. Is that what ADM is? Dancing and being intoxicated while the world burns? I argue that dancing is necessary, but the political value of ADM cannot be reduced to mere escapism. ADM is an autonomous zone, but also acts as a crowbar to break open local politics; an escape and safety-net from a destructive capitalist system; the real, visible practicing of an alternative to it.

Hakim Bey – the pseudonym of American anarchist Peter Lamborn Wilson – writes about the temporary

autonomous zone (TAZ): “As soon as the TAZ is named (represented, mediated), it must vanish, it *will* vanish, leaving behind it an empty husk, only to spring up again somewhere else, once again invisible because undefinable in terms of the Spectacle.” Bey’s concept of the autonomous zone is a perfect description of ADM, as a “microcosm of that ‘anarchist dream’ of a free culture”.⁵ Just like the German Fusion Festival or the many Teknivals – sound systems coming together for multi-day tekno festivals – the festivals of ADM were a way to provisionally experience what the struggle for equality and abundance may result in. Just like during blockades, occupations, and festivals, but continuously, for more than twenty years. This vision survives because ADM has placed itself outside of the system: no paid employees serving you a drink, controlling audio equipment, cleaning up your trash; only people who want to contribute to a community. The distinction between visitor and organiser, consumer and product, dissipates. It’s the type of experience you construct collaboratively. An autonomously created and maintained free space, full of cultural innovation and care. A place that’s there for you, even if you’re addicted, even if you’re poor, even if you’re fishing remains of a pizza out of the rubbish bin, and even if you are young, naive and analytical.

It is 2022 and I am sitting by the campfire at ADM. It’s this community’s twenty-fifth anniversary. The previous location in the Western Harbour has already been lost. Instead, we are in Amsterdam-Noord, on the Slibvelden, where the municipality has granted another temporary permit to build something new. Someone tells me he quit drugs: he wants to feel something again. Techniques of self-transformation, from drugs to mindfulness, can easily morph into means of distraction. Distraction which makes exploitation and alienation bearable. While the party rages at ADM, partying is no simple escapism for this man.

As we stare into the campfire, we talk about the importance of making alternative modes for the organisation of society tangible and real. Political awareness entails more than the broadcasting of information about oppression. It involves creating space for a feeling of connectedness, of being alive, of being powerful enough to combat that oppression, both personally and collectively. You don't have to be under the influence to feel happy and connected to something bigger.

ADM constitutes a necessary contribution to building social movements, creating networks, and demonstrating alternatives. In concrete terms, ADM achieves this by eroding or undermining oppressive structures, as opposed to toppling, escaping or taming them. Prefigurative politics is about constructing in the here-and-now the type of world we want to live in. It means starting from where we are, instead of waiting until we have enough political power to push through change from above. To me, that world is one with music, dancing, welded-together pieces of art, paintings, crazy outfits, glitter, panther prints, endless screen prints of VIVA ADM on second-hand T-shirts. Discovering a new kind of joy in the collective. ADM is not an attempt to push parliamentary politics to the left – though it certainly has the potential to do so, and the people there would undoubtedly benefit from a more leftist parliamentary politics. In fact, everyone with respect for different forms of life on earth would benefit from a leftward push and practically anyone can contribute something politically. But the way in which ADM opposes itself to capitalism and the state does not seem to be the main purpose of this diverse communal living-space. It forms a rupture in the stifling capitalist dogma which posits that there are no alternatives. The more people come to occupy that rupture, the wider it grows.

WRECKING BALLS

The AT5 documentary does a good job of portraying the liberatory potential of experiencing what is possible outside of strictly capitalistic ways of coming together: the potential of feeling what is possible, of feeling how the world could be. A tightrope-walker with the water, the boats, the setting sun setting behind them. A crowd of friends and vague acquaintances standing on the stage showing how much more there is to life than work – there is music, there is dancing, there is ecstasy. My father, my social democrat pops, years before he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, is here at his first visit to a place like this, and he moves to the music of Trikosis, anarchist folkpunk played by people in glitter outfits, dancing in a tent on squatted grounds, an old white man, sober, a boomer, immersed in the music. Alongside him vegans, queers, punks, people of all ages and backgrounds, dancing with him as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Twelve hours later, some of them will still be dancing, as I complete yet another round with the garbage crew. My parents will have gone home by then.

Showing how things could be is a form of movement-building and propaganda. That too is the meaning of ADM. While some draw their theory from leftist zines, or Twitter or lectures, others draw from praxis. We can read about the meaning of subculture or the importance of squatting. We can also step into a space, naive and without political analysis, and experience what it feels like to not be treated as a consumer. To see what it does to people when they come together to build something, instead of being ordered around from above. To be offered a meal when you have no money, and to see someone else donating because they have enough to share. Spaces like ADM make people susceptible to anti-authoritarian politics,

including those who aren't reached by texts and podcasts and protests. A good rave attracts people who don't come to the reading group. You can read about the commons; we can pit Elinor Ostrom against Garret Harding and have endless discussions and send out furious tweets. We could also sow together and reap together. Claiming a space is a means, not an end. As a sanctuary, such a space can soften the hardest blows dealt by neoliberal policies. As a physical place, it offers space for various groups to come together. As a cultural breeding ground, it demonstrates to local politics the importance of the commons for innovation and emancipation. As a festival, it allows people to experience how the world could be.

In 2023, ADM is still here. And it will be here for decades to come, in whatever form it might take along the way. Just as now, it will still be a long bike ride away, there will still be people of all stripes walking around, and ever-changing ADM will be different from the way I have described it here. In the meantime, the earth is heating up, the rich are getting richer, the consequences of neoliberal policies are being felt ever more viciously, and the cops keep bringing down their batons. As soon as the temporary autonomous zone is described, its meaning slips away. I can spread information about it, present arguments for it, and create awareness of it. But we should never try to capture it. It can only be shaped collectively. Another world is possible – listen carefully, and you can already hear the beat.

NOTES

- 1 The opening words to the epic poem *May* by Dutch socialist poet Herman Gorter. This line is one of the most quoted lines of poetry in the Netherlands, often used to announce some perceived abrupt change or transformation. [Translator's note]
- 2 Jules Evans, *The Art of Losing Control: a Philosopher's Search for Ecstatic Experience* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017).
- 3 Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (London / New York: Verso, 2017).
- 4 Marten en Kamiel, *Chidda vs. ADM: hoe vastgoedsspeculanten levens vernietigen*, <https://defusie.net/chidda-vs-adm-hoe-vastgoedsspeculanten-levens-vernietigen/>
- 5 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 99.

The right to the city centre: squatting in the Nieuwmarkt 1968–1975

Billie Nuchelmans

In *The Production of Space*, French philosopher and urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre writes about the false freedom that marks the work of architects and urban planners, and why it is vain hope for people with revolutionary ideas about architecture and urban planning to rely on such “experts”. According to Lefebvre, it is “the supreme illusion” to believe that architects are able to transcend the power dynamics inherent in their work. Ultimately, architects and urban planners will always be forced to distort their ideas in conformity with top-down directives.¹

Yet, the current urban planning vision of the “experts” in Amsterdam seems to have nothing but our best interests at heart. The city is internationally renowned as a progressive beacon of bikeways and front gardens. The current housing crisis is being addressed with massive new construction projects, claiming to create liveable, diverse neighbourhoods, whose architecture eagerly references the “workers’ palaces” of the Amsterdam School. The urban planning vision underlying this emerged out of the tumultuous years of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, with a significant role played by the squatting movement. A notable struggle often cited as a crucial turning point took place in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood. There, a coalition of local residents, heritage organisations, architects, and the emerging squatting movement succeeded in thwarting top-down large-scale renewal plans, instead realising a neighbourhood much more in line with the wishes of its residents.

But the results of that struggle, despite its role as the origin myth of Amsterdam's current urban planning doctrine, are now coming under pressure for entirely new reasons. In this context, it is worthwhile to critically reflect on how the struggle for the Nieuwmarkt is thought to have changed Amsterdam's urban planning, on the coalition that took on the Amsterdam municipality, and on the most radical element of that coalition: the emerging squatting movement.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AMSTERDAM

The run-up to the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood conflict began in the fifties and sixties. At this time, to combat post-war housing shortages, large suburban areas were being built outside the existing city. In the city centre, on the other hand, in the context of so-called "urban renewal", residential and small-scale business spaces had to make way for modern office and retail spaces and more expansive infrastructure. This renewal could only be achieved through large-scale demolition. One of the neighbourhoods for which a sanitation plan was developed was the Nieuwmarkt. The neighbourhood had been severely damaged during the war. Many Jewish residents were deported and murdered, and during the famine of the winter of 1944/45 many of the vacant homes they left behind were stripped of any building material that could be used as fuel. According to the 1953 reconstruction plan for the neighbourhood, a large part of the existing buildings would have to be demolished to make way for a massive thoroughfare. The plan projected offices along this road – for housing, the new suburbs were deemed a better fit.

The first resistance to the municipal plans mainly came from heritage associations, but during the sixties, leftist

movements began to express criticism as well. In 1966, an “anonymous element from the subversive Amsterdam provotariat” in the magazine *Provo* railed against the “great hollow space” and the “amorphous concrete desert” that would result from urban renewal within the old city centre.² Though the newly planned expansion areas might consist primarily of social housing, leftist groups claimed the existing city centre too. The vacancy there, amid ongoing housing shortages, was unacceptable to them. Moreover, people should have the opportunity to live wherever they want. Groups like *provo* also saw the densely built old city centres as places where class consciousness and solidarity could arise, providing the possibility for autonomous resistance and spontaneous action.

This criticism in the Amsterdam context aligned with a growing global reaction to post-war modernist urban planning. In her influential 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, American-Canadian author Jane Jacobs attacks the large renewal projects undertaken by modernist urban planners. She advocates for a return to a more traditional, small-scale approach, which she sees as essential for ensuring social cohesion, safety, and economic growth. More outspokenly leftist and less focused on traditionalism is the work of Henri Lefebvre, who in 1967 in *The Right to the City* argues that the concept of “the right to the city” often finds its expression in “the surprising detours of nostalgia and tourism” and “the return to the heart of the traditional city”. However, this right only gains a truly emancipatory meaning if it entails more than “a simple visiting right or a return to traditional cities”; it must be nothing less than “a transformed and renewed right to urban life”.³

In Amsterdam, these developments led to the emergence of the squatting movement at the end of the sixties, which went on to become one of the most active and

visible parts of the coalition fighting for the “right to the city”. Occupying a vacant house without the owner’s permission had been happening for much longer – but in this period, the practice took on an increasingly pronounced political character, with squatting becoming a conscious method of action. Occupying vacant buildings was no longer seen as just a way to find shelter clandestinely, but also as a form of protest and a tool to denounce vacancy and demolition during a great housing shortage that resulted from policy choices.

THE SQUATTING OF THE NIEUWMARKT

Initially, the plans for the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood were not carried out with much urgency. However, momentum picked up in 1968 when it was decided that the Amsterdam metro would run right through the Nieuwmarkt. Tunnel sections would be assembled above ground and then sunk on-site. The use of this method meant that all buildings above the prospective metro tunnel would have to be demolished. For the emerging squatting movement, the neighbourhood immediately became a key target, and in late 1968, after several earlier squatting actions in other parts of the city, a group of students, former provos, and heritage association members decided to squat a building in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood. In their enthusiasm, however, the somewhat inexperienced squatters forgot to set up the tables, chairs, and beds necessary to establish *huisvrede* [“house peace”, a legal protection against eviction without court order] and were promptly evicted.

To avoid such mistakes in the future, “Woningburo de Kraker” [The Squatters’ Housing Agency] was established a few months later. This organisation published a squatting manual, explaining the importance of house peace, among other recommendations, such as the tip to



Demolition on Zwanenburgwal, 1968. Photo: J.M. Arsath Ro'is (Collection Stadsarchief Amsterdam)

squat in the evening, “for example, during a popular TV programme”, or the advice to invite neighbours for a cup of coffee as soon as possible after a successful squat, to avoid secrecy.⁴ Not long after, the so-called “Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt” decided to apply the lessons from this manual in an organised and planned manner by squatting and refurbishing as many vacant Nieuwmarkt homes as possible.

Soon after these first organisational steps, the squatting movement in the Nieuwmarkt began to grow. This was due not only to the growing number of empty houses in the area, but also to several important victories. For example, squatting enjoyed better legal protection after 1971, thanks to the Nijmegen Squatters’ ruling, which clarified house peace, among other things. Local victories also strengthened the squatters’ position. For instance, after the Amsterdam municipality cut off electricity to a number of squatted buildings in the winter of 1972, squatters immediately occupied the Municipal Energy Company, calling on workers to show solidarity by no longer

cooperating in cutting off power to squats. Just a few days later, the municipality caved in and announced that all squats in Amsterdam could from then on be connected to gas, water, and electricity.

According to statistics kept by the Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt itself, six years after the first unsuccessful squatting attempt no fewer than 260 people were living in squatted homes in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood. To facilitate squatting on a larger scale, a substantial organisation was set up. There was a central fund to finance actions and refurbish buildings. A printing press put out manuals, posters, and pamphlets, and a pirate radio station started broadcasting. To avoid being wire-tapped by the police, squatters laid their own telephone cables over the roofs. Much energy was also invested in the relationships with remaining non-squatting residents. Besides the formation of joint consultation bodies, for example, squatters went all-out in organising a festive neighbourhood day. The collaboration that emerged with Wijkcentrum d'Oude Stadt, an association of critical residents, also proved important. While on the one hand squatters would attend meetings at the Wijkcentrum, on the other some of the more radical residents participated in activities of the Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt. Together, the two organisations waged a coordinated two-front struggle against the municipality. The Wijkcentrum mainly bombarded institutions with angry letters and procedural complaints, while the Aktiegroep involved itself in actions of a more illicit character.

Such actions were plentiful. Opponents were often pressured using fairly intimidating tactics. Squatters would break into closed meetings, "evict" the workshop of a contractor involved in demolitions in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood, and visit municipal officials at home to "personally point out the incorrectness of their work". The mansion of transport minister Westerterp was plastered

over with posters. When the minister attempted to intervene, he got a splash of wallpaper paste in his face.⁵

The actions of the squatting movement succeeded in significantly delaying the demolition plans for the Nieuwmarkt. Yet despite all this resistance, the construction of the metro and the accompanying demolition took place regardless. In 1975, the decision was finally made to extend the metro line, which already ran to Waterlooplein, all the way to Central Station. At that point however, the action groups had gained so much momentum that even large-scale demolition would not mean the end of their vision for the neighbourhood. When the municipality definitively decided to construct the metro line through the Nieuwmarkt, it was clear already that the development of the demolished neighbourhood would not proceed according to the plans presented in the fifties.

THE ALTERNATIVE

The municipality had made its first concession already in 1969, when the decision was made to allow three architects to rework the existing requirements plan. One of these three was Aldo van Eyck. Van Eyck was, at that point, an established name in Dutch architecture as well as an outspoken voice in public debates about architecture and urban planning, who had also spoken positively about the provo movement in previous years. In 1965, he hired as his assistant Theo Bosch, a carpenter and furniture maker by trade, who was studying at the Academy of Architecture in the evenings. Together, they set out to work on a new urban plan for the neighbourhood.

In October 1970, three alternative plans were presented. Van Eyck did not miss the opportunity to loudly express his dissatisfaction with the plan of requirements imposed by the municipality, suggesting, among other things,

to – “if you’re going to make breakthroughs anyway” – just make a large hole in the monumental Zuiderkerk church and let traffic drive right through it. Concretely, van Eyck and Bosch proposed splitting the planned thoroughfare into two narrower streets, while preserving as much of the existing urban fabric as possible. Neighbourhood residents and action groups were positive about the van Eyck and Bosch plan. Supported by this response the architects set up a shadow project trying to refute the conditions set by the municipality, among other things through conversations with residents and a traffic study of the Amsterdam city centre.

More than the presented plan, it was this collaboration with residents especially that made the initial reworking of the existing plan of requirements grow into many people’s preferred alternative to the municipality’s plans. The municipality, under increasing pressure from protests and actions by the squatting movement, was forced into a series of concessions. The planned upscaling was gradually dialled back. The municipality also abandoned its earlier intentions when, in 1973 – twenty years after the presentation of the original reconstruction plan – the projected office buildings were cancelled, and the decision was made for the area to retain its residential function. A year later, the task of overseeing the adapted plans was finally handed to the Van Eyck & Bosch firm.

Van Eyck and Bosch not only teamed up with neighbourhood residents but also specifically with the squatting movement. For example, office employee Dik Tuijnman – who, like Theo Bosch, started his career as an architect after carpentry training – gave carpentry courses to squatters. And even when, in the run-up to the completion of the metro, the large evictions leading to the infamous Nieuwmarkt riots took place in March 1975, the architects sided with the squatters, who were determined



Riots in reaction to large-scale evictions, 1975. Protestors use parking meters to defend themselves against the police. Photo: ANEFO

to mount a last-ditch attempt in preventing the demolition of their homes. In the street, however, they would have a hard time standing up to the riot squad. To enable the movement of people and materials between different squatted buildings during the evictions, a bridge was constructed at a considerable height between two buildings on either side of the Rechtboomssloot canal. Even during this direct confrontation with the authorities, the architectural firm continued to support the squatting movement, and depending on who tells the story, the bridge over Rechtboomssloot was financed – or even designed – by the architectural firm Van Eyck & Bosch.

The construction of this bridge – which, due to the riot police's water cannons, ultimately offered little help – still captures the imagination. But perhaps more important than the direct support of the architectural firm to the squatters was the more indirect support that the squatting movement and other action groups in turn offered to van Eyck and Bosch. While the firm developed a concrete collaboration with the squatting movement, its attitude towards the municipality was marked by a surprisingly open hostility. Van Eyck and Bosch insisted, regardless of the contractual situation, that they considered the residents of the



The “Pentagon”, designed by Theo Bosch: social housing on the corner of Zwanenburgwal and Sint Antoniesbreestraat. Photo: Stadsarchief Amsterdam (Archief Dienst Ruimtelijke Ordening: foto’s afdeling B)

Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood to be their true beneficiary, not the municipality of Amsterdam. Bosch, in particular, took a strong stance against the municipality, saying that you always had to “watch out that you don’t get conned”.⁶ In negotiations, he consciously made use of the pressure exerted by the emerging squatting movement, among others, on the municipality. “I realised well”, Bosch would later say, “that Lammers [the councillor for urban development] was in a tight spot because there were all sorts of problems playing out within one week. I was invited [and] upon entering, he said: ‘Bosch, we have to come to an agreement.’ I said that was only possible by agreeing with me.”⁷ The broad coalition of activists, and the squatting movement in particular, had exerted so much constant pressure on the municipality that van Eyck and Bosch, from their position as architects, only had to give the final push.

The current Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood is the result. Generally, the old street pattern is restored. Buildings that

survived the demolition were refurbished, and the gaps in between filled up. The new construction realised under the supervision of van Eyck and Bosch was integrated into the old neighbourhood but also attempted to produce a new form of urbanism, with many semi-public transition zones between the streets and houses, and a strong emphasis on light, air, and public greenery influenced by modernism. Perhaps even more importantly, the trajectory of the metro in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood above ground is not characterised by offices, but by rental homes. For example, in the triangle between Sint Antoniesbreestraat, Rechtboomssloot, and Oudeschans, where vacancy and demolition once ran rampant, there are about a thousand homes as of 2022, of which no less than 68 per cent are rented out by housing associations.⁸ That percentage is well above the Amsterdam average of about 40 per cent and much higher than the average of 25 per cent in the Centrum district.⁹ This makes the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood one of the bastions of social housing in Amsterdam's city centre. It's not a coincidence that vacancy is also much lower than in large parts of the rest of the centre.¹⁰

GAINS AND LOSSES

Regarding the struggle for the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood, the conclusions drawn usually mainly relate to urban planning. The resistance to the municipality's plans, and especially the riots of March 1975, are seen as a turning point for urban planning in Amsterdam, where the centralised power of the Public Works Department was broken, and top-down, large-scale, modernist renewal was exchanged for more traditional small-scale mixed use.

These conclusions are losing their relevance today. Plans for wide motorways through the centre of

Amsterdam are a thing of the past – instead, the municipality has been trying to make the city centre car-free for years. Office construction no longer threatens the residential function of old neighbourhoods as it did in the post-war decades, and chances are slim that a developer will submit plans to demolish a block of houses in the middle of the Nieuwmarkt to make way for a brutalist office complex and three floors of parking. When it comes to the construction of new homes, the focus on suburban areas has shifted towards an emphasis on densification within the existing city. And while mayors or city councillors can perhaps occasionally still be pointed out as personifications of evil, Public Works certainly can't. Since the service was abolished in 1978, much of the power once concentrated within it has been transferred to smaller, impoverished government services and private parties.

Yet affordable housing, liveability, and social cohesion face more threats than ever, such as the selling off of social housing, gentrification and rising house prices, as well as cuts to local facilities, the squatting ban, the disappearance of free spaces, the commercialisation of public space, holiday rentals, and the transformation of retail space, which doesn't cater to neighbourhood residents, but mainly peddles junk to tourists. Meanwhile, the participation procedures that emerged in part from the confrontation in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood have been extensively formalised since the nineties. If that seems to be a democratic improvement at first glance, in reality it means that the participatory process is organised in such a way that it mostly benefits stakeholders experienced in bureaucratic procedures, thereby reproducing existing social inequalities.

A cynic who knows their Marx could say that the urban planning shift of the seventies produced its own gravediggers. We fought for the refurbishment of neglected

old houses and got gentrification. We advocated for small neighbourhood shops and got souvenir stores. This cynic would probably be partly right. Less fatalistically, it could be said that the protest movement of the seventies left behind little more than a superficial shell of urban planning, while the social principles that once belonged to it have been steadily eroded. The ideology of activists may still seem to point the way, but, while their actual organisational power was broken, it has given way to nostalgia for the traditional city, a new guise under which segregation and exploitation continue. "Urban strategy", wrote Henri Lefebvre in 1967, "cannot but depend on the presence and actions of the working class, the only one able to put an end to a segregation directed essentially against it. [...] Without it, integration has no meaning and disintegration will continue under the guise of nostalgia and integration."¹¹

Looking at the spatial and social history of Amsterdam at that level, the victory in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood appears more fleeting and local than is sometimes assumed. But this should not lead to defeatism, as this history remains a valuable source of inspiration and provides us with concrete tactical lessons. Squatting as it happened in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood has become virtually impossible today. Not only are demolition and vacancy in contemporary Amsterdam less visible and less concentrated in specific neighbourhoods; there is also the squatting ban of 2010, which dealt a huge blow to the squatting movement. This new situation means that while we cannot simply repeat the seventies, we can appreciate the ongoing importance of building networks, internal organisation and cooperation, mutual solidarity, and external alliances of that period.

Additionally, it is precisely the relativity of the victory in the Nieuwmarkt that shows how even in a time when

the squatting movement was clearly on the rise, gains and losses were deeply intertwined. The Nieuwmarkt riots of 1975 ended with the eviction and demolition of all squatted buildings in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood, but the lead-up to that defeat was a crucial factor in the emergence of the Amsterdam squatting movement, while the eventual reconstruction of the neighbourhood was an important concrete victory.

Perhaps equally important, finally, is acknowledging how the victory in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood has over time become part of a narrative that has come to mask the further commercialisation and segregation of the city. That a particular erosion of ideological principles took place simultaneously with the disintegration and dismantling of the squatting movement is no coincidence. If we want to draw valuable conclusions from the history of the Nieuwmarkt and the emerging squatting movement of the seventies, we should not only see it as a conflict over the design of the city, but as the fight for a genuinely different city. Not just as a closed chapter in the urban planning history of Amsterdam, but as part of an ongoing social struggle. Without bottom-up pressure, urban planning will only produce different manifestations of the status quo. Constant presence, organisation, agitation, and political pressure are needed to give a genuinely emancipatory meaning to our ideas about the city. The way this pressure is organised is bound to historical context. The need for it is timeless.

NOTES

- 1 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 95.
- 2 Roel van Duijn, *Provo: de geschiedenis van de provotarische beweging 1965-1967* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1985), 176.
- 3 Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. Eleonore Kofman en Elizabeth Lebas, (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 158.
- 4 Eric Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur: Geschiedenis van de kraakbeweging 1964-1999* (Amsterdam: de Arbeiderspers, 2000), 28.
- 5 Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt, *Metrorapport van de Nieuwmarkt*.
- 6 Marcel Teunissen, *Theo Bosch: Knokken voor de stad - 1: Biografie* (Rotterdam: Stichting BONAS/Nederlands Architectuurinstituut, 2006), 40.
- 7 <https://allecijfers.nl/ buurt/nieuwmarkt-amsterdam/>
- 8 <https://www.nul20.nl/dossiers/dashboard-woningvoorraad-amsterdam>
- 9 <https://allecijfers.nl/ buurt/nieuwmarkt-amsterdam/>
- 10 Lefebvre, *Writings*, 154.

Against property: squatting as ex-appropriation

Daniel Loick

The German squatting movement coined a slogan decades ago that is still in use today: better squat than rot (*Lieber Instandbesetzen als Kaputtbesitzen*). This slogan opposes the common practice of homeowners leaving apartments and buildings empty in order to speculate on real estate prices and drive up rents. Vacancy often has the effect of letting buildings fall into disrepair. When squatters occupy vacant buildings, on the other hand, they usually start fixing them up (as long as the cops leave them alone, that is).

This essay is an attempt to philosophically justify this slogan.

PROPERTY AS ABUSE

Most philosophers – in fact, most people – would agree that use presupposes property; that in order to use something legitimately, one needs the authority to exclude all others from it. For Immanuel Kant, to cite the most philosophically sophisticated justification of private property, the legitimacy of law itself rests on this belief. Kant argued that human freedom is inconceivable without the use of “external objects.” Everyone, therefore, has a rational and rightful entitlement to a universally binding system of rights that ensures ownership over said external objects. In “Doctrine of Right” in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defined property as “[permission] to constrain everyone else with whom he comes into conflict about whether an external object is his or another’s to enter along with him into a civil constitution.”¹

However, other approaches have contested the axiom of the necessary connection between use and property. For example, in his pamphlet *What is Property?* the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon fundamentally attacked the institution of property by advocating the exact opposite thesis: that property is not a condition to use, but an obstacle. “Roman law,” he writes,

defined property – *jus utendi et abutendi re sua, quatenus juris ratio patitur* – as the right to use and abuse a thing within the limits of the law... The proprietor has the power to let his crops rot underfoot, sow his field with salt, milk his cows on the sand, turn his vineyard into a desert, and use his vegetable garden as a park: are these acts “abuse” or not? In matters of property, use and abuse are necessarily indistinguishable.²

Today, it is legally permissible (and constantly happens) that owners leave fruit rotting on the stalk or sow salt in the earth. Or, to take more relevant examples, it is possible for homeowners to leave their apartments empty, for banks to withhold food from markets in order to speculate, and for pharmaceutical companies to prohibit poor countries from producing affordable medicine due to patent law. Such phenomena are not accidental occurrences in a decadent society, but rather express the essence of modern property as such. The authority to exclude others from using a thing and thus also from having a say in its use is constitutive of property. The owner has the right to prohibit interference. The right to property authorises personal caprice and revokes the possibility of external (not just ethical or moral, but perhaps more importantly, legal) intervention.

How exactly should we understand Proudhon’s thesis that the “use and abuse” of property are “necessarily indistinguishable?” Does the abuse authorised by property

lie only in a certain inappropriate manner of use? Can there be such a thing as *non-abusive use*? Is there a particular element that brings property into abuse, and are there means to counteract it? Two influential critiques of property can help explain its abuse observed by Proudhon, as well as point towards the potential for a non-abusive use. The first is social, which claims that the problematic aspect of property results from its exclusive character, through which other members of society are excluded from using and deciding on all the resources that are privately controlled. The second is ethical, which claims that the problem with property does not lie in its exclusivity, but already in the appropriation of an object as such. According to this critique, which has its origin in the Franciscan ideal of poverty, an appropriating attitude towards the world leads to an emptied form of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, ultimately incapable of use.

THE SOCIAL CRITIQUE OF PROPERTY

Private property, as Marx notes in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, is "the specific *mode of existence of privilege*, of rights as *exceptions*."³ The nature of private property essentially involves removing something from the community. It is the right to the exclusive use of a thing, thereby excluding all others from using the same thing. Unlike Proudhon, however, Marx's critique does not stop there. He goes on to explain that such a property regime, once it extends to the social means of production, inevitably leads to exploitation. Private ownership of the means of production allows capitalists to appropriate the surplus value produced by others. This leads to the well-known fundamental contradiction between labour and capital: the wealth of society is socially produced, but privately appropriated.

Marx's focus on exploitation marks a significant shift of emphasis in relation to the thesis of the indistinguishability of property's use and abuse, which he spells out in various ways.⁴ The most obvious dimension of abuse is injustice: the sheer fact of exploitation is unjust because it leads to an unequal distribution of both material wealth and social power. The annual study on global inequality commissioned by Oxfam regularly reminds us of the extent of this injustice; according to its 2019 report, the twenty-six richest people on the planet owned as much as the 3.8 billion poorest people.⁵

One does not need a sophisticated theory of justice to recognise the obscene character of such an arrangement, but the most important aspect here is that these twenty-six people are able to remove a large part of the available resources of the world from use by the rest of humanity. Private property is therefore an obstacle to use.

Another dimension of the critique is that of dysfunctionality: capitalism is inherently unstable and crisis-ridden. A system where private parties compete with each other at the pain of their own demise is systematically based on the devaluation of the social, political, and – perhaps most importantly today – ecological conditions of their own success. This, in turn, has devastating effects, even when considering just the consequences of climate change and human-induced natural disasters, which regularly hit the poorest parts of the world the hardest. The abusive character of property is demonstrated here, for example, in relation to the question of sustainability: the dysfunctionality of capitalism has led to a situation in which the current use of natural resources has seriously threatened their future use, or even already rendered it impossible forever.

A third dimension concerns the alienation caused by capitalism. The young Marx in particular tried to show

that a society based on the private ownership of the means of production, and thus on exploitation, leads to a deformed, distorted, and therefore deficient subjectivity. Under capitalist working conditions, the worker develops a one-sided, impoverished emotional and intellectual life. This is determined, in Marx's words, by the fact that in his work he "does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind."⁶

This critique no longer concerns the objective but the subjective capacity for use. The deformation produced through alienation means that the worker can no longer enjoy even the little she receives in return for her work because, as Marx puts it, in alienated labour she has lost her own self. This oft-discredited point of critique (due to its latent essentialism) can be easily substantiated with reference to current socio-psychological diagnoses: phenomena such as depression, exhaustion, burnout, and acceleration show that neoliberal working conditions, which claim to enable self-realisation and creativity, are also increasingly undermining a meaningful use of the goods acquired through work.

These three dimensions of the social critique of property concern only private property in the means of production, not property in itself. Every society, Marx claims, has some form of property order; there never was and never can be a society that does not in some way regulate the appropriation and ownership of goods. "True property," Marx writes, can only exist under communism. Communism will make it possible for proletarians to appropriate what they produce and thus enable them to become owners. Communism, therefore, is not the negation, but the negation of the negation of proletarian property. Max Horkheimer aptly described this conception of

communism as a “gigantic joint-stock company for the exploitation of nature.”⁷

The social critique of property does not fully exhaust the radicality of Proudhon’s thesis concerning the indistinguishability of property’s use and abuse. Marx aimed to establish conditions of universal usability through common property, but he did not question his bourgeois presupposition of the reciprocal implication of use and property. The unsatisfactory consequences of this adoption of bourgeois premises has been pointed out by critical theory: a classless society conceived like this runs the risk of reproducing the domination of the external and internal nature of human beings, and thus of reproducing deficient relationships to the world and to oneself.⁸

THE FRANCISCAN IDEAL OF POVERTY

In his book *The Highest Poverty*, Giorgio Agamben develops another critical strategy that productively supplements and questions the social critique of property. Agamben reminds us of one of the most important but often forgotten theoretical debates concerning property in the history of Europe: the dispute around poverty within the Catholic Church in the second half of the thirteenth and first half of the fourteenth century. The starting point of this controversy was an eminently theological issue raised by the Franciscan doctrine of apostolic poverty. The Franciscans assumed that Jesus and his disciples did not possess anything at all, either individually or collectively. Thus, as followers of Jesus, the Franciscans also saw it as their duty to live a life without money or any form of property. Hence, the *Regula Bullata*, composed under the direction of St. Francis himself, states: “The friars are to appropriate nothing for themselves, neither a house, nor a place, nor anything else.” For the Franciscans, poverty

was not a matter of economics or politics, but ethics; only a life that in no way enters into an appropriating relationship with the world can be an ethically perfect life. This maxim was provocative, not only because it questioned the secular power and monetary wealth of the Church, but above all because it sought to realise a way of life completely outside any established legal order.

The poverty controversy has a long and fairly convoluted history, with several different factions, each with various interests and theoretical arguments. In 1245, the pope claimed ownership of all Franciscan properties, thus allowing the friars to use them without technically owning them. According to one of the most important Franciscan theologians, Giovanni di Bonaventura, the friars rejected not only some property rights, but all rights to objects in general, and limited themselves to simple *de facto* use (*usus facti* or *usus simplex*). Another Franciscan theorist, Bonagratia di Bergamo, tried to make this *de facto* use plausible with an analogy to animals: when a horse eats its oats, it does not first have to claim ownership over them; rather, its simple use is completely indifferent to and incommensurable with the juridical order of property.

This Franciscan practice and the papal worldview eventually became too heterogeneous for peaceful coexistence. A direct confrontation finally broke out between the friars and the Holy See when Pope John xxii, who firmly opposed the view that Jesus and his disciples were completely without possessions, took over the pontificate in 1316. With his 1322 bull *Ad conditorem canonum*, John xxii revoked the ecclesiastical administration of Franciscan possessions, effectively forcing the friars to become legal owners of all the things they wished to use. The Pope also declared the Franciscan ideal of poverty heretical, thus driving the most important members of the Order into exile.

“What is in question, for the order as for its founder,” Agamben concludes, “is the *abdicatio omnis iuris* (‘abdication of every right’), that is, the possibility of a human existence beyond the law.”⁹ These efforts to remain outside the law appear rather counter-intuitive, considering that many political conflicts today are about equal inclusion under the law. Hannah Arendt spoke prominently of a “right to have rights,” i.e. a (pre-judicial) right to be part of a political community and to participate in its social practices.¹⁰ Yet a problem just as significant as exclusion from the political community is the phenomenon of *forced inclusion*, that is, the imposition of a legal or political order against someone’s will. Against such forced inclusion, the Franciscans insisted on their *right not to need rights*.¹¹ Although it seems at first that no one can be harmed by being granted legally secure control over the things they need to satisfy their fundamental human needs, from the Franciscan perspective, John xxii’s bull must have appeared as an act of violence. The act seriously diminished the Franciscans’ abilities of self-determination, because it turned them into subjects they simply did not want to be.¹²

The Franciscans’ conviction that an ethical life is only possible when one does not become a legal subject is not just some religious quirk. The problem of forced inclusion becomes obvious in the case of colonisation, within which European states succeeded in extending the Roman property regime to the entire planet and thus eliminating the possibility of living without property (rights) without also falling into deep material need. The violence inherent in this does not (only) consist of a *violation of law* (although it is regularly accompanied by this), such as breaches of treaties, expulsions, and physical violence, but rather lies deeper, encompassing the implementation of a normative order within which property conflicts can be conducted at all; i.e. in the *establishment of law as such*.

The colonial order often forces indigenous populations to relate to their environment as their property in the first place. Such an involuntary imposition of a legal order therefore constitutes a form of violence, even if it does not involve taking away anything materially from those affected. Rather, the violence of law consists in damaging the ethical substance of an autochthonous community by coercively transforming it into an alien social grammar, and thus devaluing preexisting knowledge and local practices. In some cases, opposition to such a conversion may have mythical or religious reasons, while in others, the prevailing views of the tribal community or traditions are more important. But in every case, the establishment of a property order is accompanied by a fundamental intervention in the affected parties' relationships between themselves and the world. This means, among other things, that under colonialism, members of indigenous groups were forced to transform their subjectivity into that of legal persons – especially in order to defend themselves precisely against that colonisation.¹³

In turn, socialising institutions were set up to manufacture legal subjects in the first place. The colonial experience thus cannot be fully grasped without the theoretical instruments of a social critique of property alone.

THE ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF PROPERTY

In addition to the general commitment to keep open the possibility of a life beyond law, and against the internal and external expansions of right, the Franciscans also developed a particular critique of property in terms of content, one whose philosophical significance and political implications have still not been fully appreciated. While the debate between the Franciscan theorists and curial jurists gravitated around the highly specific theological

question of whether Jesus and the apostolic community lived completely without property, it had implications that extended far beyond the realm of theology.

As Annabel Brett has recognised, the ideal of poverty is by no means just about poverty – the Franciscans could have remained poor within the existing legal order and lived in peaceful coexistence with church and society. Rather, the friars wanted to develop a subjectivity opposed to power, empire, and mastery.¹⁴

What they lacked, however, was a sufficiently large imaginary of concepts and images to outline such an anti-sovereign subjectivity. Initially, Franciscans were instructed to simply occupy a position opposite to domination, namely the subject or slave, as the safest measure to not become masters themselves. But Franciscan ethics seem to open up other possibilities beyond a humble resignation to fate.

In addition to the metaphors of submission, the concept of “minority” is essential for Franciscans. Franciscans are minorities, or Friars Minor, and from a purely legal point of view, like children. Just as minors are under the guardianship of their parents, so are Friars Minor under the guardianship of the Church.¹⁵

This acceptance of the minoritarian position also seems at first like a simple inversion of the terms of domination: instead of sovereigns, they want to be subjects; instead of fathers, children. Yet the idea of valuing and practicing a minoritarian perspective has different theoretical and practical implications than simply valorising subaltern positions. Minoritarian perspectives open up new possibilities for action, as Deleuze and Guattari have shown. Becoming minority here refers to the affective engagement that creatively resists the temptation, the desire to dominate others, including that of the revolutionary.¹⁶ From here it is only a small step, following the

Franciscans, to identify poverty as a prerequisite for democracy. If one understands the people not simply as the self-identical subject of popular sovereignty, but as the “part with no part” for whom the distance to domination is always already subjectively inscribed, then it becomes clear that real democracy can only be determined as the *government of minorities*.¹⁷

Like the social critique, however, the ethical critique of property has its own problems and limitations. It is no coincidence that the Franciscan experiment did not last, and was ultimately defeated by the Curia, both practically and philosophically. In the language of Nietzsche, the Franciscans are characterised by an extreme slave morality. They withdrew from the law but could not establish an alternative way of using the potentialities available in the world. Thus, their retreat from the law is at the same time a retreat from the possibility of influencing the course of Western history. The social and ethical critiques therefore mutually point out their respective blind spots. The ethical critique deciphers the fundamental damage that the paradigm of appropriation inflicts on our relationships to ourselves and to the world, while the social critique enables us to think of an alternative use of the enormous wealth and multitude of possibilities that capitalism has produced up to now.

TOWARDS A POLITICAL CRITIQUE OF PROPERTY

Registering the failure of their critique, Agamben claims that Franciscans should have advocated for the creation of general social conditions that would allow them to “make use of things without ever appropriating them.”¹⁸

Such a critique manifests itself paradigmatically in the practice of squatting: the squatter uses a building or territory without ever owning it. She profits from the potential

invested in a given structure without entering into a relation of appropriation with it. Her treatment of the squatted building or land is also inherently gentle or even restorative, creatively challenging the prevailing link between *property and abuse* with a new link between *occupation and use*. This practice is not simply social or ethical, but political insofar as it seeks to confront those who wish to maintain exclusive control over their property and whose power and wealth is therefore threatened by precisely such action. The squatter revokes the owner's private caprice and forces her to give at least a basic general justification, which can only be achieved through communication and democratic deliberation. While the social critique of property aims at *expropriating appropriation*, and the ethical critique at *non-appropriation*, the political critique aims at *ex-appropriation*, that is, at establishing conditions under which no one can exclusively appropriate the world anymore.

The example of squatting as a practice of the political critique of property can be generalised. This is one of the promising aspects of the current debate on the commons: it allows us to escape the limits of the Western property tradition and instead to see property no longer as a condition but an obstacle to the common use of shared resources.¹⁹

This becomes obvious in the example of open-source software, in which programmers challenge the dictates of exclusive property rights, such as copyright and patents, and work cooperatively on a common project. The goods produced in this way are not only freely available and thus usable for everyone, but are also often of better quality, which means they are better to use.

Commoning is not limited to immaterial goods. The commons were put on the agenda with the Zapatista uprising in 1994, who fought to preserve an article in the Mexican constitution which made guarantees to individual communities that part of the land must remain in the form

of commons, that is, in public ownership. Today, struggles over commons encompass many areas of public infrastructure, such as free access to basic needs, including general access to land, water, and air, as well as public services such as education, healthcare, and more far-reaching struggles for social welfare including free public transport, swimming pools, sports facilities, and cultural institutions.

The commons operate within given legal systems. They are not anarchic structures. Above all, the commons often see themselves as forms of common property (in contrast to private and state property). However, these legal forms often have only a strategic and thus provisional character. Constructs such as the Creative Common License serve only to prevent private appropriation of the corresponding product and to guarantee that it remains in the public domain. The Creative Common License is a property right that simultaneously pushes the idea of property rights as such to its limits and undermines it; it serves solely to ensure the general conditions of non-appropriability. Commoning thus unites both the social and ethical critique of property. The commons makes it impossible to privately appropriate what is socially produced, thus blocking exploitation and related forms of injustice, dysfunctionality, and alienation.

At the same time, the commons do not simply aim at alternative forms of appropriation through common property, as was the case with the social critique, because commons-based production is not universalising. It is prescribed neither by state nor economy, but rather allows an exit from those state and economic dictates. It also renders impossible both the development of an imperial possessive individuality, as well as the fetishisation of consumer goods. At the level of subjectivity, there is much more reason to hope that the non-egoistic coordination and cooperation practiced in commons can mobilise or

cultivate quite different affective-habitual resources than would necessarily be the case under capitalist competitive conditions. Commons thus seem to correspond exactly to the demand to use the world without appropriating it.

EPILOGUE

In the aphorism “Refuge for the Homeless” in *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno develops the famous verdict that the wrong life cannot be lived rightly. He derives this from a moral paradox in regards to modern dwelling:

It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home. This gives some indication of the difficult relationship in which the individual now stands to his property, as long as he still possesses anything at all. The trick is to keep in view, and to express, the fact that private property no longer belongs to one, in the sense that consumer goods have become potentially so abundant that no individual has the right to cling to the principle of their limitation; but that one must nevertheless have possessions, if one is not to sink into that dependence and need which serves the blind perpetuation of property relations. But the thesis of this paradox leads to destruction, a loveless disregard for things which necessarily turns against people too; and the antithesis, no sooner uttered, is an ideology for those wishing with a bad conscience to keep what they have.²⁰

The aporia described by Adorno is only aporetic because he did not (yet) know the practice of squatting. Squatting opens up the possibility of updating and expressing exactly what Adorno pinpointed: “that private property no longer belongs to one,” but without falling into paralysing “dependence and need.” The *moral* imperative of “not being at home in one's home” is thus rehabilitated as a *political* imperative. It cries: Occupy.

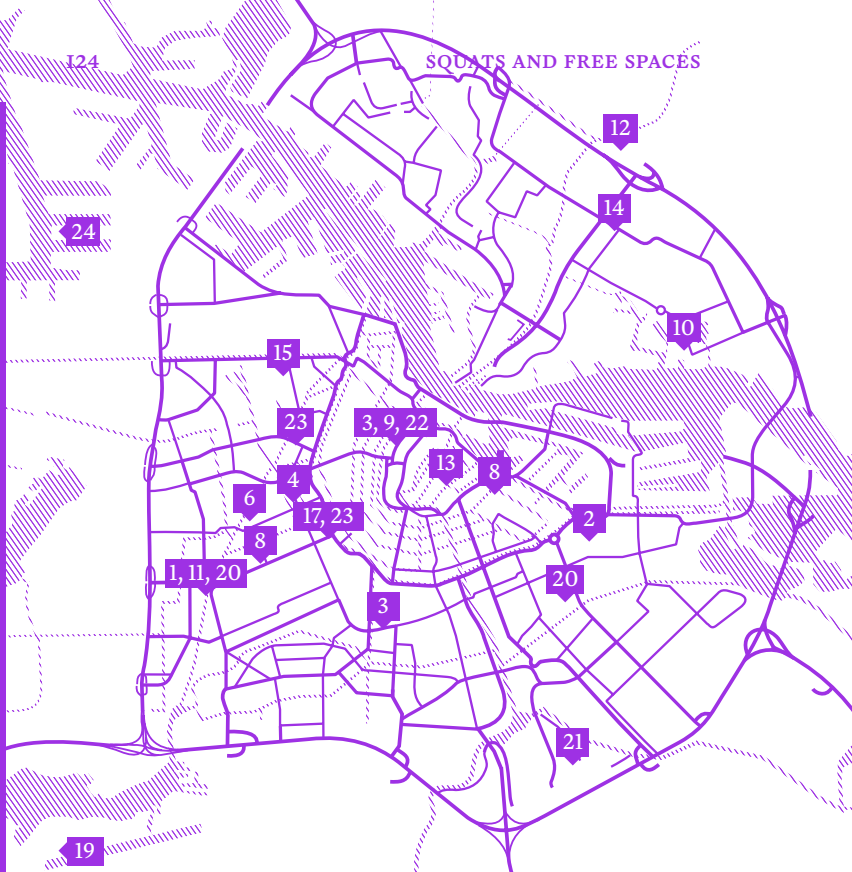
NOTES

- 1 Immanuel Kant, 'The Metaphysics of Morals,' in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 256 (§8).
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- 3 Karl Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right,' *Marx & Engels Collected Works 3* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 109.
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- 7 Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 58.
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- 9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 110.
- 10 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 296.
- 11 Werner Hamacher coined this phrase, before Agamben's rediscovery of the Franciscans; see Werner Hamacher, "The Right Not to Use Rights: Human Rights and the Structure of Judgments," in *Political Theologies*, eds. de Vries and Sullivan (New York: Fordham, 2006).
- 12 For a trenchant critique of contemporary subjectivities as marked by the property regime, see Eva von Redecker on phantom possession: Eva von Redecker, 'Ownership's Shadow: Neo-Authoritarianism as Defense of Phantom Possession,' in *Critical Times* 3, no. 1 (April 2020): 33–67.

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- 14 Annabel Brett, *Liberty, Right and Nature: Individual rights in later scholastic thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.
- 15 Compare Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, III, 125.
- 16 Compare Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 105–6.
- 17 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2006); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2009), 44.
- 18 Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*, 144.
- 19 See, for example, Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, (Oakland: Pm Press, 2018).
- 20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 2005), §18.

Squats and free spaces: portraits of autonomy

Squats and free spaces: portraits of autonomy is comprised of interviews with residents of and those involved in free spaces, squats and alternative spaces in Amsterdam. This is an incomplete overview, and people speak in their own name. We interpret the term “free space” loosely to show the diversity of possibilities and difficulties that are part of running an autonomous space.



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Free spaces cannot be defined

Ivo Schmetz

I've worked, lived, talked, danced, flirted and laughed in *vrijplaatsen* [free spaces]. Free spaces have taught me to take my life into my own hands, free from the pressure of economic value. Their communal character forces you to listen, co-operate and let go of your ego. It initially costs a lot of time and energy, but collective effort yields something far greater. Without a doubt, free spaces have largely made me who I am today.

Despite all my experience and encounters, I've never heard of (or read) a definition that captured their essence. Maybe it's the fact that free spaces (just like art) can't be pinned down that gives them their power and makes them special. They all differ in format, colour, composition, vision, organisational structure and substance. They're diverse, experimental, social and free-spirited, but all have their own identity. Free spaces (the name says it all)

are, I think, about the freedom to organise a place collaboratively, in accordance with your own opinions and ideas. Not about frameworks or criteria, and ideally not about predefined functions, but instead, the freedom to be who you are, to define yourself, and to challenge the status quo.

Free spaces create a bridge between the conscious and subconscious, the fusion of intellect and intuition. They are fields of energy. A new horizon. A collective work of art and a practice that arises organically, from the bottom up. Horizontally structured, for and by local, small-scale, autonomous communities. A collaborative experiment with the possibilities that arise from different perspectives and function-dynamics. Preferably for the long-term in collective ownership, because shared responsibility and self-maintenance result in dedication and willpower.

Free spaces are non-commercial by nature – they function at a distance from the market. Open, hospitable, accessible and affordable for everybody through public programming (art, music, film, food, education etc.), in connection with the surrounding neighbourhood, city and other interested parties. Communal moments in which the internal and external can mix. Social, public, cultural, enjoyable and adventurous, free from the urge to consume.

The perfect free space doesn't exist. There are an endless amount of magical moments but equally so disagreement and tears. An interesting free space is always changing, a continual collective process with highs and lows. Constantly rediscovering and redefining itself. Daring to make mistakes and to start over. A free space is a space with lots of discussion, aiming for consensus, radical decisions and risks, but most of all it's a space for coincidence, doubt and new ideas.

It's important to think and act regeneratively for the future of free spaces and the rest of society, to keep nourishing a fertile ground so that beauty can thrive. Giving more than taking, in balance with the Earth and all non-human life. Building and repairing instead of demolishing, polluting and depriving. In solidarity with the people around you, but also with faraway strangers. Freedom and free spaces don't just exist and aren't just created to serve you. You share it, feed it, cherish it.

Free spaces are, as far as I'm concerned, living proof that things can be done differently, and that's why I can't and don't want to imagine a life without free spaces. Free spaces cannot be defined but are one-hundred per cent essential!

LAG
Maxigas



What is a free space?

“Free space” is actually a specifically Dutch term. I consider it a concept of compromise and conflict; it’s a dichotomy. The way it’s used is shifting from being a strictly political concept, to referring to values that have more to do with culture. The term free space is also used to justify the political struggle of specific places, in terms of their cultural contribution to the life of the city. It’s also a specific word that has a legitimising

function. But it’s a tradition for sure. Free spaces exist. And they exist because a lot of squatted and autonomous places don’t exist anymore. I wish it was more of a conflict, but I think, at this moment in time, it’s more of a compromise.

Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you’ll never forget?

The Interference Conference was a true LAG moment. What’s funny is that there was a description of the event that everyone could add to, and a Markov-chain generated the conference call. This was of course before the current hype around Artificial Intelligence, but it was already an ironic comment on the topic back then. We published a reader that was designed algorithmically: every time you downloaded it, a new layout would be generated. Every copy was unique. I think that something like this already represents some of the values of LAG: it’s not about “high

tech”, but about the experiment. Risking it in unknown territory. Not just loving, but also hating technology.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

There’s something about LAG that I can’t find elsewhere. We also discuss philosophical topics in a technological context; what does technology do within cultures of philosophy? Besides that, LAG of course also organises way better parties than all other similar organisations. This is the place where you can drink pints and where people discuss mathematics in front of a whiteboard at one in the morning, with techno music playing. Apart from that, LAG is part of a social movement. In the end it’s – not even a group of friends, because sometimes we’re also a group of enemies – but a group of kinsfolk. We have something in common, and I think that it’s our critical stance towards technology.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

What’s exciting is that the future of LAG is totally unpredictable. It could be a disaster, or something incredible. I strongly believe that LAG should work together more, and in more practical ways, with other political groups – especially groups that are not concerned with technology. We’ve done a lot of research in the past years. At some point, I hope we can translate our research into something that speaks to more people. The historical conditions are in place, but people have to stand up and occupy and resist more. We have to question, criticise and violate the laws that make it difficult to do that. When that happens, I can imagine that LAG won’t be here anymore, but will be in a more chaotic and unstable situation.

Nieuwland Flipper



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

On the day of the Brazilian elections, Brazilians could cast their mandatory vote at one place in The Netherlands: the RAI. People came to Amsterdam from all over The Netherlands. We have a number of Brazilian people in the community and they organised an event that people could go to after casting their vote. The elections were tense. Will the fascist regime continue or will something new emerge that brings more hope? But it wasn't gloomy

and I was happy to see that. At the same time, it's also a good example of how many different aspects this place has. One moment, it's an evening where Brazilians come together, the other a collective of Jewish antifascists, refugees meet here, Turkish communities or students or climate activists. I find it special that one place can mean something for so many different communities. Activities have picked up again in the past half year. During the lockdowns it was painful to see the place empty, while so many people put their blood, sweat and tears into it.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I think Amsterdam has become much more boring in the past almost-twenty years that I've lived here. There's a commercial, touristic monoculture that's gradually taken over the city. There's less and less space for places where people don't come together because someone can profit

financially, but where people come out of their own interest. Like here: we have volunteers who make sure the bar is stocked, prepare meetings, answer emails, or work in the kitchen or behind the bar, and that's so beautiful. For a lot of groups, it's important to have a place that's accessible to use. Nieuwland is a kind of free space, because we collectively own and manage the building ourselves. Because of this, we have the freedom and autonomy to define ourselves within certain laws and bureaucratic frameworks. We're tied to certain loans that we've had to take out to be able to buy the building, which brings financial pressure. Still, if you compare it to a commercial place, a lot more is possible. But we are required to ask for donations, so that we can pay our rent and energy bills.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Nieuwland is a place used by lots of different groups,

but sometimes I miss the connection between these groups. There are students and climate activists today and a queer community tomorrow. I would love it if they would interact more. I would also like to organise more activities that are accessible for the neighbourhood. You need all the help you can get to organise the current thirty or forty activities. It's a challenge to keep it all going at the same time.

Molli Chaoot Ras Caiera



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

I celebrated my birthday at Molli. We made pizza and brought a collection pot for donations to cover the costs. Before we knew it, we'd already collected more than five times the costs! After that, we partied all night long with a different DJ every hour. At the end of the night, the forms to buy beer were totally full, so thanks to the party we could also donate a load of money. And I also bumped into friends that I hadn't seen for years.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The most important thing to me is that we feed people.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

The only thing we need is a new kitchen and some more people, people who are interested in doing more than just visiting.

Vrankrijk Binx



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

I'll never forget "Transmission" last Saturday. The venue was full of queer folks. There was still a queue after one in the morning. The music was beautiful and diverse. I can't remember exactly how things went, but I know for sure that I was dancing!

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

First and foremost, this is a queer safe space and besides

that, everyone knows that no photos are to be taken here. It's just a lovely place to come together on a Wednesday evening.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

If I'm really honest, I think it'll look exactly the same. At most, there'll be some more posters, paintings and stickers on the walls.

De Trut

Lot van Bommel



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

We often organise a themed party at the end of the year. They are always legendary because we completely transform the whole space. We've been around for almost forty years and have had many anniversary parties, they're always legendary too. To be honest, every Sunday's legendary.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

That we're a queer safe space. There aren't a lot of those. Apart from that, it's important that we can support other queers with our money, because the queer struggle isn't finished and there's a need for financial support. We can chip in. Think about safety and visibility, emancipation, basically. Here in Amsterdam, we can give people a safe space, and, through that, help others financially across the globe.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I would actually like to see it stay the same. In terms of our mission and effectiveness, in any case. I hope that we grow together with the queer community, and that we don't become old-fashioned or get stuck. We're very attached to our little cellar, so hopefully we're still here at this location.

Nicole
Klaas



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

Most events here were small and not particularly spectacular or big. I organised

a series of film screenings with the ambition to do that weekly. In the end it only happened three times. We started, I think, with *Dog Day Afternoon*, and after that *Bound*. That's by those two directors who made *The Matrix*. That's a really fucking cool film. It's a sort of lesbian mafia-thriller. It was really cool because it was an intimate screening, with a lot of people we didn't know. It was just really fun, to meet new people too.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

That people just live here. There was a time when a lot of people would live here temporarily, they were in between houses, but now we try to have more permanent residents. It's a house that people live in, but also really different of course. It breaks down a bit and then we build it back up, it negates the way things usually go, that would happen in a normal household (which is actually

a pretty wrong way of doing things). This is more chill in certain ways. You don't pay rent, for example. It's more free, too. We can do what we want. You can't do that in a house that you rent. Plus, you're not in that whole system of landlords and all that shit, and the neighbours appreciate what we're doing too. On the flip side, it was a proper shit hole when we came here, everything had to be fixed. It's still really badly insulated and we're not connected to gas. We have a gigantic energy bill. It's unaffordable to keep it even remotely warm here. That's why we don't turn on the heating anymore. It's really cold here nowadays, so that's not ideal.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Ideally or realistically? Because there's a pretty big difference between the two... Ideally, for me, it would be fun to do small events from time to time, film screenings

for example. We still have a free-shop, there's a clothes rack downstairs that people can take things from. We also have the goal to split the space up more clearly into living space and social space.

Plantage Dok Alexandra



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

Plantage Dok turned 20 in April 2018. This year we've existed for a quarter of a century. During the celebrations in 2018, we organised a massive open event, where you could discover

what goes on in each room of the building. It all felt very magical, because every door would open to a different fantasy world. There are some “Dokkers” that work at different places and are sometimes on tour. For this gigantic party, everyone made sure to be home. There were large installations on display, for example the one by Electric Circus that you can crawl into. I myself gave a concert with The Sleep Fairy, who came from across the ocean to our studio Medusa MagiQ, with organ and cello. From belly dancing to enormous dinners, to magical installations and music, it was so beautiful to see so many free spirits and worlds all in one building. For me, that physical space where you come together and where you, in an organic way, connect with each other, is actually like a sort of web of roots in a forest in which new things grow, really a free space. And that space is created for things that the people believe in.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

There aren't many places in the world anymore where people can make their own rules and can keep those rules organic. In a way that the rules also develop along with the people and groups. It's a special place where things are thought about from within the group, people and the building. At the same time, people can also keep their autonomy and come to agreements about what they believe in. There's actually an ongoing dialogue about what it is to be together, to create together, and to build things. Different people commit in accordance to their abilities to keep things alive and sustainable. Building, thinking, writing economic plans themselves. Wherever art is made, there's room to really dream.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

My wish is that, in ten years, all sorts of important things and the renovations have been able to take place in a sustainable way. That we've been able to survive these pretty harsh and hyper-capitalist times, and that people have been able to keep their freedom. I wish for us that we can come together even more, can be even more at one, and within that, do and make beautiful things, while continuing to discover who we are in the process.

OT301

Irina



What is a free space?

I would classify a free space as a space that leads the way to a rupture. Our mission is, one way or another, to keep this rupture open. When you get a chance, you poke/stick one finger/foot in and after a while maybe you stick/poke a second finger/foot in. The point isn't to widen the rupture, it's about keeping it open. Where you would usually see people around you pour concrete in the rupture, you maybe plant a seed in it. Younger generations don't always know what's possible. If they never encounter the rupture, they can't imagine that weeds could grow out of it, right? So you just try to keep it open in case somebody wants to enter it. You always have to adjust yourself, trim away some stuff, to make some more space. Perhaps that's a case of questioning your own assumptions, assumptions that you think are obvious.

Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

The B-Base event was born here at 4Bid Gallery as an invitation to explore the influence of the body in your art practice, regardless of the medium. The most recent B-Base event lasted three days. The participating artists did not know each other at first and as they got to know each other better, the creation emerged. I love it, it's almost like an alchemical curation. You're not really trying to convey a message, you're just letting the message emerge. And if the artists don't click, the audience does the work. We need spaces where you can fail and experiment. Young artists are taught in school about packaging their product even before they understand what it means, because they have to sell it. You need room to play, you need to be able to mess around with your material, and you need feedback to be confronted with the audience. So you need these

kinds of spaces, because how else are you going to develop yourself, as an artist, as a person? We're told that there's only one way to "make it." Fuck that, seriously. That's what we need to get out of people's minds, especially young artists. I am deeply worried about this, because it has been completely turned upside down. Maybe I'm talking about total utopia, but I think it comes down to the times we live in and how little exposure we have to the alternative. Because if you had been exposed to the rupture, you would have probably followed a different path.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

4Bid Gallery exists within the walls of the OT301 and therefore there's some kind of uncontrolled cross-pollination. People who never set foot in galleries stumble in here, because they were actually on their way to the club, cinema or restaurant. Art is fundamentally

an excuse for these encounters. And these encounters change us.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I really have no idea what this space will look like in the future. When we submitted a proposal to run the gallery, we didn't think we'd be here for more than six months. And after six months we said, "Well, it's pretty fun, let's do six more." And here we are, ten years later, because back then we didn't plan beyond those six months. We are still carrying out this project, not because we ever said we would, but because we ask ourselves every day how we want to carry it out. In this way we maintain it as something we are committed to, hence its changing nature. I like that very much. It fits me, personally, and I think it fits a lot of people in the crew as well. Most of us, if not all, are independent artists; we live our lives in a free-flowing way. We can't

pin ourselves down for more than a little while.

Vrij Paleis
Daniel



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

If I had to pick one, something that I thought was really cool in terms of vibe or ambience, then it would have to be the first BYOB (Bring Your Own Beamer) event. There were loads of people projecting all sorts of things. I remember someone had made a documentary about people from Kenya. You had to look at the

ceiling to watch the story. Someone else was projecting at the back of this little wall here, someone else on a door, things were being projected everywhere. I had a white linen suit on with a white umbrella, I went dancing dressed like that. I was a kind of dancing screen in a way. I also had one of those slide-things with me. Actually, it was a really small TV with a sort of zoom function. It literally looked like a TV from the '70s, and you push one slide in, a diapositive. There's a big battery in there too and if you push that down the light goes on. So I was approaching people, like, "Hey psst, do you want to see Jesus?" and "BOOM!" – there's Jesus right in front of your face.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

There's a new initiative to build a darkroom, so that will bring in a lot of new faces and new energy. We could also offer workshops related

to that, so that people can experience the entire process of photography. That's a great thing, because people haven't experienced that for a whole generation. It would feel like a victory if we could offer that, because then there would be an extra darkroom in Amsterdam. That way, we could help a new generation of artists express themselves.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

The idea is to make this place successful. Imagine what you lose if you lose this place, what Amsterdam loses, that's another unique place gone. Then you'll just get another Starbucks or some other bullshit place around the corner here. Because yeah, if you look at this place with profit-hungry eyes, it's a fantastic location that you could easily extract fifty-thousand euros in rent a month from. Totally awful, of course.

Aan Lager Wal Job



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

I think of one of the first big parties. You can't really see it now, but there are still footprints on the ceiling. A tree trunk was pulled diagonally into the living room through the window. It was way too crowded and an at least partially naked Cumbia band was playing music. We partied both indoors and outdoors, with food and fun games for the kids in the afternoon. It turned into a big party. It was way too

crowded in here, so at some point people started crowd surfing. They didn't because they wanted to though, but because it was so full. That's why there are footprints all over the ceiling: people walked upside down. Oh yeah! The house almost collapsed then. We went downstairs and we saw that the ceiling was bulging, it was literally rippling. We had to pull people out of the room. After that we decided that, in the future, we would only have parties in the garden.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The living space is the most important function. It's certainly a very stable living space by squatting standards, we're a stable living group too. Besides that, we don't have events here all the time, but those are nice too. People really like what we organise here. It's very diverse. The idea is that events are different. We don't just want to organise parties, but

dinners and movie nights too. We also want all kinds of people to come, like people from the neighbourhood for instance, not just squatters. The most important thing is the residential function. We live here with more people than we normally should, and we often have long-term guests. For me personally, it's nice that I can finally do something other than squatting, because that takes up a lot of time and energy in life. The only thing I was doing, was squatting: "Oh no, we have to leave in a month, time for a new place." That went on for years.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Another ten years... that would be absolutely insane, haha! We're not even half-way there yet. If we could stay that long, I would make major improvements to my self-built hut outside, where I live. In general, I would like to see things run a little more smoothly in terms of event

programming. Like standardise some things I guess. It is getting better, but we still have meetings where we talk about how many crates of beer we have to get every time, and then you think: "We've done this before, why are we talking about this." I don't really need to change things much. I like it.

Infokafee Bollox

Hans



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

No, because that's a secret. But a lot of people attended.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The diversity, I think that's important. Where punk meets yuppie. In reality we're pretty easy about it.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I don't want much change. At a certain point you achieve something that works, and if people want something else, they'll let you know. Eternity over momentary affliction.

ADM Noord Ayla



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

I had just arrived here when a couple of people under the influence of mushrooms got the idea to organise the ADM Winter Games. The games would be based on typical squatting sports. I was so in love with this idea, even though I wasn't on the same mushroom trip. The first edition was just with people internally. It was so beautifully pieced together and everyone just went for it. I've always found that to be one of the most beautiful events.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

At this moment in time, the most important thing is my child. I look at my environment through the eyes of a mother. What's this place like for my child? I decided to have a child here because I think it's valuable to grow up here. The older he becomes,

I've seen this with other children at ADM, the more he develops a personal relationship with everyone here. Children get something different from everyone. I find that to be such a beautiful and broad range of skills, which, as a family, you can't offer your child. You're not stuck here with two parents in a bubble, a cocoon. It's so important that a child can form their own connections with housemates and can find a different source of inspiration in everyone. I see that my child reaches out to people independently, and isn't intimidated by adults. Of course, he can tell that some people are children and some are adults. But that distinction isn't as big for him as for other children. Every interaction contributes to his perspective.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Incidentally, everyone here just received the same homework to answer the question:

how do you see yourself within the community in ten years? At this moment in time, it's difficult to imagine the future at this location, because the companies that want to come and "develop" here will probably be granted access. It would be great, but I can't imagine that we'll be given priority to stay here. In my experience, living with fewer rules, as we do here, works better. My hope for the future is that the government, despite their obsession with rules, will start to accept this. Bureaucracy is stifling. It smothers new ideas. I hope there will be more awareness of that and that ADM can take the lead in that a little bit. We've been showing for ages that it works fine to have fewer rules. That's why it would be fantastic if we could continue our story at another location. We spend a lot of time on topics such as ecology and sustainability, but there's still a lot of potential that we'd like to utilise. That's difficult at the moment, due to the temporary nature of

our accommodation. Now, with every investment, we have to consider whether it makes sense in the short term.

Fort van Sjakoo Floddy



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

I haven't really been to the public events, but one time, a young guy from Forum voor Democratie [Dutch far-right party] came in and started a debate on fascism versus anarchism. He wouldn't leave, so we emptied a bucket of water over him. That worked pretty well.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I really enjoy being in this space and talking to customers, finding out what's going on in the world. It's also nice to get compliments from people, often old militant ladies. In any case, I think this is a funky space, and when you walk in it feels like a different decade. Even before I lived in Amsterdam I would come here often, it's funky to just sit here and pick up a random book, read about different ideas and look at fun graphic novels. Plus I can play my own music all day long.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I don't think anything will change at all. At best, our IT person will put some new technological thingy in the database. Just to keep it exciting. I think the books will change, but maybe not. There will probably be other titles with the same content

and the ratios in the shop will shift too. For example, the militant shelf has shrunk considerably in recent years.

Het Bowlwerk (Bowling) Radical Jedi



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

One of the most memorable things that happened in the Bowling was when some of the new squatting laws were enforced and things really started to get tough for We Are Here. They were often kicked out within a day or two. A lot of people came here during that transition. There were times when twenty or

thirty people stayed here. And that to me shows what the Bowling really is about, as opposed to just partying.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

Initially we had the ambition to connect the international anarchist scene with the local squatting and activist scenes. That's why I moved here, that's why I left my whole life behind. Over time, and I say this somewhat bitterly, only the basic structure remained – a space for people who have nowhere else to go, instead of the intentional project it was before. What I am currently doing is working with the neighbourhood group Verdedig Noord. When they heard that the municipality wanted to demolish the Bowling, they came to us to see what we could do about it, because they also disagreed with the council decision and wanted to turn the Bowling into communal property. They didn't know much about squatters

at first, but they had good intentions. But the larger squatting scene got wind of it and a lot of people found it difficult because Bowling is still a kind of bastion of squatting in Amsterdam and now – unjustly – there was an image of Verdedig Noord as a gentrifying group, a bit like the Urban Resorts. People from all over the Netherlands were angry, angry tweets were sent, it really got out of hand. But the way that Verdedig Noord started talking with us clearly came from good intentions and it was important that we kept the conversation going. So we started talking again and this time many more people came to the Bowling. It took a while before we could put those angry reactions behind us and say: that's not us. Yes, we're squatters too, but we are not necessarily always a united front. This place means a lot to a lot of people. We are still in conversation with Verdedig Noord and I think we've built a solid collaboration, without people having to leave the building.

I really hope that in the future, with this neighbourhood group, we can integrate the Bowling more and more into the community and at the same time keep it as an autonomous space.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

If I imagine the future optimistically, the space is still there and people still live there, also because it's fun and satisfying to be here, there are events and resources. It's a community centre that also offers living space. Realistically, I see a much less positive scenario where it's just not there. Amsterdam in particular is such a centre for capitalism, I really can't imagine that these kinds of things continue to exist in this growing dystopia. People are really, really going to have to come together and find it within themselves to give a lot more to keep things like this going. I'm not as optimistic as I was when I moved here anymore.

II

Whose streets?



Benti

Soumeya Bazi

The sky is grey this morning, I note, as I peek outside, looking into the street. It is the middle of October, but the trees are greener than I'm used to around this time of the year.

For several weeks now, I have been volunteering in the new neighbourhood centre in the Van Deyssel quarter in Amsterdam Nieuw-West, the district where I was born and raised. I am the first point of contact for local residents who come to the weekly consultation hours with a variety of questions. The consultation aims to lower the threshold for local residents to find the right help and is a collaboration between various community organisations in the neighbourhood. I am sitting behind my desk on a chair that is slightly too tall for me, my trainers (as usual) dangling a few inches above the ground. Large maps of the renewal plans for the district are displayed on the walls, fresh off the press. Each housing block on the map has its own colour, indicating the timeline for demolition or renovation. I try to keep the plans from my field of vision, as they cause a feeling of deep unease and constriction. I doubt whether that helps or if it only feeds the disquiet. In the meantime, I have been able to receive many local residents. The questions range from recurring water leaks in their homes to seeking a solution to quarrels between neighbours, to evictions, applying for financial aid for a wheelchair or translating a letter. But of all the questions, there is one that invariably keeps coming back. And today is no exception.

As I return from the coffee machine I look through the window of the community centre and see an elderly man locking his bike. He is wearing a windbreaker and on

his head a light orange beanie. As I take a sip of my tea, I watch him moving timidly in my direction. Although he is clearly hesitating, his natural appearance of calm and restraint shines through the hesitation. He puts his hand on the door handle but studies the front of the building carefully before opening the door. I greet him with a smile. "Welcome," I say. The man nods politely. He appears to be around seventy years old, has olive-coloured, leathery skin and a youthful twinkle in his eyes. "How can I help you?" He puts a hand on his chest as if to apologise for having just walked in and starts talking to me in Darija (Moroccan Arabic). He introduces himself by saying that he is from southern Morocco and tells me he has lived in this neighbourhood for over fifty years.

"Benti," he continues, "I have a small question." Benti means "my daughter." He points outside among the green autumn trees. "In the neighbourhood, they have started demolishing houses. But I don't exactly understand what they are doing. Can you check for me what will happen to my house?" Again, he puts his hand apologetically on his chest. The employee of the housing association Rochdale who can answer this question is not here, so I suggest googling it for him. I ask for his address. He replies, but I don't know how to spell it. As someone with ADHD and an auditory processing problem, it is not the first time I have trouble filtering sounds. I ask if he can write down his address for me. He smiles shyly and says that he can't write. I curse the auditory centre of my brain and think like hell about an alternative. Soon he suggests going home to pick up a letter with the address on it. "That's smart", I say. "I'm here until two o'clock, I'll wait." We say goodbye and he gets back on his bike, heading back to the house where he most probably raised his children, a house that was far too small. I waited for him for three hours, but he did not return.

The man reminds me of my grandfather. That first generation of Moroccan Dutch people who didn't have time to pick up a pen and learn to write or read. But who nevertheless, for us, managed to do everything they needed to do, in a new country and through the cracks of a new language. Who worked so hard to keep mouths fed, sometimes to the point of chronic health problems. A generation that despite its illiteracy, despite its inability to hold a pen, has written, and is still writing, the story of our communities. Now to an increasingly smaller extent.

As I walk back after my shift to my shared temporary live-in guardian flat that will also soon be demolished, the man is still on my mind. His generation is dwindling and as a member of the younger generation, I feel an urgent and loving responsibility to move forwards, standing on the shoulders of our parents and grandparents. We are the future. But where our ancestors shed blood and sweat to create a city in which our livelihoods were secured as much as possible so that we could get ahead where they could not, the tears, blood and sweat of their children no longer have the same impact. The currency used to provide families with a roof over their heads for all those years has become virtually worthless.

No matter how hard you work, no matter how much patience you muster, no matter how many obstacles you overcome: living in the place where your story once began cannot be taken for granted anymore. Although it is long overdue to finally settle down. To blossom further where our parents dropped their leaves. To take root in the soil they helped cultivate with bare hands and crooked backs. To continue writing our shared story. Without being cut off again.

On Sunday 15 October 2021, a few days after meeting the old man with the orange beanie, I hurry to Plein '40-'45 in Sloterveer. It is cold and windy, but the October

sun gently peeks through the clouds. I have my woollen scarf wrapped tightly around my neck, and with my hands tucked into my coat pocket, I patiently wait for the demonstrators marching in protest from the August Allebéplein in Slotervaart through Nieuw-West. This afternoon, Plein '40-'45 forms the final stop in the first major anti-gentrification demonstration in Nieuw-West. The protest has been organised by the residents committee "Actiegroep bewoners Johan Piet" [Action Group Residents Johan Piet]. For thirteen years, the residents of the Johan Greivestraat and the Johan Pietstraat have been locked in a stalemate with housing association De Key over the future of their council housing. Thirty-five years of overdue maintenance on these overcrowded houses has resulted in entire families living under dire circumstances.

Draughts, mouldy walls, poor insulation, recurring leaks: people have become seriously ill and their children are not spared either. The residents have been clamouring for thorough renovations for years now. Yet De Key refuses to comply. The association has very different plans.

For anyone who knows these streets it is plain to see that almost all tenants have been driven out of their neighbourhood. The years-long battle that Mohamed Sadiki – the initiator of Actiegroep bewoners Johan Piet – and his neighbours fought for a healthy and liveable home for his children and neighbours seems to have been pulverised between the teeth of excavators. Swept away to make room for a new reality, it is as if these people never fought and lived here.

A reality in which a shiny red carpet is eagerly rolled out for seventy private sector apartments and a handful of overpriced and cramped studios rented out on temporary contracts. Studios that, as we have seen too often, are not meant for the young people of the neighbourhood, but for students and "starters" from outside the neighbourhoods

for whom this area serves as a temporary home. Somewhere on the sidelines dangle the dwindling number of elderly residents who may return to a deceptively shiny and sparkling new housing district. A new housing district robustly encapsulated within a torn social fabric. Whose name has been changed to a brand-new, awkward acronym that seems to want to disguise the decades-long history of neglect by the municipality and housing associations alike.

In the distance, I hear a drum. I look up. Across the tram tracks, I see a group of people approaching. They hold up placards with powerful slogans. The leaders of the march collectively hold a banner: "HOUSES FOR PEOPLE NOT FOR PROFIT." Entire families participate. Mothers, fathers, children. Different generations. All ages. Local residents with a migration background, and local residents without. Amsterdammers from Slotervaart, from Osdorp, from Geuzenveld and Amsterdammers from other areas of the city. I feel goosebumps on my arms. Neighbours stand close together with straight backs. Feet anchored firmly into the ground. Children hold each other's hands. I meet my neighbours from Sloterveer and run into a few friends. The atmosphere is filled with a sense of solidarity and militancy.

All of us are here for the same reason: we will not let ourselves be driven away, economically, or in any other way. The story of Piet Mondriaanstraat and Johan Greiverstraat is the story of the whole neighbourhood. It shows a glimpse of the troubling developments we are faced with now as a city. For decades, our neighbourhoods have been politically disadvantaged by associations and authority figures, leading to all kinds of problems and challenges. Since I first opened my eyes in 1996 at the Slotervaart Hospital (which has since been run aground by capitalist mismanagement), the neighbourhood has

been a site of struggle. Across decades, so many residents of Nieuw-West have managed to hold their own despite racist policies, exclusion, neglect and misguided solutions. I grew up with the derogatory words, "I wouldn't be caught dead in Amsterdam Nieuw-West!" Meanwhile, it is often wealthy groups of people with no connection to or genuine interest in the district and its residents for whom construction is now taking place. Who, due to the housing shortage elsewhere in the city, are lured by housing associations with big words and slick terms to settle down in the newly renovated rental homes and high-rise apartment complexes, where not that long before people were living under miserable conditions. This process is called gentrification. It is a word that literally refers to the aristocratic upper class.

Gentrification is not just a crisis of housing. It is a crisis of the soul of Amsterdam. Life stories of Amsterdam residents are being brutally cut off by pulling the home ground out from under their feet. The breath of the city's soul is increasingly stifled. What started in the early 1990s in districts like De Pijp and Jordaan grew into a viscous, suffocating oil slick which is now, thirty years later, seeping into Amsterdam's suburbs and swallowing them up without mercy.

I am standing in the crowd next to an acquaintance who is almost thirty and still lives with his parents. The social housing he lives in with his siblings is too small. He wants to grow up, develop himself, and eventually work towards building a family, but he feels like his life has been stagnant for years. This is their story and that of many other Amsterdam youths. Several local residents take the stage. Politicians and a spokesperson from a housing association I won't name, are also desperate to get a word in. I sense that something is about to change. I have been walking around with the idea of organising and mobilising at the

district level for more than a year. A name for the collective has been singing around in my head for some time. But... where to start?

When the politicians and housing association representatives leave after the demonstration ended, it starts happening. Various residents' committees, De Bundel housing project, individual local residents, and the national housing movement; we all sense that it is time. Encouraging smiles and combative glances are exchanged, and numbers and email addresses are noted. It all happens organically. A few short months later, the time had come: Nieuw-West in Verzet [Nieuw-West Resists] is born.

Another few short months later, on Saturday 12th of March 2022, the young action group's first demonstration takes place. It marks the beginning of a much-needed, organised, collective struggle for Nieuw-West. A battle we cannot and will not fight alone. A fight that is also about your struggle. Because our stories are intertwined. The poetry of Amsterdam is us.

A city cut off from its flowers – wild and sometimes worn down –
 is but a drawn-out agglomeration of concrete and stone
 A city solely for the rich is a horizon
 whose dazzling dusks have all but gone
 So I ask of you: let us not be deprived of this city's soul
 For those whose lives have hardly partaken in paradise,
 Suspended in a downward tilt
 For those who have to count their pennies
 We take back the city
 for our people who carry the city on their shoulders
 And for those who cannot work, no matter how clearly they imagined it
 We take back the city for ourselves.

I am often reminded of the old man with the orange beanie who came to the consultation hour. His address in Sloterveer, which he did not know how to spell – I wish I were able to pass it on through the ink in the pen in my hand

when, on some care-free day, I would finally sign an affordable and permanent rental contract. I want to be able to turn the page in our history with a cup of tea in my hand as I stare out my window at the familiar Amsterdam autumn trees with a solid roof over my head. Sealing our shared story. Like the kiss on our children's foreheads after reading an and-they-lived-together-happily-ever-after story.

The rent is too high: how our homes became unaffordable

Rodrigo Fernandez

The current housing crisis is the kind of crisis that makes life impossible for one half of the population of the Netherlands, but which doesn't exist at all for the other half. For decades, homeowners have profited from rising property values. Meanwhile, for renters and first-time-buyers this has led to increasingly unaffordable house prices. This makes the current housing crisis different than the housing crisis of the seventies and eighties. While those years were characterised by the dilapidation and vacancy of buildings, the relentless rise in property value today results in the construction of overpriced houses and a massive lack of affordable ones. The solution proposed by most people, especially by politicians, is to simply build new houses on as large a scale as possible. But aside from the fact that new development plans, for a variety of reasons, are faltering, it is by no means certain that more houses would necessarily lead to more affordable housing. What if the price of housing is not so much determined by supply, but rather by the amount of capital available to buyers? And if that is the case, what needs to be done to bring prices back down?

In this piece, financial geographer Rodrigo Fernandez shines a light on these questions. What Rodrigo makes clear is that a radical change is needed to tackle the housing crisis. The bad news is that politicians, administrators, planners and property developers may not be up to the task. The good news is that inspiration can be drawn from a different political economy of housing that existed in the past, showing that the large-scale construction of high-quality and affordable housing, within a short timeframe, is feasible. Political choices, not eternal laws of nature, have caused the problems we now face. The role that

Rodrigo ascribes to the squatting movement is to preserve the consciousness of the possibility of political change.

The text below is the result of an interview I conducted with Rodrigo. I edited his answers into a continuous account. I have drawn from a number of scientific articles authored or co-authored by Rodrigo to provide additional information, where necessary.

Boris (EC)

WHY HOUSING IS SO EXPENSIVE:
THE FINANCIALISATION OF REAL ESTATE

The story of why housing has become so expensive begins in the middle of the nineties. At this time, all kinds of legal opportunities arose for banks to pool mortgages with other loans so as to trade them on financial markets. This is called securitisation and it has caused a major transformation in the financial system. “Homes became the collateral for a worldwide chain of financial products. Property has become a pawn in the financialisation of the entire globe.”¹ It was political choices that made this possible: legally, by covering the risks, and also by regulators and supervisors looking the other way. This is a manufactured situation. There is nothing “natural” about the pricing developments in the property sector.

What in fact happened was that a great deal of debt was injected into the market, allowing people to pay more for a home, making that home more expensive without the property actually being improved qualitatively. The price goes up, solely on the basis that those in the market have more to spend. And those market participants have more to spend because lending norms are eased. Put simply: by making it easier to take on higher mortgage debts, people can offer greater sums of money for a home. In this way,

a veritable Dutch housing boom occurred in the nineties. This is the first period in the life cycle of financialisation, the period of debt-driven price growth. House prices rise – due to greater mortgage debt – faster than incomes do, making housing increasingly unaffordable. While in the seventies and eighties a single income (and not even a very high one) was sufficient to buy a home, nowadays you would need almost three for the average home.

But then you reach a peak, the point at which debt cannot rise any further because debt is ultimately limited by the incomes of those who service that debt. Once that happens, the initial debt-driven price growth gives way to the second phase in the financialisation life cycle: wealth-driven price growth. This period goes hand in hand with the rise of buy-to-let, or the buying up of houses for the sake of renting them out. Aside from the usual stocks and bonds, wealthier households now also look to properties for their investments, made all the more lucrative by the de-regulation of the rental market. “A number of measures were implemented with the specific goal to make investing in rental properties more attractive. Since 2015, for example, the maximum rental price of a property has been tied to the estimated market valuation of the property. As a result, flats in attractive areas that were previously in the regulated social housing segment were transferred to the private sector.”² It has also been made it easier to evict tenants, raise rents and offer only temporary rental contracts.

As this wealth-driven price growth draws on, more and more debt is taken on as well. Buy-to-let homes are not only bought with ready cash but increasingly also with borrowed funds. What arises now is a third phase in that long life cycle of financialisation which brings in the institutional investors, who come to take over from the initial private owners of buy-to-let homes. “More than

ever before, institutional investors face a ‘wall of cash’: a global surplus of financial liquidity. Pension funds, insurance companies, and large multinationals all have growing amounts of capital that need to be managed and yield a return. Against this exceptional background – a capital surplus searching for investment opportunities – institutional investors have become big players on the markets for residential property.”³ Whether this third phase in the financialisation of property will persist remains to be seen. But if this process becomes a success, it will only bring house prices even further out of balance with incomes.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BUILDING NEW HOMES

Evidently, what makes housing unaffordable is not a lack of supply, a problem to be solved by simply building more homes. To be sure, supply is currently too low. Housing construction has trailed behind population figures and there is a genuine scarcity. But the real problems are to be found in changes in the political economy within which housing construction takes place. It is not simply a matter of “Build, Build, Build” like the ruling right-wing vvd party alleges. The question is how to make the building of affordable homes possible again. Just building new homes (raising supply) will not automatically make housing affordable again.

There is an important historical component to draw from here. The majority of social housing in Amsterdam was built by housing associations. “Social housing construction dominated reconstruction after the Second World War. Between 1945 and 1985, the share of association-built homes rose from less than 15 per cent to nearly 40 per cent of the entire Dutch housing stock.”⁴ The development plans in Amsterdam, which brought us iconic neighbourhoods like the Bijlmer and Nieuw-West, all

came about through close cooperation between the municipality and housing associations, and were financed by pension funds (more on those later). Hardly any private entities were involved in this process and market incentives played no role at all.

This has been crucial for the vibrancy of Amsterdam's urban space, because the market does not care about essential matters like schools, playgrounds, cultural centres; in short, all the things that make the city not only liveable but interesting as well. Private property developers want nothing more than to sell every square centimetre they build or rent it out for the highest price. But for the people who actually come to live here, there has to be some diversity.

We just cannot let the market build these sorts of things, because it will leave us with one gigantic, collective market failure. For a long time, there was a keen awareness of this problem in the Netherlands and a whole political economy was organised to support urban development. But this political economy – which was so strong in the Netherlands and carried in it a powerful tradition, the planning tradition, involving graduates of the TU Delft who carried this spirit all over the world – in truth, is completely gone. As a result, the current view on housing construction is incredibly simplistic, neglecting all the knowledge that was built up. The guiding principle now is profitability for property investors and construction companies.

This leads to all kinds of problems, the most important of which is the price at which the market is willing to build, and the profit margins that prop up this price. The prices that come out of this calculation are leagues away from what households can afford. We cannot let ourselves be guided by the whims of investors. Renting out a 50 square meter studio flat for €2000 a month might be

completely normal in the eyes of an investor, and such an investor might even calculate a ballpark figure showing you it is all very reasonable indeed. But if that is what is considered reasonable, we have to radically reorganise how things are done. Because, of course, it is nowhere near reasonable from the perspective of the tenant. For the tenant, it is simply unaffordable. In a political economy regime like this, only those with a lot to spend and very little choice will find their way to housing, and for the most part these are expats. But those in normal jobs or those trying to start a family are locked out. Asking ourselves how, for whom and with what intentions we build is now far more urgent than simply pushing for more construction. Because in the current model a price is set that is only interesting for the investor, not for the tenant.

The regulation of rental housing, therefore, should not be limited to social housing but must include the higher segments as well. The focus of regulation should be to ensure generally affordable housing. Really, anything above €1000 is already unaffordable for most people. If this means that investors pull out, then the system must be arranged differently: housing has to become a public task. Because the purpose of building homes is not to generate profit but to provide people with housing, which is a fundamental function of a city. The creation of houses as private cash-generating units deserves no priority at all. The only interest that matters is that of tenants'. This means developing much stronger protection for renters, perhaps even to the point that investing in property is no longer a profitable business.

A relevant aspect to consider here is the cost of renting compared to a mortgage. Homeowners build up an extreme amount of wealth extremely quickly, compared to renters. So, renters are immediately at a disadvantage already, and doubly so when we consider that their monthly

costs are also higher than those of homeowners. In this way, homeownership has become the single most important driver of inequality. Owning an average home allows a household to increase their wealth by an entire annual salary per year. A house worth €400,000 whose value goes up by 10% in a year, brings in €40,000 of new wealth annually. Each night, you go to bed and wake up a little richer. This does not happen for renters, and that is a massive injustice. All this has arisen in a relatively short time and of course comes on top of all the other channels contributing to inequality, like the more classic inequality between labour and capital. But empirically, homeownership is the largest driver of growing inequality. What's more, this is strongly generational. The older you are, the longer you have been in this rat race, the greater your wealth has grown. If you rake in €40,000 each year, it matters a great deal whether you have been in this game for two years or ten. Consider also that interest rates are rising now and home prices are starting to drop slightly. The people who just got in are already seeing negative returns. Of course, these are the youngest people. Wealth is therefore not only unequally divided in the Netherlands, but this division is also strongly generationally determined. And this leads to its own problems and dynamics. Put simply: the younger you are, the more you find yourself at a disadvantage.

All the most important lessons from urban planning and development have been completely forgotten. We no longer know how to build cities that are not only affordable but also liveable and interesting. A really interesting city is one in which you encounter exciting new things, a city that allows for exciting things to happen. None of that happens in a city that leaves housing construction to project developers guided purely by profit. It is important to realise that this market failure is preceded by a political failure. A failure of the elites, who have transformed

housing into a market which cannot but fail to serve the basic needs of ordinary people.

HOW PENSION FUNDS COULD FORM PART OF A SOLUTION

Solutions to the housing crisis are not easy to implement. The problems we face now have developed over the past forty years. Within the current institutional context, it would be impossible to strike out all these problems at once. This is because the most important players on the housing market, including the housing associations, have been financialised. They are trapped in the logic of financial markets, the only place they can still draw funding from. But if housing construction is dependent on the market for its financing – dependent on private investors, that is – this necessarily leads to an acute lack of democratic control. This is a systemic problem that cannot be solved easily at the level of municipal politics by well-intentioned city councillors and civil servants.

Before we can do anything, we need to realise how deep the rot has spread and how big this problem is. The important thing to remember is that a completely different system for financing, not just housing construction but the other public goods that made up the welfare state as well, has already worked remarkably well in the Netherlands for a very long time. For a large part of the previous century, pension funds embedded in the public sphere played an essential role in financing public goods.⁵ The largest pension fund in the Netherlands was founded, oddly enough, not to distribute pensions. It was founded to solve the problem of making Dutch state finances, Dutch state debt, independent from the whims of the turbulent financial markets after the First World War. How much better it would be to owe our debts not to foreign bondholders, they thought, but to our own pension funds, controlled by ourselves.

That was the guiding notion in the twenties of the previous century that led to the creation of the ABP, the pension fund for civil servants and the largest in the country. Up until 1978, the totality of Dutch public debt was owned by the ABP. There were no transferable public debt securities. The ABP financed everything from the construction of homes to dykes and infrastructure. In this way, the ABP fulfilled the role of a central financial planning mechanism.

The crucial change came in 1996, when the ABP was made independent, lost its public character and started down the path of financialisation. The ABP held about 5% of its wealth in stocks and bonds at the time, practically none of it in foreign economies. Five years later almost all of it was invested in stocks and bonds. Nowadays it is fully accepted that it is hardly invested in the Netherlands at all. The ABP stopped financing public institutions and all the elements of the Dutch welfare state directly, pushing all these entities into the hands of the banks. Around the same time, the state also withdrew as a property owner, leading housing associations⁶ and universities⁷ to become financialised as well, adjusting to the whims of the banks and the demands they set for financing.

Bringing a (pre-financialisation) ABP back into cooperation with all these underlying entities of the public sphere is an absolute precondition to win back any kind of democratic control over all these domains. It is the only way to break housing construction and other public goods free from the profit-driven logic of the financial markets. As long as this democratic control eludes us, the profit motive will continue to be the determining factor in housing construction and the goal of delivering affordable housing will never gain traction. All this is to point out that a thorough rethinking of the pension system (essentially the delayed wages of workers in the Netherlands) is inextricably tied to solving the housing crisis.

The problem now is that neoliberalism is the dominant current at economics faculties. These economists have gained a kind of magical status but are illiterate in social questions; they just do not understand them. To even speak of alternative systems, like financing through the ABP, is simply unthinkable to them. Because such a system – a state that funds its activities by itself – does not live by the so-called laws of the market. When you look at a daycare centre as a source of profit instead of a service to care for children, or clinics as cash-generating units instead of a place to provide care, then these perspectives are so radically opposed to each other, that the one will never understand the other. This is what makes the dominant narrative held by all relevant economic actors – be it academics, the central planning office, the central bank or the Ministry of Finance – so bluntly one-sided. As a result, the way we talk and think about solutions is inevitably limited: calls go out to make housing construction more profitable for investors in order to incentivise production. This is supposed to raise supply and theoretically cause rental prices to drop. In other words, we should raise rents in order to lower rents. Clearly, the dominant narrative is fact-free and logically inconsistent. And it is all made possible by a society lacking checks and balances, lacking ideas that run counter to received wisdom, with counter-hegemonic forces that are just not strong enough.

THE SQUATTING MOVEMENT AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

If we want to build these counter-hegemonic forces and think up new ideas, we will need a flourishing squatting movement. Squatting is the creation of spaces that temporarily disqualify the rules, norms and laws of the capitalist system, and create opportunities for other ideas and utopias. This is an important function of anarchist free

spaces: the creation of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ), the temporary real existence of alternative modes of living.⁸ And this is a precondition for developing new ideas, because doing so within this ubiquitous capitalist system is next to impossible. Squatters have always fulfilled this role, though circumstances have changed. The rise of the squatting movement came at a time of urban decline in the seventies, which left many spots vacant or abandoned even as the need for housing grew. But the past ten to fifteen years have seen the city being filled up to the last millimetre, as every corner became more and more valuable. That is the major difference between then and now: the current housing crisis is going hand in hand with extreme price growth, instead of the dilapidation and vacancy of buildings of earlier times. That also brings with it a change in the character of the city.

Anyone can see that Amsterdam is quickly becoming a clinical city, commercialising more and more and becoming increasingly dehumanised. There is less and less space for original initiatives, for personal input or personal character. The city is degenerating into a monoculture dominated by international shopping franchises and Nutella shops, becoming less interesting for people by the day. In time, this could be the deathblow for a city like Amsterdam, still holding onto its past as the “magic city” where everything was possible and anything was permitted (if we are to believe the mythologising, that is). It is developing into a city that is both swarmed by mass tourism and is bogging itself down with rules to deal with that same mass tourism – which will never work but will succeed in making the city a less exciting place to be. Ultimately, only that which generates profit will survive as the entire idea of a “right to the city” fades away. While once people came together in the city and encountered others – whether you enjoyed it or not – people now live in distinct bubbles just

barely brushing past each other. The city is fragmenting. The claim you once had, that this city also belongs to you, is gone. And that is the great tragedy of it all. The crisis in residential property is having an enormous background effect on the city itself. The city is really a commons, something that ought to belong to us all. But now it has been captured by the interests of capital. And that is the hardest thing to undo.

That is why squatting is of vital importance: those temporary spaces it creates make a life outside the system possible. And that is an undeniable prerequisite for the creation of alternatives to the status quo and the developing of new solutions to the housing crisis. For that reason, there is still much wider support for it among the public than it might seem. Squatting is not just a solution to your own living situation; it is a public good for the whole city.

NOTES

- 1 Jelke Bosma, Cody Hochstenbach, Rodrigo Fernandez, Manuel Aalbers, 'De politiek van buy-to-let', *Beleid en Maatschappij*, 48:3 (2020), 288–298, hier 290.
- 2 Ibid. 295–6.
- 3 Rodrigo Fernandez, 'Een muur van geld op zoek naar vastgoed', *Agora*, 31:4 (2015), 8–12, hier 8; Rodrigo Fernandez, Ilona Hartlief, en Kees Hudig, Kees, *Blackstone als nieuwe huisbaas. Hoe grote beleggers terrein dreigen te winnen op de Nederlandse woningmarkt* (Amsterdam: SOMO, 2022), 9.
- 4 Bosma et al., 'De politiek van buy-to-let', 295.
- 5 Rodrigo Fernandez, *Explaining the Decline of the Amsterdam Financial Centre: Globalizing Finance and the Rise of a Hierarchical Intercity Network* (PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2011), 45–77.
- 6 Manuel Aalbers, J. M. van Loon, en Rodrigo Fernandez, 'The Financialization of a Social Housing Provider', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 41:4 (2017), 572–587.
- 7 Ewald Engelen, Rodrigo Fernandez, en Reijer Hendrikse, 'How Finance Penetrates its Other: A Cautionary Tale on the Financialization of a Dutch University', *Antipode*, 46:4 (2014), 1072–1091.
- 8 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003).

A selection of posters from the Amator Archives: collective struggle against unaffordable housing in Amsterdam *Werker Collective*

Amator Archives (from the Latin *amator*, lover) is an open source platform initiated by Werker Collective to support the production of political imagination through processes of counter-archiving, self-publishing and collective study. The materials in the archive are classified in crates (categories) and shelves (narratives) by its users, in function of their research needs. In 2009 Werker started collecting documents and visual materials with the mission of preserving and spreading the legacy of self-organised documentary practices. These documents originate from second-hand bookstores and flea markets, donated by friends and comrades, or are produced during the collective's artistic and activist collaborations. Since then the initiative grew into an archive of more than 3000 historical and contemporary documents and is ever-expanding. The archive is physically located in the Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood of Amsterdam and is regularly activated through conversations, workshops, performances, installations and publications.

GEEN ONTRUIMING!
DE BULMERKRAKERS
ROEPEN OP TOT STEUN.
VAN BULMERMEER TOT JORDAAN
 (o.a. pension de tudgeest) **EN**
NIEUWMARKT WORDEN NU
BEWONERS MET HUISUITZET-
TING BEDREIGD. 
STOP DIT WANBELEID VAN
GEMEENTE EN HUISBAZEN.
WONEN IS GEEN GUNST
MAAR EEN RECHT.

DEMONSTREER MEE
ZAT. 2 NOV. 14 UUR MUSEUMPLEIN (KLM
GEBOUW)
PARAPLU MEENEMEN! KOMITEE "SOLIDARITEIT MET DEKRAKERS
VAN DE BULMER. TEL: 967557.

25 NOVEMBER
E DORO,
SAN WI O DOE?



- 30 000 surinaamse werklözen
- 45 000 woningzoekenden
- racistisch politiegeweld
- racistische visumplicht

BIGI MASSAMEETING foe LOSON
PROTEST TEGEN RACISTISCH BELEID

Zondag 9 november
 aanvraag 1300 uur
 Rottaanhus
 Rozengracht 133
 Amsterdam

Sprekers van LOSON, werklözen, woningzoekenden,
 huisvrouwen, en andere organisaties
 muziekgroep Redi Dron, toneelgroep Mahandra

KONDREMAN, BONDROE KON NA WANI
ROTHAANHUIS 9 NOVEMBER NA DRAPE WI DEI

HERE WE ARE



UNDOCUMENTED
MIGRANTS
WELCOME

WE
ZIEN
DOOR
DE KAN-
TOREN

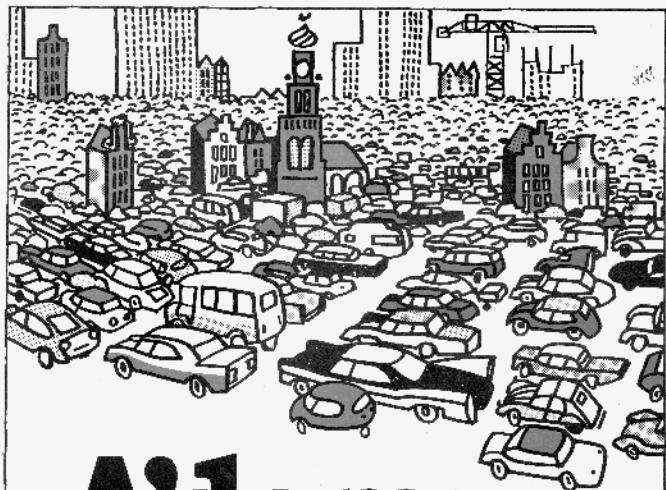
HET BOS
NIET
MEER

daarom

OP HET
WATERLOO VLEIN

29, 30 APR., 1 MEI

HET ANTI CITY CIRKUS



A'dam, denk effé na:

Allemaal grote gebouwen of groot en klein leuk door elkaar?
 Hele buurten slopen of beetje bij beetje vernieuwen?
 Steeds meer auto's of verstandig beperken?
 Pleinen vol bankgebouwen en hotels of lekker gezellig?
 Parkeergarages: autoverstoppers of juist autolokkers?

moet je hart dr aan dan?

7 april s'middags 2u. Roothaanhuis Rozengr., s'avonds 7u. Aula Spui



STRAAT VRIJ!

aktiedag 15 sept.

**de straat vrij voor toneel,
muziek, mime, feest enz.**

DEMONSTRATIEVE OPTOCHT

15.00u vanaf BEURSPLEIN

EIND MANIFESTATIE 17.00u

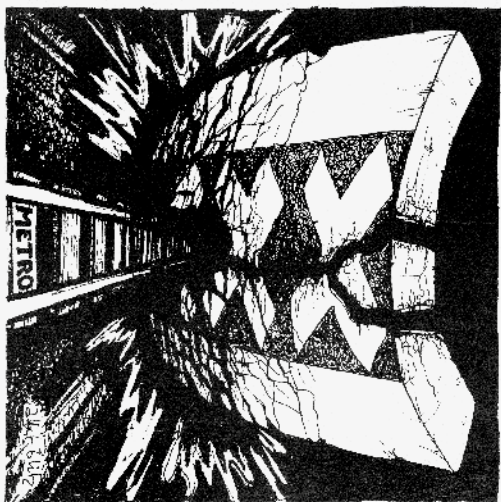
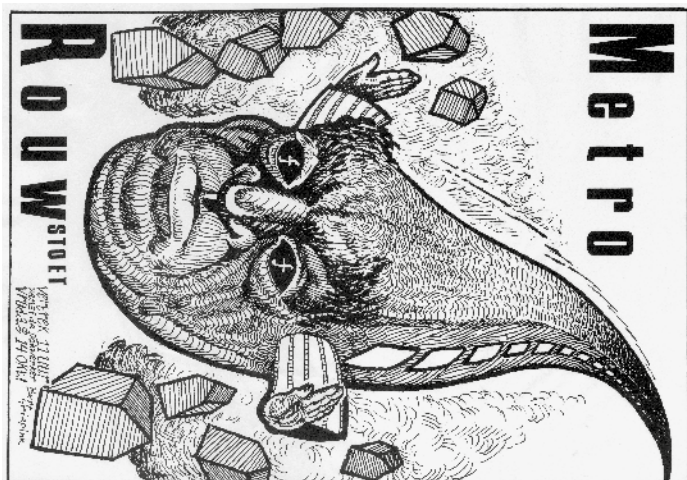
WATERLOOPLEIN

informatie: 24 52 49

opgeven: rapenburg 58

AKTIE GROEP AMSTERDAM VRIJ

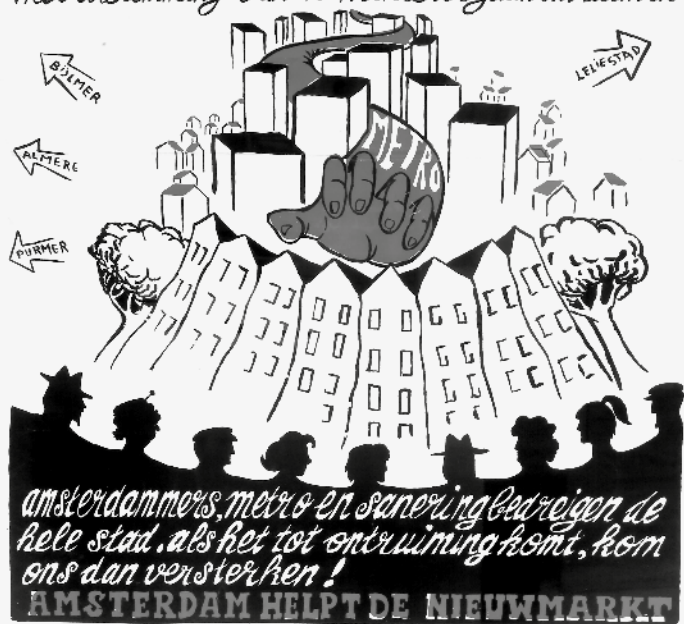




inlichtingen: metrocafé 't hoekje om, lastageweg 1 a 'dam tel 65089
 aktiegroep nieuwmarkt, Keizersstraat 2a a 'dam tel 292660
 bar roodmerk behaaienastraat a 'dam tel 263150
 nieuwmarkt nieuwsdienst 19.00-07.00 uur tel 261765
 voor giften, bestellen van metrorapport: 3.80 giro 2541151 tlv m.de boer, amsterdam

DE NIEUWMARKT EROP OF ERONDER

nu de raadsverkiezingen weer achter de rug zijn, neemt de dreiging voor de 200 bewoners op de metro oostlijn toe. In de vakantietijd als de 2^{de} kamer en de gemeenteraad niet bijeenkomen en veel amsterdammers weg zijn, wil kammeres met toestemming van 'n minister gaan onttruimen



KONTAKTADRESSEN: KAFE HET HOEKJE OMT-HOEK : ASIAGEWEG-OLDE WAAL, KOSTIEHUIS ROODMERK TEL: 253150

VOLKS VLIJT
Paleis
tuin
FEEST

29-30 APRIL en 1 MEI
OP HET WATERLOOPLEIN GAT

CONTACT ADRES WERKPLAATS-TEL.-274437 GEM.GIRO-6393 t.v. ELLEN ZIJL

HET ANTI-CITY CIRCUS

29.30 APRIL
& 1 MEI

VEROORZAAKT
DE FEESTELYKE
SLAG OM HET
WATERLOOPLEIN
TEN EINDE HET
PLEIN VOOR VOLKSVLYT
OP TE RICHTEN

WIN
DEZE
SLAG
MET

TROFFELS
HARKEN
PLANIEN
GITAREN
HAMERS
SPYKERS
TENIEN

&


U ZELF

STEUNSTORTINGEN
VOLGAARNE OP
GEM. GIRD. N^o
Z 6393
T.M.V. ELLEN ZIJL

WATERLOOPLEIN

STEUNSTORTINGEN
VOLGAARNE OP
GEM. GIRD. N^o
Z 6393
T.M.V. ELLEN ZIJL

het Plein




23 aug

anti city circus, dagelijks bereikbaar van 5-8, tel 253150

© 2004 anti city circus

het Plein




23 aug

anti city circus, dagelijks bereikbaar van 5-8, tel 253150

© 2004 anti city circus

het Plein




23 aug

anti city circus, dagelijks bereikbaar van 5-8, tel 253150

© 2004 anti city circus

het Plein

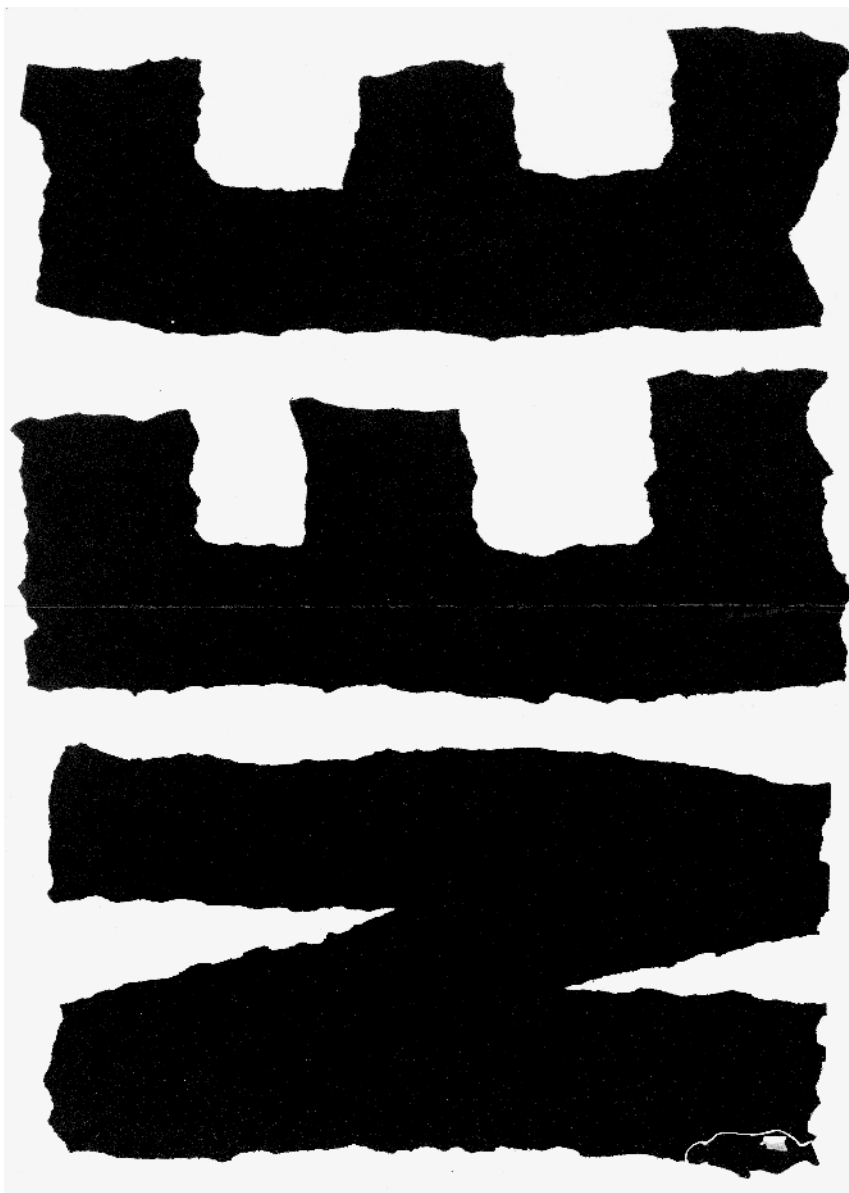


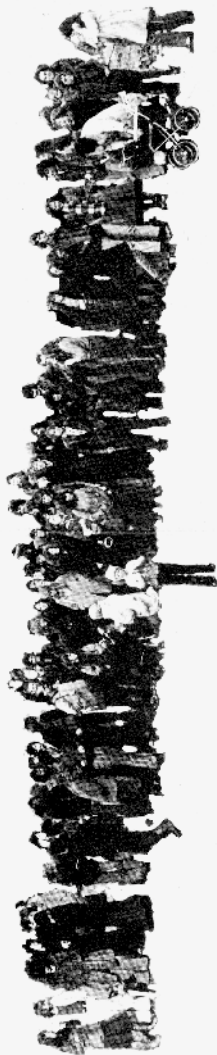
23 aug

anti city circus, dagelijks bereikbaar van 5-8, tel 253150

© 2004 anti city circus







ZEGGEN WIJ TEGEN DE METRO EN ONTRUIMING - JA TEGEN HET
DIREKT BOUWEN VAN HOO WONINGEN IN DE NIEUWMARKT.

WIJ BLYVEN HIER WONEN!

DE 260 BEWONERS VAN HET METROTRACEE.

NIEUWMARKT NOVEMBER 1974

STEIN HET VERZET VAN DE NIEUWMARKT STROFT OP BEJK. 1028 99 170. TINY A TER MARSCHE • LIJSTER NAAR RADIO SIRENIE. EIKE
VRIJDAG MIDDAG 5.30 OP 195 M • BEL NIEMANSDIENST TEL. 241765 DABEZ VA 1900 WUB • WACOBANK • LEES HET METROTRACÉ VAN DE NIEUWMARKT
VERVOLGBAAR IN CAPE 1 • HOEKE LASTAGEVEST 1 OF KOPFTEBEAR 1000AVERK BETHANENSTR. 20 ZE DLUK 13 50 • KOMT ONS HELPEN ALS HET ZOVERE 10 1111?

GENTRIFICATION / HIGH RENT

Artists, galleries and museums are used to GENTRIFY neighborhoods with low income housing. When the BIG CAPITAL moves in, it pushes out the artists by imposing staggeringly HIGH RENTS. The same cycle repeats in the next neighborhood, until there is no place to go for my neighbor with a lower income, or for me with my artistic practice.

ARTISTS CAN'T AFFORD
 ARTISTS CAN'T AFFORD
 ARTISTS CAN'T AFFORD
 ARTISTS CAN'T AFFORD

TO PAY THE RENT
 TO PAY THE RENT
 TO PAY THE RENT
 TO PAY THE RENT

EITHER

SEND IN YOUR TESTIMONY
 ARTWORKERRIGHTS.ONLINE





NACHTWACHT IN DE NIEUWMARKT

MAANDAG 7 APRIL A.S. OM MIDDERNACHT



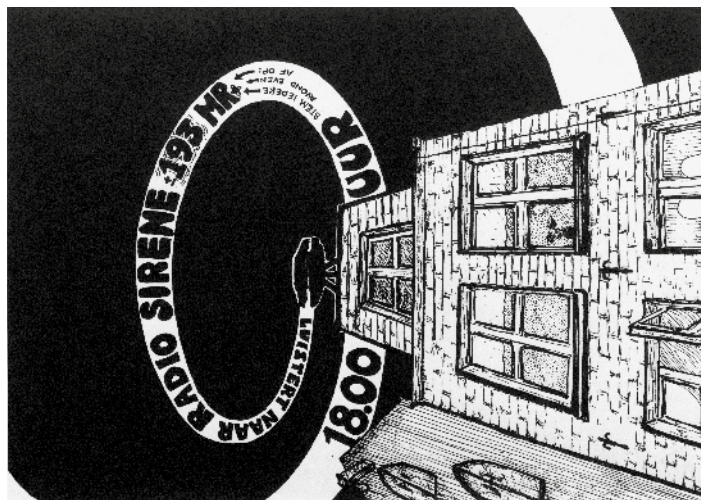
BRENG JE
BED MEE

ALLERLEI
VERTIER

VERHINDER DOOR JE AANWEZIGHEID
GEBRUIK VAN GEWELD DOOR DE OVERHEID
ER IS EERST 'N MEETING IN DE SMEDERIJ om 8 uur

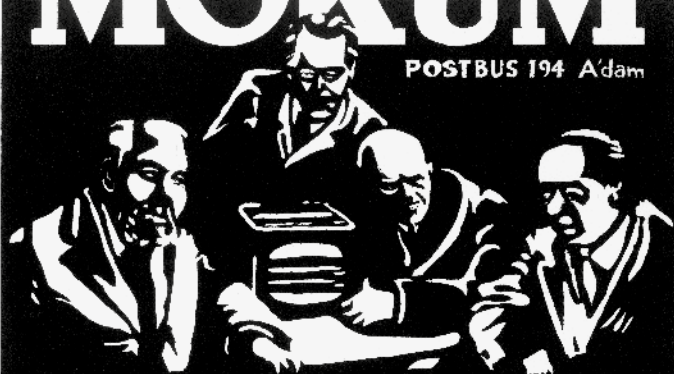
**HELP ZE WILLEN
DE
NIEUWMARKT
ABORTEREN**





RADIO MOKUM

POSTBUS 194 A'dam



BERICHT UIT DE NIEUWMARKT
I E DERE ZONDAG 15 uur:
230 mtr. (1304 KHz)

LEVEN



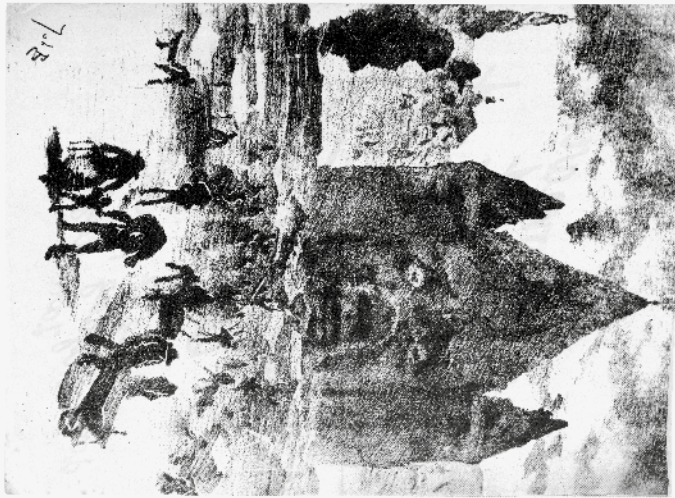
JOHN VAN DER LINDEN

NIEUWMARKT

23 MAART 1975

KEIZERSSTR. 12*, AMSTERDAM

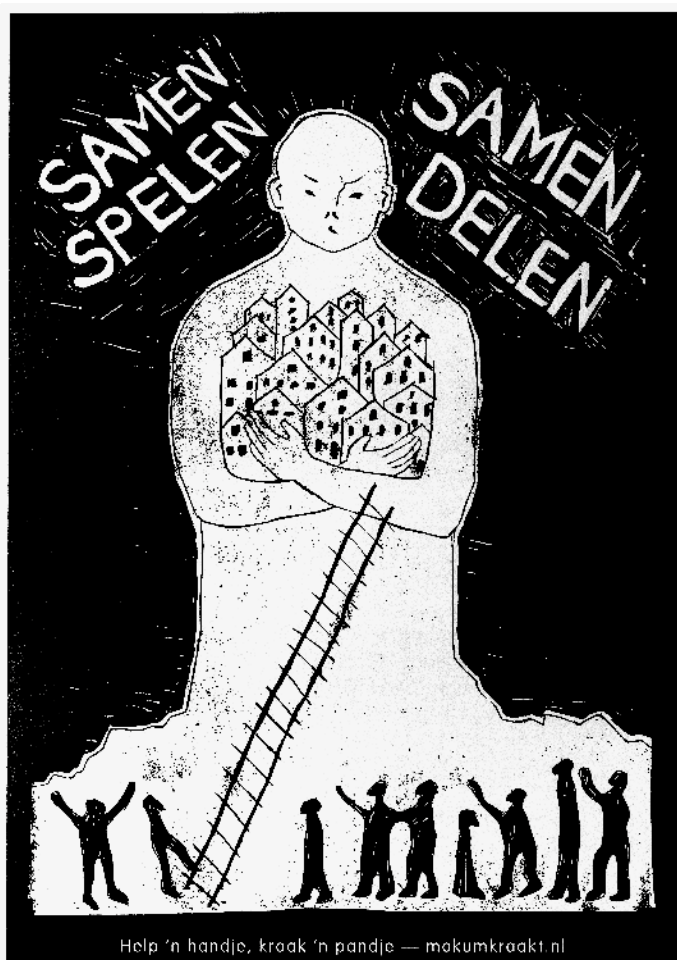
Hang dit affiche voor uw raam. Laat zien dat het ook u aangaat.

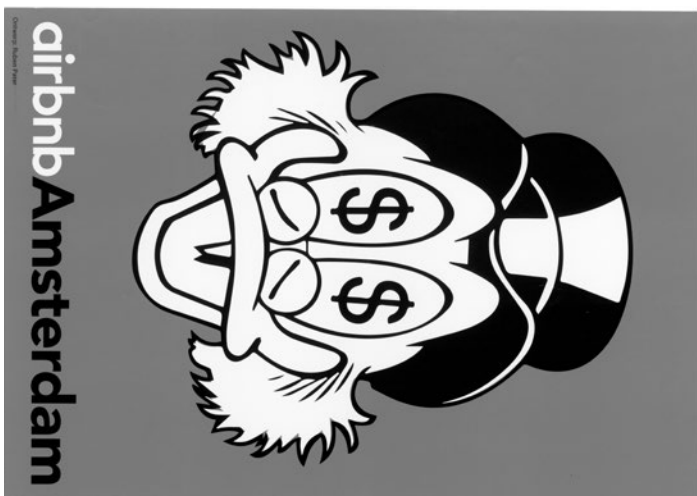


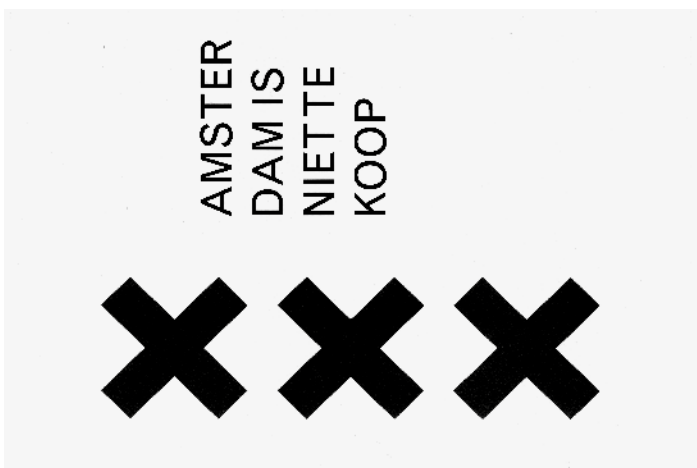
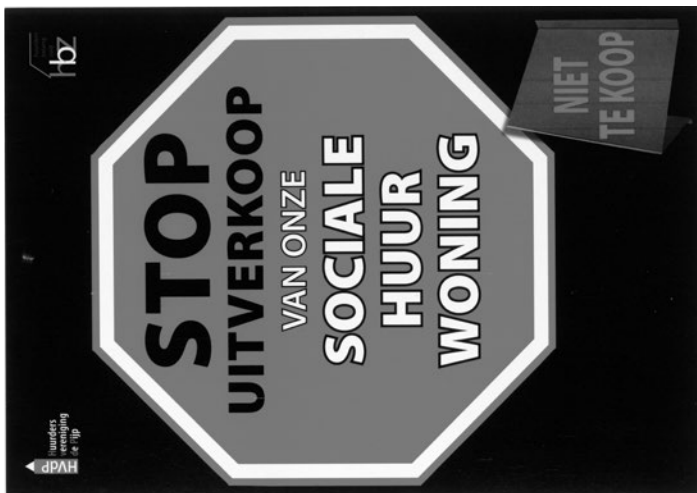
de Nieuwmarkt
 geeft niet
 de geest...
 maar geel!
 een feest!
 September.
 donderdag 12
 vrijdag 13
 zaterdag 14

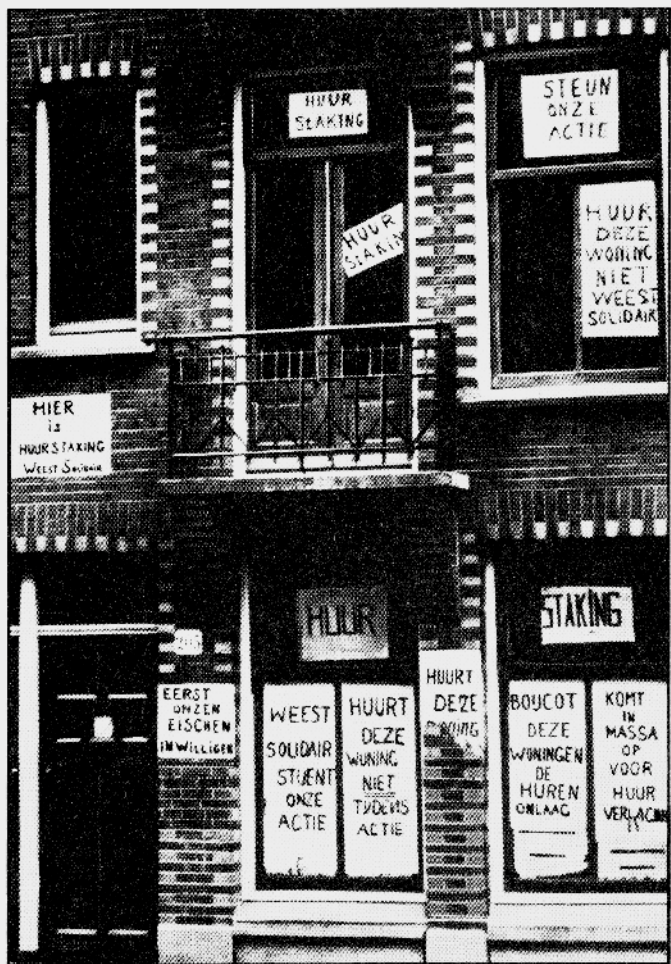


Help 'n handje, kraak 'n pandje. — mokumkraakf.nl









Van Beuningenstraat 205: geboycot, Amsterdam 1933



300 BEWONERS VAN
 VILENBURG RAPENBURG VALKENBURG
 NIEUWMARKT- EN BETHANIENBUURT

HEBBEN 1 - JUNI 1970 OP EEN OPENBARE VERGADERING IN HET MOZES & AARONHUIS BESLOTEN:

GEEN HUISUITZETTING GEEN SLOOP IN ONZE BUURT

WIJ WONEN HIER. WIJ BEPALEN WAT HIER GEBEURD.

WIJ KUNNEN ONS OOK WEL BETERE HUIZEN VOORSTELLEN OM IN TE WONEN, MAAR DIE KUNNEN WE NIET BETALEN, TENZIJ WE NOG HARDER GAAN WERKEN OF ONZE VROUWEN ER BIJ GAAN VERDIENEN. DOORDAT ONZE WONINGEN AFGEBROKEN WORDEN, WORDT DE WONINGNOOD IN STAND GEHOUDEN. MET DE BOUW VAN DURE NIEUWBOUWWONINGEN WORDT DE WONINGNOOD VOOR ONS NIET OPGELOST.

Het **WONINGBELEID** is er op gericht **GOEDKOPE WONINGEN zoveel mogelijk AF TE BREKEN.**

De huren van **GERESTAUREERDE WONINGEN** zijn voor ons **ONBETAALBAAR.**

Zolang **ONZE HUIZEN** nog staan worden ze **haast NIET ONDERHOUDEN** en

worden de HUREN steeds weer VERHOOGD.

Het tekort aan woningen wordt stelselmatig in stand gehouden om ONS TE DWINGEN de KRANKZINNIG HOGE HUREN te gaan betalen in de BUITENWIJKEN VAN AMSTERDAM.

**WIJ LATEN ONS NIET DWINGEN
WIJ LEVEN NIET ALLEEN OM DE HUUR TE BETALEN**

ONZE HUIZEN WORDEN NIET AFGEBROKEN!

WIJ ZULLEN IEDERE HUISUITZETTING, VERNIIELEN

EN DICHTTIMMEREN VAN WONINGEN EN SLOOP IN

ONZE BUURT VERHINDEREN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

**SLOPERS POLITIEAGENTEN AMBTENAREN
VAN NU AF AAN IS AL DIT WERK IN ONZE BUURT**

B E S M E T



"deze mensen hebben niet alleen stenen gegooid naar de politie... maar naar onze democratie, naar ons allen!" zei procureur generaal van Dijken op 23 februari j.l. in het

NIEUW MARKTPROCES



Kees Lauriks
Manuel Gomez en
Hans Markus zijn nu dus ook
tot ten hoogste 26 weken

**VEROORDEELD
NAMENS ONS ALLEN?**

- 171 *Geen Ontruiming! De Bijlmerkrakers roepen op tot steun.* Komitee “Solidariteit met de krakers van de Bijlmer” Amsterdam 1974. IISG (reprint).
- 172 *November e doro, san wi o doe?* LOSON (Utrecht). Amsterdam 1980. IISG (reprint)
Here we are. Undocumented migrants welcome. Here we are support group. Amsterdam 2020.
- 173 *Geen Mens is Illegaal. Sluit Detentiecentrum Rotterdam.* Stop the war on Migrants. Rotterdam 2021.
Saneren-Deporteren Speculeren. Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt. Ernest Annyas. Amsterdam 1971.
- 174 *We zien door de kantoren, het bos niet meer.* Anti-City Circus. Amsterdam 1978.
- 175 *A'dam, denk effe na: moet je hart d'r aan dan?* Ontwerpgroep Spinoza. Amsterdam 1976.
- 176 *Straat Vrij!* Aktie Groep Amsterdam Vrij. Gerda van der Veen / Campi. Amsterdam 1979.
- 177 *Amsterdam Pleegt Zelfmoord.* De Lastige Amsterdammer. Hans Sijses. Amsterdam 1971.
- 178 *Metro Rouwstoet.* Bert Griepink. Amsterdam 1977.
Metro. Albert Blitz. Amsterdam 1975.
- 179 *De Nieuwmarkt erop of eronder.* Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt. Bert Griepink. Amsterdam 1974.
- 180 *Volkslijtpaleis tuinfeest.* Anti-city Circus. Amsterdam 1978.
- 181 *Het Anti-City Circus veroorzaakt de feestelijke slag om het Waterlooplein.* Anti-city Circus. Martijn. Amsterdam 1978.
- 182 *Het Plein.* Anti-City Circus. Amsterdam 1980. (Series of 4 posters).
- 183 *Nix Plat!* Wijkcentrum d'Oude Stadt. Amsterdam 1972.
- 184 *Nee. Wij Blijven hier Wonen!* Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt. Amsterdam 1974.
- 186 *Gentrification / High Rent.* Art Worker Rights. Werker Collective. Amsterdam 2021.
- 187 *Kunstenaars steunen de Nieuwmarkt.* Opland. Amsterdam 1975.
- 188 *De huidenstraatruuk.* AMRO-bank. Amsterdam 1983.
- 189 *Nachtwacht in de Nieuwmarkt.* Amsterdam 1975.
- 190 *Help ze willen de Nieuwmarkt aborteren.* Binding rechts B&W Aanslag provocatus. De Vrije Zeefdrukker. Amsterdam circa 1975.

- 191 *Luistert naar Radio Sirene*. Amsterdam 1971. IISG (reprint).
Ontmoeting met 40 Fransen in Roodmerk. Koffiebar Roodmerk.
Amsterdam 1976.
- 192 *Radio Mokum: Bericht uit de Nieuwmarkt*. Amsterdam circa
1975.
- 193 *Leven: Nieuwmarkt*. Dane Wilson Beerling. Amsterdam 1975.
IISG (reprint).
- 194 *De Nieuwmarkt geeft niet de geest, maar wel een feest!*
Johan Braakensiek. Amsterdam 1974. (double-sided
poster)
- 195 *Mokum Kraakt. Help 'n handje, kraak 'n pandje*. Mokum Kraakt.
Amsterdam 2022.
- 196 *Samen Spelen, Samen delen*. Mokum Kraakt. Amsterdam 2022.
- 197 *5 Jaar Witte Kinderplan*. Collector: Steef Davidson. Amster-
dam 1974. IISG (reprint)
- 198 *Airbnb Amsterdam*. Ruben Pater. Amsterdam 2018.
Demonstreer, Red Amsterdam: Stop de Metro. De Vrije Zeefdrukker.
Amsterdam 1975.
- 199 *Stop Uitverkoop van onze Sociale Huur Woning*. Huurders
Vereniging De Pijp. Niet te Koop. Amsterdam 2020.
Amsterdam is Niet te Koop. Yuri Veerman. Amsterdam 2018.
- 200 *Huur Staking*. Spaarndammerbuurt. Amsterdam 1931. Stads-
archief Amsterdam (reprint).
- 201 *Anti-City Circus Waterlooplein*. Anti-City Circus. Amsterdam
1978.
300 *Bewoners van Uilenburg, Rapenburg, Valkenburg, Nieuw-
markt en Bethanienbuurt. Geen Huisuitzetting, Geen Sloop in
Onze Buurt*. Amsterdam 1970.
- 204 *Je Bent Te Laat*. Yuri Veerman. Amsterdam 2021.
- 205 *Metro-snelweg, grote buurtbijeekomst*. Albert Blitz. Amsterdam
1970.
Feestelijke openingsborrel van Het Bouwcafé. Amsterdam 1981.
IISG (reprint)
- 206 *Nieuwmarktproces*. Albert Blitz. Amsterdam 1976.

The possibility of an escape: a story of homelessness in Amsterdam

I find Jimo at a day shelter in the Willemstraat in the Jordaan neighbourhood. The building's front is graced with the words "For the People's Salvation". It's the name of a Christian association which first opened a nursery on this spot in the nineteenth century and has been operating here ever since. The goal back then was as much to improve the living conditions for children in the Jordaan slums as it was to "win them over to Jesus". Nowadays, the shelter is still run by Christians, primarily from the Dutch Bible Belt, but evangelisation no longer seems to be a key objective. Jimo brought an Iraqi man here who became homeless after a divorce. Jimo is trying to guide him through the institutional landscape of homeless care in Amsterdam. He spent the last five nights sleeping in a shelter – as a mystery guest, in his words. He is probing the conditions to find out how people are treated in the shelters. He wants to see how things are run, in order to raise potential issues with the management. No one has asked him, let alone paid him, to do this.

Jimo has been without a home for roughly two decades. It wouldn't be entirely accurate to say he has chosen to be, but it is the result of some of his own conscious decisions, such as living without property. I'm not sure the word "activist" applies to him. In many ways, it wouldn't do him justice. On a daily basis, he concerns himself with the lives of the unhoused and the world he shares with them.

This world is being kept out of sight of the official city as much as possible. The new, rich, gentrified Amsterdam is being sanitised. It is becoming a city that gladly presents

itself as a hub within globalised capitalism. But while the fin-tech sector opens new headquarters in the city centre and new luxury apartments spring up everywhere, poverty and inequality are on the rise. The recent urban development programmes benefit real estate investors and wealthy homeowners, but make housing unaffordable for everyone else. Unsurprisingly, the number of homeless people has doubled over the same period in which housing prices went through the roof. While the government seems incapable (or unwilling) of tackling the structural lack of affordable housing, the approach towards the unhoused consistently fails to address the actual problems. The official view seems to be that there should not really be homeless people, but if they do exist, they need to be managed or contained.

But how that works out in practice is something we are rarely exposed to. The world of the unhoused is shrouded in stereotypes and indifference, and is barely considered from the smooth surface of a tidied-up city. Nonetheless, this world is all around. I am meeting with Jimo to discuss that world. We talk about his life, his experiences with the authorities, and we talk about the right to a dignified and independent life for all.

A PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM

At the day shelter in the Willemsstraat, Jimo explains to me that this is one of the few places of its kind that don't demand identification of those that enter. No registration or intake is required here.

“This is a Christian shelter; some people have issues with that, but I don't. The average liberal doesn't do a thing for the homeless but these people do. Most of the people working here come from the Veluwe, from deeply Christian communities. They open this shelter three days a week,

from eleven in the morning to two-thirty in the afternoon, and everyone is welcome. Anyone, not just the homeless but the neighbours as well, people with limited incomes. At other shelters – the more institutionalised ones – you have to do an intake first, give them your name and personal information. But not here. Here you can remain anonymous. So you meet people here you wouldn't meet elsewhere. You can get free coffee, tea, sandwiches and soup, even clothing. They have nice clothing here, it looks just like a shop. They also host some events and hand out gift bags for Christmas. People come here to regain their strength, if it's cold outside they sit here a while. I don't come too often myself, only three times this past year.

“I keep seeing new people, it's a dynamic world for the homeless. Nowadays, about a third come from EU countries, a third are undocumented – Algerians, Moroccans, Sub-Saharan Africans – another third is Dutch, the classic homeless, let's say. So it's a bit of a mix. Everyone is welcome here.”

That is not the case everywhere. Day shelters do not provide a place to sleep. They are only opened during the morning and afternoon, so the unhoused don't have to spend all day in the streets. Night shelters are generally much more austere and not readily accessible to everyone. They are run by care or charity organisations, both Christian and secular, often funded by the municipality. The concept seems simple enough, but as Jimo explains, in reality it is more complex.

“There is a huge housing problem in the Netherlands, but they have turned it into a healthcare problem. In effect, if you don't have a so-called ‘care indication’ – meaning you're not sick or have serious mental issues – or if you don't cause a public disturbance and you're not addicted,

you will not qualify for shelter. Myself, I don't have an indication. That means I don't qualify for a normal shelter. They have built a whole healthcare system around the provision of shelter. If you don't have an indication, they don't get any funding to care for you. So they just don't. If someone like me, or someone like you, shows up, they say: 'You can take care of yourself, go figure it out.' The image of the homeless is still very much associated with junkies, but that doesn't hold up anymore. Most people would probably not recognise the average homeless person. Head to any library and a large part of the people there will likely be homeless. Guys dressed as cleanly as any other, because the shelters hand out some clothing.

"The transformation of the housing problem into a healthcare problem has led to the construction of an enormous care industry. Millions of euros flow through it. Sometimes it makes me think that those organisations would rather maintain the status quo than actually solve the problem. Think of foreign development aid, where so much cash gets held up at the top by directors and their high salaries. It is exactly the same here in the Netherlands. Apparently, a spot in the night shelters costs about as much as a night in a three- or four-star hotel. So the costs are high, understandably considering the support and other elements that come with shelter, but the difference is that the people who are supposed to benefit from these shelters are often belittled and humiliated. To be clear, some really great people who have the best intentions in the world work at places like this, but it can get hectic, especially in places housing two hundred people at a time. Amsterdam is also in a whole different league than places like Haarlem or Utrecht, where shelters are generally more comfortable and working at a smaller scale. The Amsterdam system has to serve a massive amount of people, so there are often tensions.

“At the same time, you see organisations that really focus on control. You get frisked upon entry and are immediately monitored. You are constantly belittled; you feel unfree. That is why many homeless people choose to sleep outside. They feel unsafe inside, sleeping in dormitories with anything from eight to forty people, always having to guard their belongings. Lots of people prefer to sleep in tents or anywhere outside to avoid the shelters.”

This is one of the most striking things Jimo points out to me: the housing crisis has been turned into a healthcare problem. At the same time, neoliberalism has hollowed out the welfare state and privatised public institutions. NGOs are filling in the gaps, but that comes with the risks of a patronising or selective approach to those who seek care. Moreover, the dependence on government funding means a lot of these organisations cannot operate autonomously. It makes sense to draw a comparison to foreign aid, as Jimo does. There’s a similar tendency to reduce people to “humanitarian subjects”, dependants who are only provided the bare minimum of support. The structural inequalities at the root of the problem are rarely addressed. Real solutions aren’t provided.

In this context, care and charity organisations can offer little more than temporary relief. Damage control and management are the highest attainable goals. Above all, the unhoused must be made “legible”, turned into something compatible with the bureaucratic needs of shelters and care organisations. I imagine it’s offensive to someone like Jimo, who has spent most of his adult life attempting to evade the state’s controlling urges and social norms.

LIVING WITHOUT MONEY

Jimo emphasises he was never “that typical homeless man with a shopping cart”, although he does not seem to mean

this condescendingly or to see it as a matter of shame. “Multiple factors play a role,” he says as he begins to recount his own story.

“I was raised partly in two different countries, in the Netherlands and in Morocco, and I didn’t know all the rules and regulations here. I had no idea how Woning-Net [the distribution system for social housing] worked and had never registered for social housing, I wasn’t even aware I had to. No exciting stuff with drugs or anything like that – I just never registered for social housing. I knew there was a housing problem, but I had no idea how bad it was. My parents were still abroad when I came back to the Netherlands, and I was living with my uncles in my parents’ house in Amsterdam Nieuw-West. I had my own spot, didn’t have to pay rent – I was all right. I always thought one day I would buy or rent a place of my own. I thought it was all really simple. I had no idea you had to put yourself on a waiting list for fifteen years to get into social housing, let alone that everyone had already registered when they turned eighteen. So that was the first thing: I just never registered.

“Besides that, I was planning for years on leaving the Netherlands. I was sick of it all: the system, the bureaucracy, the materialism. At one point I was completely disgusted by money, I didn’t even want to touch any of it. Not that I was rich myself, but I was done with it, and I was an idealist. One of those who really means it and is prepared to make actual sacrifices. Not like it is now – although back then there were also people calling each other out while nobody thought: ‘I need to start with myself.’ It all starts with yourself.

“In any case, I didn’t want to be on benefits, I was too proud. I could have gone to work, I had my high school diploma. But I didn’t want to. At first, I thought this was

a phase. I never thought I would do this for twenty years. I wanted to live like this for maybe a year, surviving but also going to festivals and doing things I never had time for before. I wanted to catch up on things I had missed because I was always moving between countries. That's how it started. And then gradually you get sucked into it, you come across new things, develop new priorities. I never ended up going to university.

“At first I was living without money while still living at home. But I had to leave because of family circumstances. I went travelling for a while through Europe, to Greece, to Belgium. Just a short while. When I came back, I had no home anymore. I spent the first three nights at a friend's place. After that, I spent three days on the street. I didn't sleep. I had decided I wasn't going to hole up in doorways and porches. At some point, I found myself walking around asleep. I would wake up just in time to stop from falling into a canal, that's how tired I was. At last I slept in the park for a night. I say slept, but I wasn't out for long. I'm a light sleeper. Luckily, it was summer. After that I started sheltering in those soon to be demolished buildings, the ones that have been completely stripped bare. Some still have windows, some don't. But at least it's a roof over your head, and you can set up a mattress, a chair and a table. A bit like squatting, just with buildings a little further along in the demolition process. I did that for a few months.

“I went to the Bijlmer too, there were lots of empty flats there. I did some independent squatting there as well, though most buildings still had heating. But sometimes there would be other people living there already, in anti-squat situations or sometimes even the original residents. I saw things here that I never thought existed in the Netherlands. Raids in the middle of the night, security guards with dogs. People were robbed by the security guards, they would take your phone. Very racist at times.

I often felt like I had ended up in some sort of movie. I had some encounters with the police as well. I was new and they did not know me yet. Before this, I had been a youth worker for some time and a lot of those kids had immigrant backgrounds – Moroccan, Antillean – and they had told me stories of the cops. I remember thinking: you must have done something, the police don't bother you for nothing. But then I discovered it for myself.

“Around this time, compulsory identification was introduced. Before that, I had never had any encounters with the police. I never gave them a reason to bother me. I was an upright citizen. But now they could stop me just to ask for my ID. So they did, without any provocation, and when I argued with them they would arrest me and I would spend the night in a cell. I saw some nasty things during that period. It was racial profiling, before anyone talked about that. Not much later, you had to have your fingerprints in your passport as well. But I refused. I didn't trust it because of how they had treated me. The mandatory IDs weren't supposed to harm anyone either. I didn't want my personal information to end up in their systems, because who knows what they'll use it for. I have a particular profile, a particular last name, a particular background, and at the time Islamophobia was really gaining ground. All I wanted was to leave as few traces as possible in the government records.

“And so I lived without ID for a while, which makes life in the Netherlands very complicated. At a certain point, you can't get insurance, can't book anything. People think it's progress... I know a lot of elderly folks and undocumented guys who can't even pay cash in the trams anymore. If you go to university, you need a card to get in. Everything is digital, and some people just don't have the resources to adjust.”

SQUATTING WITH WE ARE HERE

The experience Jimo describes, it occurs to me, is one of holding on to your principles and being shut out of the system as a result. How do you deal with the difficulties that inevitably arise when you don't see that as a reason to make compromises? How do you relate to others? How do you continue along your own path?

“I never had a thing for drugs or alcohol. Fortunately. But I see a lot of guys, they come in all fresh – just in from Bulgaria or Slovenia or the Czech Republic – and some of them already start to show the signs after a few days. Signs of stress, lack of sleep. Some of them keep it up for a few weeks, but you see them change. Some hold up for months, years even. But that moment always comes, the day when it cracks. I was never really homeless in that way, you would never see me aimlessly wandering the streets. I had a few golden rules for myself: thou shalt not sleep in doorways, thou shalt not rummage through waste bins. I have my pride, my sense of honour. I'm not going to steal. To my mind, if I steal anything I might as well work on the stock exchange and do it for real. I'm not going to be a petty thief. So I had some rules for myself, that's how you keep your dignity.

“What I did do is sleep in some of the boats along the canals. Sometimes a friend would let me use their house for a while when they were abroad. Sometimes friends had bought a new house but were living in a rental while the new place was being renovated. I would stay there and help out sometimes. There were lots of ways that I managed to stay at a place for six months to a year. But every once in a while, you run out of options. You have to find some new way. So I started sleeping in a boat. At some point the owner came down. He asked me politely

to leave, so of course I did. He was a relaxed and kind guy. So I went to the next boat over, and that same guy came down again, and I thought: 'Damn, this guy is out to get me.' But I left calmly just the same, because I respect other people's stuff, even when squatting. I know it's not being used, but I'm still mindful of the owner. Unless they're one of those crooks with two hundred apartments, that's a different story. So I started to pack up and leave the boat, when he suddenly said: 'Weren't you in that other boat just the other night?' At first, I thought of denying it. But I decided not to. Then he said: 'You know what, you can stay here.' He was pleased that I had left everything behind quite neatly. 'Rather you than some other guy.'

"Once I got to know him, I learnt that he and two of his business partners owned something like twenty boats. They bought them up, fixed them and then rented them out for big events like Gay Pride, King's Day, corporate events, and so on. They made good money with these boats and they had all kinds, mostly smaller canal boats. So that's where I spent my nights for a while. At some point, they even let me vouch for other people; guys I knew from the shelters and from the streets; guys I knew would be calm and respectful; one time a Brazilian, then a Palestinian, or an American. The guys at the boat rental place trusted me, so when I showed up with someone, they could sleep in the boats as well.

"In Egypt there's a saying: 'If your friend is honey, never lick him clean.' I want to respect other people's privacy and not abuse their kindness. Some friends have given me keys to their place, I can come in at any moment, but I don't. Even at times when I had nothing or nowhere to stay, I would never just show up unannounced at two o'clock at night. In that way, I kept good relationships. Some guys use up their whole network and end up getting spat out by their whole community.

“After some time, I came into contact with the squatting movement. I spent some time living in an attic room across from Joe’s Garage, which is when I got to know them. But it was tough too. I would come there sometimes, but was often treated with suspicion. It’s a really paranoid world. Maybe that makes sense though, things have happened in the past of course, police infiltrations and that kind of thing. But I think they only hurt themselves by keeping everything so closed off. There might be plenty of sympathetic people, but you won’t be let in easily. It has become a bit of a subculture that is not really open to others. I would go to their sessions and maybe develop a fun idea for an action, but each time I would be completely drained by the time I left. There was too much of a preconceived idea of how things were supposed to be done. They make everything big and complicated, and a lot of them are stuck in a traditional mode of thinking. Sometimes they seemed like civil servants. For real, I thought to myself they have to be working for the government, running some kind of operation to discourage people from squatting.

“Eventually I got some experience of my own and started organising actions myself. I did almost all of these within my own network, with me being the most experienced participant. And it usually worked. That’s how I got involved with We Are Here. There are lots of origin stories to We Are Here, but the way I remember it, from my perspective at least, some things just happen by accident, unplanned, just like revolutions in the past or the Arab Spring.

“Just the same with We Are Here. I speak Arabic, and so do a lot of the people there, or Sudanese or Somali. I befriended them, interpreted and translated for them. At different points in time, there were different groups taking a leading role. For a while, the churches were at the

forefront, then the squatters. It was usually a reflection of whatever neighbourhood they were in. And when I became active for We Are Here at a certain point it was all the better, as I had a bone to pick with the municipality. And it was fun. I'm a nomad myself, I would stay at some of their spots for a while, maybe once a month, and I would come to the Rudolf Dieselstraat where we had squatted something like twenty houses. These were old low-rise houses that were going to be demolished soon, and I even found a place for myself there. But usually I would just visit every once in a while, though I did some spokesperson work for them as well, or joined in at the squatting actions.

“Here's what I learned from that time: look at the neighbourhood, what's it like, what are the development plans. I would look into these things, the zoning plans, and study the district's municipal coordinators. If you're dealing with a bad one, they're going to make your life difficult. So you look at who they are, and if you're lucky you get someone who is a bit more social. And if they look the other way or don't mind you too much, you get away with things. I started paying attention to those things. We Are Here ended up getting away with quite a lot. Though sometimes it's just dumb luck.”

COUNCILS

Earlier in our conversation, Jimo described himself as a soloist and a loner. He will hang out with one group for a bit, then move onto another – always at his own pace. But for someone who prefers to go his own way, it's remarkable how much he cares about others – through his involvement with We Are Here, as an unofficial boat shelter broker, in his constant support for the homeless. In contrast to the Christian charities, this is not a matter of religious conviction for him; unlike the squatters and

other activists, he is not motivated by any particular political ideology either. He seems to follow a more personal ethics which unlike organised religion or politics, does not thrive in a group setting.

In that sense, maybe he is a loner. But that in no way means he is not touched by the plight of others. To defend the interests of the unhoused and homeless, he has set up participatory councils to represent them to the institutions.

“We call them client or visitor councils. The Regenboog Groep, which runs a large number of shelters, has one now, as well as perMens and the Salvation Army. That way, people can represent themselves to the managers. Of course, it’s an unequal battle. You often have to round up a chaotic mess of people, usually speaking many different languages, and pit them against the managers and directors who have a whole bureaucracy at their disposal. But it’s good that there’s now a law requiring these kinds of councils. Though these things are often pretty on paper, they don’t end up meaning much in practice.

“I’m committed to making these councils work in practice. At lots of organisations, it means they see me as a problem. When I walk in, they think: ‘Shit, here he comes again, I guess we won’t be closing early today.’ What happens a lot is the shelter has opening hours until four, but they close at three-thirty, claiming they need the time to clean up. Bullshit, you say you’re open until four, the city pays you to be open until four, and what’s more, they even pay you the overtime to clean up afterwards.

“On top of that, we also organise to improve the quality of the food or the hygiene at shelters. Some winter shelters I’ve been to don’t even have doors for the showers. Or the way they treat you. People are allowed to stay in the shelter until nine-thirty, but they’ll kick you out onto

the street at eight-forty-five. Most people don't do anything about it, they either don't know the rules or are too proud. And they just go out. But I'll try it anyway. A lot of the time I can afford to make a fuss, because I know I'll be heading out early anyway. I'll go around to the other people, I speak several languages, and I offer to take someone to the centre for undocumented people, for example, or I show someone around to see where they can eat or shower. A lot of the time there's newcomers who just don't know their way around.

"You see a lot of these guys from so-called 'safe countries', travelling all over Europe, getting sent away at every place they come to. I understand them. Once you realise no one is going to help you, these guys have nothing to lose. It's too simple to just say these North Africans cause public disturbance, while the Syrians and Afghans are respectful. If you know your residence permit depends on your behaviour, you put on a good show. Others will think: 'You'll chuck me out anyway, so I'll steal from the stores, steal clothing and whatnot.' It's usually young people, they think differently anyway. I talk to everyone, them too.

"At the end of the day, we have to organise collectively and point out the problems in the shelters. For example, a few years ago, when I just started getting involved with this stuff, all the day shelters would open at ten in the morning and close at four in the afternoon, like office hours. As if homeless people only need shelter during office hours. It's the nights that are the roughest. Since then, we were able to convince the Regenboog Groep to stagger the opening hours of their day shelters, with one opening at seven in the morning and the other opening until eight at night, spreading it throughout the day. Those are the kind of things we organise for. If you don't live through it yourself, or have a strong imagination, you'll never truly understand the needs of the unhoused."

This is what makes representation so important for the unsheltered and homeless community. Most of Jimo's resistance is against dependence. Against depending on either a job or a healthcare bureaucracy when you just need a home. Jimo tries to give the unhoused a voice in the client councils, so they can stand up for their own interests. Because at the end of the day, no one knows the shortcomings of the system better than they do. Based on his years of experience, Jimo sees what goes wrong and understands what should be done.

“You know the irony with the way the system is organised: I'm an Amsterdammer, I was born here, but when I needed it, I couldn't get access to shelter. They don't want to make it too easy, afraid it might become 'too attractive'. So they'll think up criteria, indications, you name it. But what happens then? People aren't stupid, they'll play the role you want them to. People will pretend they are LGBT, thinking they'll get their own room, a comfortable place with better food. In a system built around only helping people if they most need it, they'll let you starve and wither the first time you come knocking. When you come back a few months later, they let you in for free because by now you're so far along you start talking to yourself.

“I have known guys – I'm not lying – who started to play along, started to pretend, but ended up really getting wrecked. Or they would get addicted for years, because addicts get help... And I know guys at the shelters who need to smoke a spliff or have a drink before going in. Just because of the stress, the noise. But once they go down that path, they get further along. Now they think: 'I need to be weak and miserable, I need to stay in that role; it's the only way I'll get on benefits or get this or get that.' It's a perverse system. People make themselves vulnerable. If you're on the streets and know you'll get shelter if you

act like you're hearing voices, you'd be robbing yourself if you didn't play along. It's a sick automatism that gets built into anyone that comes into contact with this system.

"But what if we did it the other way around? What if we rewarded self-sufficiency and independence? Then the guys who aren't too bad yet would get out of the system real quick. They don't need care and guidance, they just need a place to stay for a while. Instead of letting someone slip further and further down, making it so much more difficult to bring them back up. And if people would really feel appreciated and helped, long before they wither, they'll put up a better effort themselves too. That way, we develop a new, much better automatism in people."

THE ABSOLUTE RIGHT TO SHELTER

A few weeks after our conversation, I meet Jimo again. He has invited me to a theatre production of the homeless collective "De Straatklinkers" at the Roode Bioscoop on Haarlemmerplein. The show starts outside on the square, where a few dozen spectators have gathered. The artists open together with a song about Mokum and how much it has changed, but also how much it has stayed the same. Individual acts follow: more songs, stories, street art. Afterwards, the crowd moves into the venue for the main event. There is music, theatre, and more stories. The collective is being supported by the Stichting MetStem and the Protestantse Diaconie. The audience clap, bellow and sing along – and the performers, now and again gently guided along by the director, are in their element.

One thing that stands out to me is that many of the acts sing of life on the street as something that also has a beautiful or liberating aspect to it. Beside the obvious hardships – drug problems, addiction, lacking a home – they portray a sense of freedom in being homeless, something

I did not expect. Of course, I have no way of knowing whether this stems from the need to simply make the best of it or if there's a genuine desire for a certain kind of freedom at play. But it makes me think of Jimo's story, of what he shares with other unhoused people – and what sets him apart from them.

Jimo is something between a squatter and a homeless person. He has built himself a life outside of the system, motivated by an urge to avoid being controlled by the state or by work. An urge for independence. And this way of living and providing for oneself, without money, income or being integrated in the healthcare system, is a radical act of resistance. The kind of freedom and autonomy that Jimo strives for is interwoven with the conviction that everyone, unconditionally, has a right to shelter.

Space for that kind of ethos is becoming increasingly limited. Now, in the worst housing crisis since the Second World War, homelessness is still being treated as a matter of individual responsibility, of individual failure. The municipality wants to put an end to homelessness, but how it intends to do so remains unclear. Many labour migrants from the EU become homeless when work dries up, as housing is usually tied to their jobs. Asylum seekers who have exhausted their legal options become homeless once their rejection by the immigration authorities leaves them with nowhere to turn to. And local residents are exposed to the risk of homelessness in a city that becomes increasingly unaffordable.

The right to shelter should not be negotiable. My conversation with Jimo has made clear to me what happens when it is: the unhoused are driven into a healthcare system designed primarily to manage rather than solve problems. People are degraded as dependants, who will only be cared for at the price of their autonomy. Jimo is one of the few to evade this dilemma. His life harbours

the possibility of an escape: as long as the city still has its fringes – the soon to be demolished buildings, the empty flats, the unseen places of refuge – there is still space for autonomous existence. The right to shelter does not mean everyone should be able to afford a house. It means that nothing – money, work, passport, or the healthcare system – should be an obstacle to obtaining a roof over your head.

Boris (EC)

Mokum for undocumented people: the right to the city regardless of legal status

Hidaya Nampiima

My name is Hidaya Nampiima, I am an undocumented citizen of Amsterdam, a member of the LGBTQI+ community, and one of the founders of Amsterdam City Rights. I want to tell you about the daily struggles undocumented people face in reclaiming the city and creating a safe space for themselves. Undocumented people contribute to this city, just like anyone. But they are denied in their existence.

Undocumented people are citizens of Amsterdam. They have families and children, they are single, or minors, and they participate in and contribute to our city life: they live and work here and their children go to school. Yet, many are prevented from meeting their basic needs because of their lack of legal status.

I have lived in Amsterdam for the past five years as an undocumented queer woman. I have witnessed and experienced the struggles that people without the “right” papers and those in distressing asylum procedures face. I have seen the lack of resources and support, and the absence of recognition of our fundamental rights and needs.

Whether it is through protesting, organising solidarity actions, or engaging in dialogue with communities, policy makers and politicians, I am committed to amplifying the voices of those who do not dare to speak out. The government and its institutions want to divide us, but I want to bridge gaps and find common ground. We, Amsterdam City Rights, want to build a Mokum where the right to the city is not contingent upon one’s legal status.

LIFE UNDER UNLIVABLE CONDITIONS

Amsterdam is Mokum for many people. The city counts more than 800.000 inhabitants, but the estimated 10.000 to 30.000 undocumented citizens living here are always left out of this number. We do not really count the undocumented people suffering exclusion in our Mokum on a daily basis. If Mokum means a safe haven, or refuge, then let me tell you about the exclusion that I and other undocumented people in this city face on a daily basis.

Right now, if you are stopped and checked or arrested by the police, and you cannot show a valid ID, you could end up in a detention centre. A lot of us do not have a valid ID: it is not recognised; we never had one; we were not able to renew it; it was stolen; or it was confiscated by the IND [Immigration and Naturalisation Service].

One of our community members was locked up for more than six months because of this. He did not commit a crime. He could not be sent back to his country of origin, but he was not allowed to stay either. After six months they sent him out of the detention centre, onto the streets. He had lost his home and his work, and above all, he was traumatised by his experience in prison. This community member was now back on the streets. Housing is a human right, but if you are not recognised as a citizen of this country, you have no right to shelter. And if you do find something, you cannot register there without a recognised ID, making it harder for allies to accommodate us.

The We Are Here group, a group of courageous refugees whose asylum claims had been denied, took matters into their own hands. Through squatting and campaigning, they spoke out in the fight for decent housing and just asylum laws. But the municipality repressed squatting even further after these important actions. Because of the dangers of getting in contact with the police, squatting is

now almost impossible for undocumented people. I get a lot of messages of undocumented people looking for shelter, a room or a house. For me and other activists and small NGOs, it is a constant struggle to find shelter for them. Since we are denied housing rights, undocumented people are prone to exploitation by landlords.

Exploitation plays a big role in our work environments as well. We have no right to work to support ourselves. According to Dutch law, it is illegal for employers to hire people without “valid” residence permits. This means that most undocumented people cannot find employment legally. And those who have a job, those who do manage to work, are often exploited. They are underpaid, experience poor working conditions, or are afraid to complain.

But there is no other option. The moment undocumented fellow residents reach the age of eighteen, these young adults encounter trouble accessing higher education. In addition, undocumented youngsters are not eligible for student grants or loans. You have no idea how long I have been longing to access proper education. Not just courses here and there, but real education. My young life has been wasted, and there are many more like me.

Even if you do manage to secure a job you are far from carefree. Under Dutch law, undocumented people do not have the right to have a bank account. Banks are required to verify their customers’ identities and residency status, before they can open an account. We do not have these. Not having a bank account creates a situation in which people are denied the simplest things. How can we pay for the train or the tram, for something from a store, or for entrance to a museum or zoo if only digital money transactions via a bank card are accepted?

Even if a service seems available to undocumented people on paper – like healthcare, because undocumented people have the right to basic healthcare – this really only

exists on paper. In practice, it does not work. Once, I had to visit the doctor. I had an appointment, but when I arrived the receptionist did not want to assist me unless I paid directly. I told her I didn't have cash on me, and that I didn't have a bank account, but there is an organisation that takes care of the administration of undocumented patients, where the bill can be sent. But she did not listen to me. Worse, she forced me into a small room and even threatened to call the police. At another practice the receptionist did not want to help me because of my skin colour. I was treated as a nuisance and a person to get rid of. These experiences had a really negative impact on me. They discouraged me from seeking help when I needed it. I felt even more rejected, on top of being labelled "undocumented".

Undocumented people and rejected asylum seekers are also entitled to legal assistance. But lawyers have too little time and receive too little compensation to work these pro bono cases. An asylum lawyer is very important for a refugee who is trying to prove to the IND why they left the country. It took me very long to find a lawyer willing to take up my rejected asylum case. More than two years.

Having to deal with exclusion, exploitation and living in constant fear of the police, many undocumented people do not dare to speak out. Some people call undocumented people invisible. Personally, I do not know which is worse: being illegal or being invisible. Both terms deny our existence completely.

Seeing these injustices happen, I could only do one thing: become an activist.

AMSTERDAM CITY RIGHTS: PROPOSITIONS FOR A MOKUM
FOR UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE

It took me some time to connect to people with documents. I did not trust a lot of people, being rejected by

IND-workers and being told again and again that I should go back to my country. But when we came together as a group of concerned individuals, in our first Amsterdam City Rights group meetings, I instantly felt connected. I looked around and saw many different faces. But I immediately felt that we were fighting for the same cause. And I realised that uniting is the key to the city.

Amsterdam City Rights started in 2018. Everything our organisation does is based on the demands and needs of undocumented people. We are a collaboration between migrant organisations, NGOs, researchers, lawyers, artists, scientists, activists, advocates, policy makers, and citizens of Amsterdam (with or without papers). We want to build our community, our city, based on human rights for everyone, regardless of their legal status. There is still so much to do here, to ensure fundamental rights for everyone, such as the right to shelter, housing, education, work, self-development, in short: the right to a dignified existence in our city.

Our aim is to unite more people, groups and NGOs to fight for the rights of undocumented people in Amsterdam, in many different ways and on various levels, and through different platforms. Amsterdam City Rights also wants to create awareness about the exclusion undocumented people experience on a daily basis. Sometimes we succeed in this, sometimes we need more time and more allies. We want the city to take positive action to take care of all of its citizens, whether or not they have the “right” papers.

So, how can we ensure that everybody living in Amsterdam has an equal right to the city?

The Amsterdam City ID The City ID is a demand and wish of many undocumented and documented people in Amsterdam. Amsterdam City Rights is working on citywide inclusion by advocating for a city pass or City ID used by

both undocumented and documented people. It has to be a legal proof of identity, recognised as such by the police if you need to identify yourself. This card would also allow people in Amsterdam to access health care, social services, cultural venues, better working conditions, higher education, and safer housing options. All of this regardless of their legal status.

The relationship between the City ID and national politics is complex. The conversations about the naturalisation of undocumented people by the national government still have a long way to go. We do not want to wait for that to happen. This means that Amsterdam needs to bypass these national rules. New York has already implemented the City ID as a proof of identity. In Europe, Zürich is getting this organised. How fearless is Amsterdam?

The right to visibility “Nothing about us without us!”, I want to shout out this phrase. I want people to really feel what this means. No more conversations about us, or meetings about us, or debates amongst the privileged about us, or using us as decorum to tell our stories. Or even worse, that we are forced to listen to what “the experts” have to say about us. It is us that are most affected by the decision-making process, so we want to shape and have the conversation together, with the equal right to speaking out and an equal say. Undocumented people want to be visible – and have the right to be – and join the debates on behalf of themselves. Let us commit to this and let Amsterdam be the safe place where this is possible.

The right to safe housing and shelter As we are deprived of our right to housing, undocumented people are easy targets for exploitation. We must take action to ensure people in our city are not vulnerable to exploitation. We can start

by making sure everyone has access to safe places to stay. One of our demands is unconditional shelter. Although this has improved, people from so-called “safe countries” – undocumented migrant workers, for example – are still excluded from the emergency shelters in Amsterdam.

Housing is a pressing topic for each person and each grassroots organisation supporting refugees, people of colour, migrants and undocumented people in the city. We have meetings in which we exchange our strategies. We want better systems for organising housing for undocumented people, but what we really want is systemic change to ensure housing for everyone. Until now it is all “band-aid” solutions: temporary solutions used in emergency situations like squatting, illegal rent or municipal shelters.

We need a new political approach to public housing and to the right to housing as a human right, at the national as well as the local level. In order to really fight the housing crisis we need to connect the voices of undocumented people and refugees to the already existing movements organising for systematic solutions to the housing crisis in the city. That way existing movements can show solidarity, and together as a coalition we can fight the trend where houses are for profit instead of living.

The right to work We demand that undocumented people are granted work permits, and that the work they do is acknowledged. So much talent is wasted, and so many lives are endangered because of labour exploitation.

The right to work for undocumented people in the Netherlands does not exist now. People already work here, and contribute to the city by working, for example in child care, construction work, all kinds of services for the people of Amsterdam. Yet we, as a city, do not grant them access to the labour rights that every worker has. Only when things go wrong, when you are exploited in

some form during your working hours, do you have partial protection. But this does not nearly give enough protection against exploitation. We should be part of the same unions as other people who work and who do have the “right” documents.

The right to education We demand equal access to education for people without documents of all ages. All children in the Netherlands have the right to primary and secondary education regardless of whether they are undocumented or not. For people over 16, Amsterdam is doing some things. In 2022, the municipality of Amsterdam, VU Amsterdam university, Inholland University of Applied Sciences and the Amsterdam School of the Arts signed a covenant for the pilot project “Access to higher education for undocumented young people”. So, let us stay positive and believe in the progress that is being made. But let us make sure that this progress will soon be accessible for a bigger group of undocumented people.

The right to have a bank account Without a bank account, you cannot pay bills, pay via a bankcard or build savings to send to your family back home. Undocumented people are excluded from these things. They often have a big responsibility to their families. Relatives and friends both near and far need support, for education and medical bills, they are often in dire situations, living in war-torn countries. We are not funding criminal activities. We need financial institutions to invest in trust: we are who we are. We work here as cleaners, construction workers, take care of children and we want proper access to the monetary system. This is our right.

The right to healthcare We demand a new approach to healthcare: the right to healthcare is a fundamental right.

The racism in healthcare has to end. Everybody deserves full and equal medical treatment.

We also want to create more awareness among undocumented people about their right to basic healthcare, and share information about how the system works. We are spreading information via various channels: in our City Rights App, on social media channels, and in working together with different groups in the city. Students, general practitioners, receptionists and all other healthcare professionals need to know this as well. We are planning to organise meetings with healthcare professionals so that we can discuss the obstacles in accessing healthcare services and how we can tackle these together. We are currently in the process of creating an accessible information toolkit about accessing medical rights with the VU Amsterdam university. Furthermore, we want to collaborate with healthcare professionals and organisations such as GGD, Centrum '45, Kruispost, General Practitioner groups, Doctors of the World and hospitals that provide medical assistance to undocumented people.

The right to information During the Covid-19 lockdowns we also focussed on the access to information. The urgency to inform people without a residence permit about their rights and where to go in Amsterdam for advice and help was very high at the time. From that, we developed the City Rights App, with information about our fundamental rights, and safe spaces where people can go for assistance.

The right to legal support My lawyer once told me that she does not receive enough reimbursement, and that she almost works for free if she would calculate the hours she spent on my case. This has to change. She told me that the lawyers protested against the cuts in the system of funded legal aid, but that the national government refused to

listen. What else can you expect from a government like this? We need to organise ourselves and press for systemic change. In this case we need others to fight for our rights to have access to the legal system.

A COLLECTIVE DUTY

I hope that more people will join us in this fight, until the right to the city is secured for everyone regardless of their background, legal status or income. Until the migration laws are changed so that one day everyone can live freely in our city, and we will not need the City ID as a band-aid solution anymore. The fight for our rights will never end, but together we can at least start by working together to create a more inclusive society. That is what we do and I cherish each step we take together in the process.

In an ideal world Amsterdam City Rights would not need to exist anymore. Everyone would have equal access to the city, public space and resources, regardless of their papers, background or income. Other cities and organisations would be inspired to work non-hierarchically and inclusively when it comes to so-called marginalised groups. We want to co-create this dynamic, and celebrate solidarity and understanding with it. We want to create an inclusive Amsterdam, a Mokum, with and for everyone. But we are not there yet. So let us continue to work together, share our knowledge, and act on the struggles and opportunities we see.

Do not call us invisible. We are here, and we are human. We have, like anyone else, the right to be heard. We are part of the city. So do not deny us, get to know us. Unite with us to abolish systemic exclusion together.

We Reclaim Our Pride: queer emancipation in Amsterdam

Sorab Roustayar

Over fifty years ago, the Stonewall Riots in New York led by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson sounded the start of the current Pride movement. It was the constant intimidation by the police and the threat of violence, on top of the subordinate position of the LGBTQI+ community in society in general, that lit the fuse. Those who led the charge were primarily trans people, sex workers and people of colour from underprivileged sections of society. The struggle that Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera fought was an intersectional struggle. They understood that the rights and the positions of trans people and sex workers were deeply connected to poverty and police violence. Their struggle was not just for themselves, but for the entire LGBTQI+ and sex worker community. The birth of Pride in the US and Europe was a riot against state violence.

At the same time, large parts of the West saw a growing resistance against capitalism, imperialism, and exploitation. Inherently connected to these struggles is the fight against exclusion based on gender or sexuality. Johnson and Rivera, and many other trans people and sex workers along with them, stood at the foundation of a mass movement in the US and Europe that refused to see the various systems of oppression as separate, but rather as a coherent and interconnected problem.

This movement has made some significant achievements in the Netherlands since Stonewall: we have our own “gay marriage”, and legal adoption for LGBTQI+ parents. But at the same time, there is still a world to win in the Netherlands in terms of dismantling white, binary,

cisheteronormativity, together with the fight against racism and discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality. These forms of oppression have made the streets unsafe for people and have forced them to mask their sexual orientation and gender identity. Many among us are afraid to hold our partners' hands on the streets and are confronted with homophobic and transphobic comments or even violence: on the streets, at school and in the workplace.

Research conducted by Movisie shows that, over the course of a year, one in five lesbian, gay or bi people and two in five trans persons are confronted with harassment or violence.¹ Reports of violence and racism have been rising in Amsterdam as well. Despite the facts, the political system responds with a scapegoat discourse blaming Muslims and refugees for violence and intolerance – that is, if the system responds at all.

Pride in Amsterdam nowadays is out of touch with these issues. It is a commercial celebration of past achievements but it no longer contributes to further emancipation. The struggle for LGBTQI+ rights needs to join the struggle against all forms of oppression. Not to celebrate the privilege of the few, but to emancipate us all.

FROM STONEWALL RIOTS TO PINKWASHING

To repeat: the first Pride was a protest against racism, exploitation, poverty, police violence, transphobia and the exclusion of trans people, the BIPOC LGBTQI+ community and sex workers. The giants on whose shoulders we now stand are the Black and Brown trans sex workers who started this fight in 1969. Well over fifty years after Stonewall, shockingly little has changed for the BIPOC LGBTQI+ community, trans people, sex workers and people with a disability. In fact, we are still dangling at the bottom of the social ladder, excluded in the labour

market, the housing market and education. As a result, sex work is the only choice left for many BIPOC trans people, with all the risks involved.

Despite all this, the Netherlands and Amsterdam continue to style themselves as utterly progressive when it comes to LGBTQI+ rights. In reality, the Netherlands has drastically fallen down the European Rankings (13th place) for these rights over the past years. This hypocrisy ensures that nothing gets done for the BIPOC LGBTQI+ community, because the Netherlands and Amsterdam would rather point the finger to foreign countries than have a look in the mirror.

This hypocrisy reaches an annual boiling-point during Pride Week. It is celebrated in many cities across the Netherlands, but Amsterdam takes centre stage with the Canal Parade, an eighty-boat parade through the city's canals. The Pride celebrated nowadays has nothing to do with resistance, struggle or emancipation. The Pride exhibited nowadays is a commercial billboard for companies, political parties, banks and other institutions looking to wipe their dirty hands on the rainbow flag. It has become a pinkwashing festival.

Pinkwashing is a phenomenon driven by capitalism in which companies, banks, police departments, political parties and other entities engage in all kinds of (political) marketing strategies to put on a "gay-friendly" face, in order to be seen as tolerant, progressive and modern. That positive image is then used to obfuscate their real negative impact.

The struggle for labour rights, the struggle of people in the Global South, and that of indigenous peoples around the world, go hand-in-hand with the struggle for sexual liberation. These struggles are all connected. Companies cannot ever engage in Pride as long as they exploit workers to generate massive profits, wreck the environment,

support wars, build walls to keep refugees out and maintain this status quo. Whoever wants to take part in Pride cannot wave the rainbow flag just one day a year.

MAINSTREAM PRIDE VS INTERSECTIONAL PRIDE

Queer and trans people of colour from New York to Amsterdam have been stepping up to voice a radical oppositional perspective. We are returning to the roots of Pride and want the economic and social position of LGBTQI+ people to improve. We are fighting a struggle for equality and the right to autonomy. We want to connect the struggle of LGBTQI+ people with that of sex workers, refugees, migrants, Muslims, Jews, women and people with a disability. Blockades were organised in 2017 and 2018 during the Pride Walks in the US and Canada by Black women and the Black Lives Matter movement. They were drawing attention to the position of Black people within the LGBTQI+ movement and in the general context of the US and Canada. Almost fifty years after Stonewall, riots are breaking out again, but now against mainstream Pride and capitalism.

Because Pride in its current form is no longer about resistance and emancipation: it has become some big party or a “celebration” as it is called in Amsterdam. But is it right to celebrate when trans people around the world are murdered for their gender identity? Can we celebrate when BIPOC people are being ethnically profiled by the police? Or when LGBTQI+ people are not taken seriously when they report violent incidents?

Pride has grown into a large event sustained by millions of euros and is now a key pillar in Amsterdam’s so-called “city marketing”. On average, the event attracts a million visitors each year from all over the world. Big hotels attract tourists during Pride with “exclusive deals”, like the

W Hotel on the Spuistraat. The involvement of all these companies is necessary to finance the event, according to the Amsterdam Pride Foundation (Stichting Pride Amsterdam or SPA).

All this has led to the co-opting of the LGBTQI+ struggle by capitalism. The municipality and SPA have their role to play here. The event in its current form not only allows pinkwashing, but engages in whitewashing and greenwashing as well. In Amsterdam, the Stonewall riots are gladly forgotten because the “origin” of Pride in Amsterdam is claimed by LGBTQI+ bar and restaurant entrepreneurs. But this unjustly decouples Pride Amsterdam from its political meaning and the fight for emancipation. It is a classic case of whitewashing, erasing the struggles of BIPOC people to allow white people to claim the stage.

MONOPOLY ON PRIDE

Since 2011, the municipality of Amsterdam has developed a specific policy to “better manage” Pride. This policy allows only one organisation to host Pride under a so-called umbrella permit. Following this new policy, applicants are required to have experience in large-scale events organisation in which safety, public order and “crowd management” play an important role in order to be granted the permit, and thus the subsidies.

This construction has created a monopoly on Pride. Any organisation wanting to host an event at Pride has to report to the SPA, which has amassed an enormous concentration of power, leading in turn to the exclusion of marginalised groups. The big circus tent that Pride has become over the past ten years has space for straight people to party, but is increasingly shrinking the room available to the LGBTQI+ community itself. The development of mass tourism has also put the safety of the community

under immense pressure. LGBTQI+ people are laughed at, spat on and assaulted during Pride. Much of the community actually prefers to avoid Pride Week entirely. All this is the result of organising the event at an increasingly large scale, while pushing notions of emancipation, education and protest aside.

And yet, the city portrays itself as the “gay capital” of the world. Anyone can claim that “in Amsterdam, we can all be ourselves.” This slogan and the many others like it attract hundreds of LGBTQI+ people to Amsterdam each year, looking forward to being themselves in the city. But is it true?

Various research reports reveal that violent incidents against LGBTQI+ people are rising. LGBTQI+ couples are afraid to walk hand-in-hand on the street, fearing for their lives. Neighbourhoods across Amsterdam have been the scene of violent incidents where gay men were beaten up for their sexual orientation.

Trans people are afraid to enter public spaces, for fear of being harassed, insulted, beaten up or even murdered. The latter might seem far-fetched but each year we gather to commemorate trans people murdered all over the world. On 20 November, Transgender Day of Remembrance, we read the names of more than three hundred murdered trans people.

The position of trans people is abysmal, not just in Amsterdam but across the world, and particularly for the BIPOC trans community. A report from 2018 studied violence against trans people. It showed that 14 per cent of surveyed trans people have been assaulted at least once, with 4.4 per cent of participants indicating the assault was sexually motivated. Three in ten surveyed people report having been abused on the internet in the last twelve months. These figures are between two and seven times higher than for the general population. The Netherlands

Institute for Social Research also published a report in 2020 on discrimination with a number of conclusions specifically related to the BIPOC LGBTQI+ community:

Dutch people with a migration background experience substantially more discrimination than native Dutch people. Percentages are particularly high among migrants with a non-Western background. People with a migration background are also more likely to experience chronic discrimination than white Dutch people.²

As a result of violence and intimidation, LGBTQI+ people isolate and withdraw from society. The city is no longer a place for us, and we are no longer a part of it. This self-isolation has an immense impact on mental health. The number of suicides is significantly higher than for cisgender straight people; for trans people those figures are up to nine times higher.

LGBTQI+ people being assaulted is no new phenomenon. As long as capitalism exists, it goes hand-in-hand with various forms of violence, exploitation and mechanisms of oppression.

MEDIA AND POLICE

Too often, homophobic and transphobic violence is ignored by the media. Coverage regularly spreads doubt around incidents, despite the victims having been witnesses to hate and violence because of their sexual preferences. When LGBTQI+ people are targeted with violence, they often do not report it to the police. And often those who do are not taken seriously. In the summer of 2022, two lesbian women were victims of assault by their Uber driver, one out of so many examples like it. In the media, their story was called into question and according to the police, every story has two sides. This brand of media coverage and the

attitude of the police undermine the lived experience of the victims, eroding trust in the police and causing people to forego reporting incidents. Perpetrators of assault and violent crime with homophobic and transphobic intent get away with it, because the police will not take it seriously.

It is not surprising that the police behave like this. Hatred and fear of LGBTQI+ people are widespread within the police force, just as racism is widespread within the police force. Organisations like *Controle Alt Delete* and *Amnesty International* have written numerous reports on ethnic profiling and racism within the police force. Various whistle-blowers have brought issues out into the open, but the political system continues to implement new laws giving officers *carte blanche* for violence with impunity.

Intersectionality matters for everyone taking part in Pride. As a matter of basic principle, government ministries, the military, the justice department and the police can have no place in Pride. They are problematic institutions that uphold oppression. The military and the police are repressive tools of state power. The police still engages in ethnic profiling. Racism and sexism are still daily practice. It is bizarre that the police were allowed to join the Canal Parade with their own boat in 2019 – the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, a riot specifically against the police. The queer community takes no pride in arms trade and the construction of destructive pipelines like those financed by the ING Bank. We take no pride in the ethnic profiling of Black people and young people of colour by the police, or in soldiers going to war over some natural resource. And we most certainly do not take pride in the racism and nationalism of the VVD, CDA, SGP, PVV, FvD [right-wing, Christian and far-right political parties] and political parties like them.

Just like in the Stonewall days, we want our Pride to be intersectional: we cannot celebrate the freedom of one

group if it means sacrificing that of another. We see how LGBTQI+ rights are used for a racist, populist and far-right witch-hunt against Muslims and refugees, the supposed threats to “our values”. This “gay nationalism” is misguided, as the Netherlands is not at all as tolerant as it makes itself out to be, and a great many white people see no issue discriminating on the basis of sexuality or gender identity.

LGBTQI+ refugees are deported without hesitation, just like many other people fleeing from poverty or war. Moreover, the fight against gender- or sexuality-based oppression is being waged in non-Western countries as well and there too you will find people who will not let themselves be forced into dominant categories of sexuality and gender. Those who support LGBTQI+ rights should be joining forces with refugees, not employing them as pawns in a politics of racism and Islamophobia.

WE RECLAIM OUR PRIDE

History teaches us that resistance, struggle, protests and strikes are necessary to bring on change in society. All the rights we enjoy today were fought for by various social groups who resisted the status quo of capitalism. The right to vote, the right to strike, the eight-hour working day, the right to vacation, the list goes on.

In Amsterdam, throughout the years, a diverse collection of groups and individuals have resisted the monopoly of the official Pride organisation, and the commercialisation and commodification of LGBTQI+ rights during Pride in particular. In 2017, a group of BIPOC and white LGBTQI+ people organised themselves under the banner We Reclaim Our Pride (wrop) and occupied one of the bridges during the Canal Parade. Well over 150 LGBTQI+ people gathered for the protest, with 38 organisations signing the action group’s manifesto. There was no media coverage of

the protest this first year, despite the clear message of the group: stop pinkwashing and create space for marginalised groups in the LGBTQI+ community.

In 2018, the action group garnered some media attention, and journalists finally started tuning in to criticism of the Canal Parade coming from the community. Various reports revealed that most of the crowd on the boats in the Canal Parade is straight and that visitors are more interested in a free party than in reflecting on the current state of the struggle for emancipation. The protest was a clear motivator for new research into pinkwashing, a term not yet used in mainstream media in 2017 and 2018.

In 2019, the group once again organised a protest – this time with inflatable unicorns. Despite the Pride organisation’s best efforts to keep us out of sight from the media, We Reclaim Our Pride manifested itself proudly and visibly. The police intervened and arrested the blow-up unicorns. Footage of unicorns stuffed into police trucks went viral and, suddenly, the media wanted to talk to us. Various political parties asked questions in the municipal council. D66 and other right-wing parties cried shock and horror over their little white gay party being criticised and tried to stigmatise and criminalise the action group, calling them “the scum of society”. Naturally, this led to more media attention. More and more journalists and outlets became interested in the critique of Pride and the general public started to learn the terms pinkwashing and gay nationalism.

A NEW PRIDE: FOR AND BY THE COMMUNITY

The critique of Pride suddenly broke out from internal discussions into a public debate. In the eyes of some, the debate was a “shame” and only brought “segregation and more disunity” within the community. But to many within

the community it was a breath of fresh air after having to witness years of mismanagement and structural exclusion from Pride events. Research by Iline Ceelen, for example, revealed that the organisation is incapable of self-reflection, does not listen enough to the community, and remains deaf to criticism.³ This is the result of the top-down structure of the organisation: a brick wall that various groups and committees have run up against for years. These groups would rather have organised from the bottom up, allowing more space for diverse voices from the LGBTQI+ community, while strengthening participation and visibility.

The last five years of protesting by the WROP action group, the start of Black Pride and the critique from various (BIPOC) LGBTQI+ organisations, diverse research reports and the public debate have finally brought the city of Amsterdam into action, allowing for a new approach to the organisation of Pride. Instead of concentrating power in the hands of one entity, more space was given to the community to organise Pride in its own way: a Pride for and by the community, contributed to by the whole (BIPOC) LGBTQI+ community.

This has opened up new possibilities for a new Pride in 2023. A new group was founded under the banner of Queer Amsterdam, consisting of eight different LGBTQI+ organisations, to organise Pride in 2023. The efforts of Queer Amsterdam, WROP, and organisations like Black Pride, are breaking the colonial, binary, white, cisgender and heteronormative system to replace it with decolonial and intersectional practices.

From 2023 onwards, this new Pride is called Queer & Pride, organised by two entities with their own permits and subsidies. Queer Amsterdam will kick off Queer & Pride on Saturday 22 July with the Pride Walk, Queer Fest and bloc parties throughout the weekend. Each day

is themed to highlight a specific subject or group, such as trans people, intersex people and sex workers. Throughout the seven days of Pride organised by Queer Amsterdam, participation, autonomy and independence are guiding principles. The voices of marginalised groups in the LGBTQI+ community are safeguarded. Pinkwashing will be resisted. Companies can donate if they like, but they will have no explicit presence with their logos or otherwise.

Another Pride is possible and necessary. A Pride that goes back to its roots, with equality, diversity and a critical perspective on the socio-economic position of the community at its core. International solidarity is another core principle: an intersectional Pride is one that brings various struggles together. Finally, Pride must be connected with the rest of the city, to transform social norms and bring about social change to the benefit of everyone. Because no one is free until we are all free.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.movisie.nl/artikel/verontrustende-feiten-cijfers-over-acceptatie-lhbtj-personen>
- 2 Iris Andriessen et al., *Ervaren Discriminatie in Nederland II*, (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau: Den Haag, 2020), 165.
- 3 Iline Ceelen, “*Shell’s white gay buttocks.*” *An insight into the complexity around the Pride Amsterdam Canal Parade*, (MA-scriptie, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2022).

Filmhuis Cavia
Julien



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

What comes to mind was a project where we worked with analogue film. We had plenty of material, because I have my own collection of cameras and some film in the fridge. Sadly, we didn't make anything of it, because we didn't have a story.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The most important thing for me is to keep cultural places

running. You just have to chip in. There were loads more fun places back in the day...

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Some more posters and some new lamps, but it should actually stay the same for the most part. I do want to set up a Super 8 film festival, and organise an analogue workshop. Maybe I'll even archive the 8mm films at some point.

Vossiusstraat 16
Hannah



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

The first party we organised, which took place on the day we learned that we'd won the civil lawsuit against the owner, a Russian oligarch on the EU sanctions list for war crimes. We knew the verdict would come on that day, so we organised the party. However, we only heard the verdict very late that day, when the party was already slowly getting started. We weren't really expecting a statement anymore, but suddenly people started cheering and ran downstairs to tell everyone the news. It was euphoric, we all couldn't believe it. Loads of people came by that evening, it was a really joyous moment. It really felt like something bigger was starting, something we had been searching for and fighting for for a long time. Finally we would have a place to build something.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I like that we have the opportunity to conceptualise what

we want a community to look like within our ideologies. What are our priorities and how do we want to position ourselves in relation to the world around us? How do we organise ourselves politically and care for the community, while also keeping a household clean and running? I like that this place is both a home for many people, as well as an accessible social and political centre, with events and a space for people and collectives to organise their meetings and projects. Vossi is accessible to many different people, both our friends and people we don't necessarily know.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I try not to project too much into the future, so I'm not too disappointed if we can't stay. Vossi is waiting for the appeal of the first trial, which will take place in a week. But I hope this place remains a space for anarchist organisation and resistance.

And that there'll be loads more of these places in Amsterdam! I really want it to stay a place that's accessible, where people get to know each other, share their experiences, work together. I like that you can have a network of solidarity directly in your home. And I would love it if the social centre gets a better infrastructure, if everything would be renovated and look nice. It'd be great if there were more events, and more regular ones too, where people could come and hang out.

Vondelbunker Semuel



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

The Bunker Bash, an event organised by volunteers, is a very special event for me and the volunteers. The event isn't that special to the outside world, it's a rave with all kinds of weird music like Breakcore and something we call Wonk, actually a kind of UK bassline. Every time we host this event I feel like we've got the best rave in town for free. It's always weird, they play weird music but you can still dance to it. People come in, often for the first time, and they think "what the fuck's going on here?!" But then they start dancing anyway. The event is mainly a way for us to bring volunteers together and get to know each other better. The group here consists of about thirty people, but our core is currently only made up of around five people. We could use a few more people who take responsibility. That's quite difficult with a collective that consists

entirely of volunteers. No one gets paid, you have to have time for it and enjoy it. We have really busy lives, I work forty hours a week, but I find what I do here to be much more important than my work. I'd like to spend a lot more time on this, but I have to pay the rent.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I think the most important thing about this place is that everyone is able to experiment here without the pressure of making money. People can organise all kinds of events here and artists can try things out. We always say: failure is an option. It's allowed here. You can experiment here, because of the fact that there's no profit motive.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

If the bunker's still open in ten years' time, it could very well still look the same.

Some things could be more beautiful, technically better and more professional. Other than that, I don't actually think this place will change much. We rent this building from the municipality, it hasn't been squatted. The Schijnheilig collective, which was the first to be here, was given this building after long negotiations with the municipality. They'd been squatting for years before that. Some left because they felt that this way it wasn't squatting any more, but others wanted to continue with the same ideals in the bunker.

Bajesdorp Henner Keffle



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

In 2003, a group was put together at a squatting consultation hour. Everything was empty in this village and actually no one knew that. All kinds of people came together and eventually squatted the village. We started the Bajesdorp Festival – it was originally called *Thuis in Bajesdorp* – when the squatting ban was imposed. We thought it would be a good idea to organise an event that no one could object to, in order to protect ourselves in a way. During the festival there were acoustic concerts in the living rooms of all the people in the village. It was very nice, small-scale and everything was free or on a donation basis. It was mainly during the day, with quiet music, neighbours and a cup of coffee, that kind of thing. A place like this just grows on its own. A free space is a place where you can be free together and maintain an ideal balance. It develops

naturally, even before you start describing it.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The important thing is that this place is still here. I couldn't say much more about it at the moment, it's different here now. Today it's mostly just our base camp. A new project is being developed with the new tenement building, which I'm not a part of. We still do fun things together with the *Muiterij Collective* and everything that's left. At a certain point the new *Bajesdorp* will be finished and that's all well and good, but it'll no longer be the free-spirited thing it once was. We currently don't really organise anything here anymore. There isn't space for that.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

This neighbourhood will be ready in the near future.

Then this piece of land will just be a kind of garden. I'm sure it'll be neat and beautiful. This picture comes to mind, of those architects' brochures. A picture of those guys standing in a really beautiful building. It also has to do with the fact that I won't live there anymore, so I lose a bit of inspiration to imagine it. I would ideally move with the Muiterij Collective somewhere just outside or within Amsterdam in the future, but we won't be here anymore. In Bajesdorp you've got a nice space and neighbours you live with and initiatives arise from that. There are plans with this group of people, because we have to make a plan. Because this place as it is now – and so much has already changed – will disappear. I just hope I end up in this kind of place again. Ultimately, I just want nice people around me. You can make something beautiful out of any place that way.

Rijkshemelvaart Marieke



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

Something immediately comes to mind, but I wouldn't call it an event. On February 9, 2021, one of the children of the Hemelvaart passed away after a fatal accident. He stayed with us for a week and this week we were together to support each other, share grief and performed many rituals. That week was so beautiful, but the cause was so terribly tragic: I'll never forget it. RIP Milo van der Veen, forever

in our hearts. If I have to list more, the party we celebrated for our 30th anniversary is a really nice memory. As a group we've created something beautiful. The festivals we used to organise on Ascension Day were no longer pleasant for us at the time, it was too much and we no longer felt safe. After a very long break, that party for our 30th anniversary was really nice, not too many people, but happy people, a nice programme and a great collaboration.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

The people's kitchen in our restaurant on Wednesdays. Pay a donation to eat, and play ping pong in the studio. There was a poetry evening recently. We've done this for a few years and I hope we'll continue to for a long time.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

Tough question. A part of squatting is the uncertainty: you just don't know. I hope that we will still be here. That the whole thing's even more beautiful. That there are more children.

occii

Sjoerd



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

As a concert hall, occii is part of a larger collective, De Binnenpret. We also have a kitchen, a free shop, a theatre and much more here. When I started here as a volunteer, I sometimes

organised benefit concerts and there was always room for an info booth. The bands we invited came from abroad and we connected them to the local scene. Almost all proceeds went to squatters and activist groups. Bands came from all over the world and they helped out in the kitchen, we were one big community. It's still like that, though it is less active now, and the political aspect has diminished a little. We do try to leave room for action groups and benefit concerts in the programming. OCCII is a kind of a steady place now. We have a permit and can, technically, stay for another fifty years, but we do have to maintain the building ourselves.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I still don't see any alternatives and I've seen a lot of places come and go. I've also been active in the squatting movement because I wasn't satisfied with the places that

were there. I can still channel all my energy into this project, the OCCII is more than just work for me, it is simply part of my life. The connection I have with music and activism, there's still room for that here. We once produced the White Paper on Squatting and Free Spaces, because the VVD [right wing party] came up with a policy paper denouncing squatting. That's where we stood with the OCCII: we wanted to show ourselves. For me, a free space is a place that organises itself and is a link between the community and the initiatives that take place there. It's a place that thinks independently and tries to offer an alternative to consumerism and capitalism in the city. That white paper was drawn up in response to the legislative proposals around 2008/2009. With the national squatting movement we tried to convince left-wing parties to vote against it. They did, but there was a right-wing majority in favour of the ban anyway. But the book

showcased the squatting movement and free spaces in the Netherlands.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I hope that, in the future, the OCCU will still be a very vibrant young scene that promotes solidarity and community. I hope that bands and musicians still come to play because of the importance of exchange, instead of just seeing it as a stepping stone to something better. The autonomous scene is so important. I hope that in ten years there will still be places like OCCU where all kinds of people from around the world still come together to organise events. Together with De Binnenpret, we've been organising things for almost forty years. I hope it'll continue. One of the residents has a child, so there's a very young group of people who will grow up here now. I think that's a beautiful cycle.

Joe's Garage Josefina



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

Joe's Garage has been around for more than seventeen years, so it's difficult to pin down one specific event in all those years. Of course our ten and five year anniversaries were great gatherings, or parties, whatever you want to call it. We've had so many meetings, concerts and presentations. The greatest thing is the entirety of it, from the beginning to where we are now. Joe's has been around since 2005. I've been involved with Joe's Garage from the

beginning, but before that I was part of the squatting consultation hours in Amsterdam-Oost. In 2008 we were evicted from Pretoriusstraat 28. On the evening before the eviction, we organised a community kitchen and washed the dishes, as one should. We then removed the entire inventory from number 28 and brought it to number 43. In the evening after the eviction we reopened at number 43. During the eviction, 43 people were arrested and we were able to accommodate these people in the evening here at Joe's Garage as it is now.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

Joe's Garage is one of the few squatted political social centres in Amsterdam. We accommodate many people who feel connected to us. We're an independent collective, but we feel connected to other collectives. It's always been about affordable living and working space and that is still our focus. But there

are also lots of other struggles that emerge in political or social areas. We're not so much a cultural place or anything like that, of course we also take part in culture, but we're more of a political-social place. It's my drive to bring those people together and provide an opportunity for reflection, discussion, organising benefit concerts and a place where things aren't about commercialism.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

I hope we can continue this way. Look, it's a squat, so the future is always uncertain. We've always known that this place might be gone one day. That's why we started a housing association in 2008 and, after years of struggle, we were able to purchase Pieter Nieuwlandstraat 93/95, called Nieuwland. In Nieuwland, there's room for affordable living space, work space and a political social centre too. We wanted to maintain an autonomous

political and social centre in this neighbourhood. If Joe's ever collapses, there won't be a place like it in the area. By purchasing Nieuwland with our housing association, we've laid a claim to the future. Ideally I'd like to do the same with Joe's Garage and purchase it just like Nieuwland to take full ownership of it. But not at any price. Ultimately, achieving that goal comes with a price tag. And if it's not possible, we won't just give this place away. Ultimately, this place is criminal property and it should actually be expropriated.

AstaroTheatro
Roberto Bacchilega



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

The Free Fringe Festival. That started as a sweet revenge or a kind of opposition to the international Fringe Festival. It's a festival for theatre and performance art, which has ultimately become a kind of format that you can buy the rights to and organise yourself in your own city. As an artists' collective, we were a bit pissed off about the approach of the official Fringe Festival. We had applied with others and they asked us to take a mandatory workshop on self-marketing and we didn't want that. Long story short, we said, "Fuck it all; let's have our own Fringe Festival." The idea was to create a festival that was really fringe, really experimental, really challenging and as community-based as possible. There were several venues that participated, such as Vondelbunker, 4Bid Gallery and AstaroTheatro. Those were good days, those are the events I remember.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

For me, art is a way to create community. When you say you're alternative and fringy, what does that mean? To me, that means trying to create a story that isn't some kind of business talk. You try to open up people's imagination, to a level that goes beyond what the corporate claim to creativity gives you. One of the great successes of capitalism, I fear, is that it even takes away your imagination. It even takes away the imagination that a better world is possible and that things can be different. Capitalism tells us that this is our human nature, our nature and the nature of things. Those are big and very dangerous claims. I, along with many other people, want to challenge this claim. There's a different way of doing things, of creating, of telling stories, and this is what we're trying to do.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

This place has looked pretty much the same for the past fifteen years and will continue to look the same. Of course, if political circumstances change then this place will change too. I don't expect the political situation in the Netherlands and the world to change any time soon, but I hope that more and more places will emerge that claim some space within this system. This neighbourhood has never been a good neighbourhood, but it's deteriorated dramatically since we've been here. Still, we try to keep it more or less as it is here. Our community has suffered greatly from the pandemic. Many of us, like some migrants and refugees, live lives that are not always easy. Suddenly the pandemic came, and we weren't able to work together anymore. As soon as there's a two-year break, what you've built up for so long crumbles into pieces. What we're

doing now is quite optimistic from that point of view: we're starting from scratch. We give performances here, run programmes and give workshops. We don't get any funds, so we really depend on goodwill.

Nieuwe Anita
Ard & Edi



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

A It may not be an event, but the space itself has a specific character. Originally, musicians played at ground level and the bar was at table height. That's a different setup than what you

normally encounter. This comes from: "Hey we're going to build a bar," instead of "a bar should look like this." When I first came here, which was at the start of all this, that's what struck me the most. Gradually, of course, it started to make more sense. The Nieuwe Anita also has a style, with items that have been picked from the street.

E On the first night that we were fully open after the lockdown, there was a storm, a big storm. I live in Riekerhaven and my roof was blown away. It was one of my first big weekend nights here and I was anxious that no one would come. I wondered if I should go to work because it was dangerous outside. I don't know what the programme was exactly, but the whole place was packed. I was quite new here, but the old owner, Olga, was walking around and she knew everyone. There was a birthday party, with something happening at every corner. There was this vibe

of everyone being back in the Anita and ready to start again. I think that was one of the most memorable nights for me.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

E There's a really nice scene around the Nieuwe Anita, made up of people of different ages. This is like a living room for them. A safe home base, you just come and you're guaranteed to have fun. I think that's important, the regulars who come here.

A Over a very long time, quite a few people have contributed to the essence of this place, and that's super cool.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

E I think this place will look the same, but not in the sense that everyone will be doing the same thing for ten years and just getting older. I hope that in ten years there

will be nice, fresh new people behind the bar who are all really looking forward to being here and I think the music will also reflect that. That doesn't mean that it'll be in line with hip pop music in ten years' time, but that it'll be in line with what's going on beneath the surface, and that the people and guests involved will also be in line with that.

A In ten years I'll be a visitor, probably, and I'll have a culture shock. "Who are these people, they don't know me?!" Then I'll probably be somewhere else and it will be nice there again. I think things will keep going, with a bit of luck. Whatever happens.

E Someone once told me that the Anita's strength is that very nice people work there. I think if we keep doing that, things will be fine in ten years. Always forwards, always nice people behind the bar. That's why it's always fun here.

Ruigoord Hans Plomp



Can you share an event with us that took place here and that you'll never forget?

The old Landjuweel festivals were incredible. The festival was free and there were no oil tanks around Ruigoord yet. It was reclaimed land that had been reclaimed by nature, it was actually one big wilderness. People came from all over the world. It was a free piece of land. A free space is a place where people can rediscover themselves. Ruigoord is really a place for free-spirited people, with space to roam freely, where one can rediscover

the uncivilised, and thereby in fact super-civilised person. Right now indigenous wisdom keepers are staying over for a visit. They just planted a peace tree with a beautiful altar around it. It happened three days ago and four hundred people showed up. I'm so very happy that this is happening with all kinds of spirituality. We had to endure a techno phase first. That raised a lot of money, people easily paid twenty euros to come here and dance by the fire. To trip and to fuck. That's all possible here, we're free. But we didn't want it to continue that way. Fortunately, that time's over, partly thanks to COVID. There was no room for live music anymore, so some people stayed away too. It's now changed completely, first of all, women now take much more initiative and there are lots more children. This is a fantastic change, I didn't like the techno phase.

What do you consider to be the most important thing about this place today?

I think, like most free spaces, we've kind of moved away from the official system. As far as I'm concerned, Ruigoord is the place where we can survive and keep our traditions and knowledge alive until the tipping point, which as far as we know is in 2026. Then the system will collapse like a pudding. It'll continue to stagnate, as it already does. Computers are being hacked, there's phishing and cyber war. People like us have so much wisdom and power to change the system. Women are still being marginalised. The main function of having a place is to survive until our system collapses. Until then, we'll continue building. A journalist asked one of the indigenous wisdom keepers: "Aren't you afraid of the future?" She replied: "We are the future." That's how I feel too. There's not much we can do to change the system, it'll change itself. I think that the "ewomancipation" of men must go together with the emancipation of women and then you get people who are

whole again. Let's "ewomancipate." Men really are less developed than women in some ways.

If you imagine what this space might look like in ten years, what do you see?

We have a lot on the agenda, there's something to do every week. Not only do we have the church here, but also the drawing room and a beautiful little theatre. There are lots of events being organised there too, such as lectures, performances and music. It's pretty difficult to find peace here as a resident. An empty schedule brings happiness, but that's not so easy here.

III

The housing struggle continues



How to organise a rent strike: a practical guide

*Nina Boelsums &
Bambi de Vries*

Rent strikes can be a powerful instrument in the struggle for better housing. How can this forgotten tactic be revitalised for the 21st century? In this piece, we will reflect on a rent strike we organised in 2022 – one of the first in a long time – and give some practical advice to would-be rent strikers.

To go on a rent strike means to no longer pay your rent, as a form of protest and a means of leverage. There are two options: a full rent strike or a partial rent strike. In the first case you withhold the entire amount. In the latter, you withhold a specific part of the rent you refuse to pay, such as a rent increase, or additional costs you are charged to pay for services such as cleaning or maintenance.

Over the previous century, the rent strike has been a successful tactic within the housing struggle. In the thirties, entire neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and Rotterdam stopped paying to protest high rents. Workers barely had any money left for food after paying for accommodation, leading to mass rent strikes under the slogan “food first, then rent”. If landlords attempted to evict tenants, thousands of rent-striking neighbours would flood the streets, preventing the police from reaching the house and often leading to the eviction being called off. In the 1980s, rent strikes were common too: tenants in Kattenburg managed to block rent increases this way for years, and members of the Moluccan immigrant community in Capelle aan den IJssel went on a rent strike to demand renovations to their homes.

Nowadays, unfortunately, rent strikes are no longer common. When tenants' rights were strong, social housing was not yet gutted, and the *Huurcommissie* [a legal entity that mediates in conflicts between tenants and landlords] could still offer support, the need for rent strikes was low. But nowadays, the *Huurcommissie* no longer serves its purpose, and the current housing crisis is screwing over everyone except landlords. As a matter of fact, renters find themselves in an equally poor position as the one they found themselves in a hundred years ago. Time to put the rent strike to use again.

RIEKERHAVEN RENT STRIKE

In spring 2022, we organised a month-long full rent strike.

Startblok Riekerhaven – a temporary social housing complex for young people and asylum seekers with a residence permit – was unsafe both structurally and socially, in addition to being run-down and dirty. The containers that made up the complex were first used as student housing in the Houthaven area, and were about to be decommissioned in 2015, until the war in Syria created a sudden need for housing for new asylum applicants. The worn-out containers were built up again in the heavily polluted Riekerhaven area in 2016. There were issues from the start: holes in the floors went without repairs, there were plagues of rats and flesh-eating ants (seriously), sinkholes appeared, broken washing machines and locks were never fixed. The roof of the complex had come off twice before, and the last time this happened, in 2021, housing association *Lieven de Key*, which owns Riekerhaven, never finished repairs at all, despite being given a year to do so. Sandbags on the roof were supposed to keep the corrugated panels in place, and there was still a large hole in them when storm Eunice hit the country in February 2022.

These years of neglect of already poor temporary housing eventually led to this storm tearing off the roofs of two out of six units. Large metal shrapnel flew across the grounds, and one of the studios was pierced by a part of the roof curling in on itself. Panicked neighbours trying to get their pets to safety were narrowly missed by flying debris. The next day, storm Franklin caused torrents of rainwater to run down the walls of people's houses.

The electricity was cut, and residents were housed in a hotel for the week. In the common space, waiting for the bus that would bring us to the hotel, we overheard multiple people exclaiming they would no longer pay their rent. Some had already cancelled the payment of three months' worth of rent – enough, that is, to be evicted. In our group chat (already infiltrated by De Key), more people called to stop paying rent. That's when it became clear that a collective rent strike had to be organised as soon as possible, or these lone spontaneous rent strikers would be an easy target for De Key.

124 out of 565 tenants joined in the rent strike. Each of us would normally pay 500 euros of rent per month, which meant that we were immediately withholding 62,000 euros from the housing association. Collectively, we put together a list of demands: we wanted compensation for damages, an independent review of the safety of the complex, safer roofs, a commitment to overdue maintenance, measures for better social safety, and a stop to the planned extension of the complex by another 250 studios.

LEGAL CONSEQUENCES

This might be a good moment to reflect on the legal consequences of a rent strike.

Workers have the right to lay down their work, but tenants do not have the right to stop paying rent. Even if you

do so collectively, in the eyes of the law you will simply be in arrears. That's why you will need large numbers of participants and sympathisers: your landlord probably won't have the capacity to evict dozens of tenants. Additionally, it's important to garner media attention, since the landlord will likely want to avoid looking bad in the public eye. This can make it more appealing for them to enter negotiations with you instead.

What we lay out here are the legal consequences of a full rent strike. In case of a partial rent strike, you should expect the same steps, though your legal position is stronger. A judge might rule that it is in fact within your rights not to pay a part of your rent, because your landlord doesn't deliver as promised.

Your landlord will send you a first reminder if you haven't paid your rent on the first day of the next month. This reminder will come in the form of a letter with a request to pay the overdue rent. The payment term for this is fourteen days – so you will have another two weeks to still pay your rent.

If after these two weeks you still haven't paid, your landlord can hand over the claim to a collection agency, which will charge for its work. These charges will come on top of the rent that is still due. For this, you will receive another letter, either from the landlord or the collection agency. After this letter, you might receive multiple reminders. You should keep these letters, and collect copies of those of other participants in the rent strike.

Collection charges can vary depending on the circumstances – you can use the tool on the website of the Autoriteit Consument en Markt [a state agency regulating market competition] to get an idea. In our case, the maximum collection charge for basic rent was about 77 euros. To afford this, we planned to collect money through benefit events.

If, after receiving all these letters, you still refuse to pay,

your landlord can summon you to a court hearing. This will come in the form of a signed letter by a bailiff. Though it is to be expected that you will lose the ensuing court case, it is still a good idea to contact a lawyer, for two reasons: firstly, low-income tenants can have their costs covered by legal benefits, something the lawyer can help you apply for. Secondly, there is no jurisprudence for people going on rent strike, which means that a case like this would be relatively unpredictable. A good lawyer will know how to use this to her advantage.

Multiple things could come out of a court ruling, and these outcomes are not mutually exclusive:

- The judge may decide you must pay the legal costs, if the landlord has requested this. These costs come on top of the rent and collection costs and usually range between 800 and 1100 euros. If you do not qualify for legal benefits, lawyer costs are added to this as well.
- The judge may order you to pay the overdue rent and collection charges within a month. This is why it is important to set the unpaid rent aside for yourself. Otherwise, if you are unable to pay, a bailiff might come and lay claim to your income and bank account.
- If, on the day of the hearing, you do not owe more than three months of unpaid rent, the chances of being evicted are very small. If you have been in arrears in the past, this risk is higher. If you have not paid rent for more than three months, the chances of eviction are very high. In this case, you risk losing your home as well as having to pay court and lawyer costs.

SCARE TACTICS

Though we never experienced any legal consequences, there were several ways in which De Key and the

municipality tried to intimidate striking tenants. Initially, De Key took on a hostile attitude towards us: residents whose personal belongings were damaged by rainwater “should have been insured”. De Key’s director came by to patronisingly reassure us that everything was very safe, and that we shouldn’t worry. We livestreamed this “conversation”, which ended in a shouting match, via Instagram, to involve all residents of Riekerhaven in our struggle for safe housing.

De Key started threatening us with legal action, and most seriously, cutting benefits for some of the people on strike. The association claimed the municipality would do this automatically, if they were told someone on benefits did not pay rent. The reasoning was that a tenant who did not pay rent did not require benefits, which was obviously nonsensical, given that our plan all along was to pay all overdue rent at the end of the strike.

On top of that, De Key sent emails threatening to send bailiffs after us even after the first month of unpaid rent. This would skip two steps in the legal procedure, and would be without legal basis, so it was probably meant as a scare tactic.

WHY JOIN IN A RENT STRIKE WHEN THE RISKS ARE THIS HIGH?

The more of us join in, the stronger we stand in our struggle for, safe, liveable, high quality housing. Going on a rent strike means taking a risk for the common good of the neighbourhood. Any resident should stand in solidarity with this! Media attention plus support from lawyers, political parties, NGOs and the wider population of the city can put serious pressure on any landlord. There is a lot we can get done this way!

In the past, whole neighbourhoods supporting rent

strikes – up to physically blocking evictions – have won serious improvements in housing. We are still indebted to that struggle. That doesn't mean, of course, that every rent strike necessarily needs to go all the way. With each development, it's wise to consider collectively whether you want to go on. Tenants can always decide on their own to stop striking and transfer their rent, but it's important that they first share their concerns with the collective. Again, the more tenants are on strike, the stronger the strike! That's why it's best to decide collectively to stop, rather than individually.

Our action received a lot of support as well. The media devoted a lot of attention to us – we were “lucky” enough to make national TV news with a video of our roof being blown off. Regional news, various newspapers and the university press were eager to report on the strike. This happened at the start, when we weren't sure yet how far we were willing to go, but it immediately put a lot of pressure on De Key.

We organised a demonstration at De Key's offices, and entered negotiations with them. We were supported by tenant association Arcade, who had a lot of experience with De Key and were fully on board with what we were doing. Our actions, together with the media attention, became impossible to ignore for De Key, who must have seen how many tenants were on strike and how well-organised we were. All of a sudden, it turned out it was possible after all to repair floors, roofs and washing machines, to keep tenants in the loop and to pay compensation for storm damage. The facades got a new lick of paint, and the yard got some new plants. Eventually, after a month of striking and three rounds of negotiations, we finally won the commitments covering virtually all our demands.

It turned out that a rent strike can be effective! We were content and tired, and decided to end the strike. Two days later however, block five flooded again, though the roof

was declared watertight three times over by various inspection agencies. These leaks prefigured a much larger disaster later that year.

THE FIRE

A couple of months later, we discovered the rent strike had not brought us the safety we fought so hard for. At 8:30 in the morning of November 13 2022, all of block five burned down, which made it necessary to demolish block six as well. 135 people lost their homes and possessions. Seven pets died. We're writing this manual still in a state of shock about what happened. What's clear is that you can't rent strike your way out of a lack of fire safety. The problem lies deeper: with the sale of social housing, and its replacement with so-called flexible housing that barely meets two of the otherwise mandatory seventeen fire safety standards. If landlords comply with regulation, but it is the regulation itself that is wrong, how can you possibly organise against that?

STRIKE!

The housing shortage does not only cause homelessness. The increased precarity of tenants makes it easy for landlords to screw them over, because they have nowhere else to go. The Huurcommissie, the body that mediates between tenants and landlords, should make rent strikes redundant, the way it used to in the past, but these days it functions slowly and poorly. All the more reason a rent strike can be the way to go to defend your right to good housing. Also, because rent strikes are not recognised legally, they don't have any legal boundaries either. They allow for radical positions. Don't be content with the promises of experts, but demand more – there are plenty of things to fight against. Maybe the cost of living crisis makes it impossible for you

to still afford food after rent. Maybe the high energy costs are making it hard to heat your poorly-insulated flat. Or, maybe, your roof is blown off.

Initially, we had counted on a couple dozen strikers, and surely no more than a hundred, since going on a rent strike is a radical action with plenty of legal consequences. The Covid pandemic also made it impossible for us to go door to door mobilising our neighbours. Still, there were many participants, most of whom joined in “silently”. We didn’t know who they were, and they never talked with us. The silent strikers didn’t help in organising, didn’t come to demonstrations, didn’t join in the negotiations or speak out on social media – but this large group *did* have the guts, and the sense of solidarity, to stop paying rent and risk being fined or even evicted. Perhaps rent strikes are a type of radical action that is very open to otherwise non-politicised people, because it is so easy to join in: you simply stop transferring your rent.

This offers the potential for a larger movement that is open to many. If we all go on rent strike collectively, we can demand real change in our housing conditions – not just for one apartment block, but for the whole city. If rent strikes become more common again, the simple threat of a strike could motivate landlords to listen to their tenants. Recently, when residents of the ACTA student housing complex called for a rent strike after being faced with a tripling of their heating and power bills, it made such an impression on the landlord and the municipality that suddenly they *were* able to find a solution. We hope our story shows that rent strikes are effective, and can empower people to think even bigger.

HOW TO RENT STRIKE IN TEN SIMPLE STEPS (TL;DR, STOP PAYING RENT)

So, how to organise a rent strike? Based on our experiences, we put together a ten step guide to a successful strike,

so that aspiring strikers don't have to reinvent the wheel. We hope it can offer some guidance, but please keep in mind it is only based on our own experience. Hopefully, in a couple of years we can write a better version, together with other experienced rent strikers.

1. Make sure to know your neighbours! Don't let yourself be atomised, but strike up conversation in the corridor, go borrow a cup of sugar, start a group chat. This way you'll be able to share your concerns, and organise together to take action.

- 2 For one reason or another, you've decided it's time for a rent strike. Start with a core group of angry tenants who actively want to strike, and make a rough plan. Decide when to start, and whether this will be a full or partial rent strike (in the latter case, decide on a percentage of rent you want to withhold).

3. Lawyer up! Find a lawyer specialised in tenancy law and get familiar with the legal situation. If you're doing a partial rent strike, your lawyer can also advice you on the amount of rent to not pay.

4. Mobilise people willing to act. It's important everyone acts collectively (starting at the same time, withholding the same amount, etc.) This provides safety in numbers. When things get heated, some people might suddenly withhold a lot of money, inadvertently putting themselves at risk. Explain that the strike is a way of pressuring your landlord into agreeing to your demands, that everyone takes on the risk on behalf of everyone, and that solidarity is important. Invite people to join the core group of organisers.

5. Organise and communicate. Get a good overview of who is participating and collect contact details. Set up safe and robust channels of communication, for the core group as well as between the core group and the other participants. Find a horizontal way of organising, via working groups, for instance, and make decisions based on consensus. Make sure you have enough active people for the negotiations, the legal proceedings, keeping in touch with participants, and communication with media and outside support groups. Collectively agree on a set of demands. Transparency is incredibly important, so share the demands, the possible legal consequences, and ways for people to get involved, so everyone knows what they are getting themselves into. Each working group should keep the others informed about their activities. Even though the amount of work is not always high, the responsibility for the striking tenants, along with the tensions that come with a months-long strike, can wear out your group. Be wary of burn-out – you’re running a marathon, not a sprint.

6. Find groups to support you. These could be organisations, collectives and other activists, both within and outside the housing movement. You’re stronger together! Approach the tenant organisation first – Arcade, our tenant organisation, had more than forty years of experience in dealing with De Key. Other groups which could support you are local political parties, student unions, squatting collectives, as well as the Bond Precaire Woonvormen [a solidarity group for precariously housed people based on mutual aid] and tenant support agency !WOON (even though the latter do things very much by the book)

7. Go public with your action. Publish the demands, and send them to your landlord. Approach (local) media. Set up a social media page – this is useful for updating neighbours

and outside supporters. We used Instagram to display the bad state our houses were in, to livestream our conversation with De Key's director, and to keep people up to date about (legal) developments (you can check it out at @rieker.fire.safe)

8. Put aside the rent. Make sure every participant does so, and doesn't spend the rent they do not pay. If many participants are short on money, you could decide to set up a collective strike fund, so people won't be tempted to spend the money before the end of the strike.

9. Enter negotiations with your landlord. It's in their interest as well as yours to keep talking. They want to avoid escalation as well as bad press, while you want your demands to be met without having to face off an army of bailiffs. When your landlord promises to improve something, press them on whether this is a formal commitment. Record the conversation, so you can keep them to their word. It's a good idea to publish a summary of the talks afterwards, so all participants are up to date and it becomes harder for the landlord to lie. Initially, De Key only wanted to "hear about our experiences". Tenant organisation Arcade helped us make it clear to them we were only interested in negotiating our demands. They also assisted us in interpreting De Key's written replies, and offered support during the talks.

10. End the strike. When your demands are met, or you are done with the strike for some other reason, make sure everyone ends the strike at the same moment. If there are people who still want to go on, make sure they understand that as individuals, they run a much higher risk. Throw a neighbourhood party to celebrate!

The function of utopia: Green Tribe, land squatting between sustainability and insecurity *an interview with Ronald & Noa*

Among the first structures to arise was a large, futuristic-looking half-sphere. In 2018, the land squatters of the Green Tribe collective claimed an abandoned parcel of land in Nieuw-West, where the geodesic dome now rises between the high grass and parked caravans. These domes, constructed out of triangles connected into a round shape, have their origins in the early twentieth century but were popularised (and patented) by American architect and inventor Richard Buckminster Fuller. While Fuller was selling his domes to the military to serve as radar stations, they gained a following in 1960s America as a symbol of counter-culture, popping up in eco-villages and artist communes. The domes were a cheap, light and easily built form of housing, which carried the utopian promise of a radical alternative.

The science-fictionesque image of the dome fits in perfectly with Green Tribe's eco-village, where it is used as a communal space for collective gatherings and other activities – in the warmer months at least, when the weather allows for it. Since the first dome, accommodation of all shapes and sizes has been built up on the squatted plot: caravans, towable containers, self-built structures. The space between the various accommodations is filled in with gardens, chicken coops, beehives, a workshop. The four

years since Green Tribe squatted this small stretch of unused land have seen it transformed into a green oasis and a largely self-sufficient housing project for a small community. Before the move to Nieuw-West, the group lived in various other spots around the city, including Zeeburgereiland. The idea to squat a piece of land, squatter Ronald tells us, came after the repressive squatting law of 2010: “That was the first moment that we, as a group, thought of occupying a plot of land. And why not? Our chances of building up something long-term are better than when we squat a house.”

Some of the members have been moving with the group all that time, while for others this is their first time living in a squat. “About half of the group is squatting for the first time,” says the relatively new member Noa, who had squatted in the past but had never been involved in a land squat before.

Occupying a plot of land opens new possibilities for living together as a community. Green Tribe is not merely a response to the housing crisis and the lack of affordable living space, it is also an answer to the individualisation that characterises a capitalist society like ours, as well as to the ecological unsustainability of this society. In the eco-village, all these different dimensions (in their words) of communal living are thoroughly revised and countered with better alternatives. With Ronald and Noa, we speak about land squatting, climate activism, utopia and the importance of communal life.

What makes squatting a plot of land different from squatting a building?

R When we came to occupy this plot, the law still worked in such a way that the property owner couldn't just evict you. There had to be a building permit, it had to be



approved, and only then could you get kicked off. Unless of course the municipality wanted to intervene itself, they can do that whenever they want and you'll have to leave anyway. So a certain dependence on good relations with the municipality is unavoidable. But the owner can't just tell you to move off if they don't have approved plans for the plot. And when a plot has been empty for longer, it usually also takes longer before it can be used again. This all makes squatting a plot of land more sustainable, more long-term.

If you squat a building and stay there for two or three months, it's a constant campaign and struggle. You never really get the time to become a community. If you ask me, that's the worst part of the new laws: there used to be a whole range of squats with lots of life and movement between them... Now, with these squatting laws you can see the whole subculture disappearing.

N I see that too. When I look at squatters who squat houses, a much larger part of their time and energy is taken up by the struggle against repression. Sure, it never truly leaves our minds that we might have to pack up and leave here someday, but we've been here for years now.

Squatted buildings tend to survive little more than months or even weeks nowadays. In that way, we have a really advantageous position: we have to be mindful of repression, but not nearly as much as other groups.

In your mission statement, you describe yourself as an intentional community. What does that mean?

R In an intentional community, people determine for themselves how they want to live together. For example, one of our intentions is to work with and in nature as much as possible. Another intention is to do it all while leaving behind the smallest possible footprint.

N Life in a squat or an eco-village is so different from accepted ways of living that no one really gets into it non-intentionally. Some find their ways to places like this out of desire, some more by necessity, but at the end of the day we all make a radical decision. The decision to really do things differently. That is already intentional.

How do you safeguard that community?

R We set up an association and as few rules as possible. Well, not rules, really. There are a few guidelines we keep to. Because we've been doing this for some eight years now, people have been getting along together for a while and many things just come naturally. When someone new joins in, they usually pick up our way of living quite easily too.

And how did you come to join this community?

N I was helping out in the gardens a few months before I moved in, so I knew everyone already. Or at least, so I thought until I joined one of the meetings and saw some

people for the first time. It's more of a neighbourhood than a house; you don't see every person as much as some others. Certain things bring the whole group together, like in the summer when it's nice out and the garden becomes one big communal living room. In the winters people stick more to themselves.

R Joining in has to come from people themselves, from what they want to do. Of course, we always appreciate it when people help out and join in. But if someone has an idea or a project, it's up to them to make it happen.

N And then, ideally, there is support.

How can you make sure people really get involved and help each other? How can you build that trust?

N It's a circle. If you trust people, they become trustworthy. When I moved here, I immediately felt that I was trusted. When you place your trust in someone from the start, and see if it works, you're in that circle. It's also important to not feel resentment when things don't work out; to not lose faith in people. You have to assume that everyone is doing what they can. Not necessarily until they are completely exhausted, but their real capacity. For some people that's a lot, for others it's less. Both have to be acceptable.

R I think the way we communicate is important. Try to not to put too much emotion into a meeting or a conversation. In the past, we had a few people who would constantly start screaming if anything was said against them. That can be hard to deal with. We don't have a strong leader or someone who steps in and says: "You need to leave now." Eventually that all happens organically anyway. Living in a community, people who are upset all the time don't tend to



last very long and usually leave by themselves. In the beginning, we definitely had times when we just didn't have meetings to avoid the tension. There's a kind of chemistry you have to develop as a group. To make that work, you have to put in the time.

Sometimes I think that people have gotten so used to living as individuals that communal life means we have to start from scratch; re-learn how to live together. Add to that the fact that we don't have any direct obligations or requirements. We won't tell you to do this, that or the other thing – while a lot of people are so used to others telling them what to do. But we don't want to live with each other like that, because we believe in the dynamic that develops between people when we don't. Social relations are so different when people are guided by intrinsic motivation.

Is that the biggest difference with 'normal' living? Is this your utopia, which could not exist outside of this place?

N It's definitely one aspect of it. That becomes clear as soon as you go from fantasising about living in this way to actually doing it. You really learn what the problems of

utopia are. That's the function of utopia: you try something out that was once just in your head, and it reveals all the new problems that arise. That kind of experimentation is only possible in a place like this. But I think there's a lot of things you can try out when it comes to living more consciously with others, even in a "normal" living situation. What we're doing here doesn't have to be the first step. The biggest difference I notice myself compared to friends who live in regular houses is not that we interact with each other in completely different ways, but that I have to walk through the rain to get to the bathroom. Or that I'm always checking whether my roof is leaking. Those practical things tend to matter more than the interpersonal dynamics.

It makes you much more connected with your surroundings. When it's really cold in winter and you're in a flat, you're ok. But here it means: no running water, frozen soap, frozen oil. Daily life is just so different, but the fun of it is that you get to learn how things really work. Living here, I've learnt how gas works, I can build a wood-fired stove, and all sorts of other practical skills. It's nice to apply yourself to the world.

How do you keep up that knowledge?

R You need a few technical people. And to circle back again to your question about utopia: generally speaking, squatting is a good way for people with limited means to live cheaply. It's an accessible way to live together with other people in a community. Of course, that could go one of many ways, but it has plenty of advantages. We have a lot of shared facilities: our kitchen, workshop, tools, washing machine, showers, those kinds of things. You occupy a plot of land and the first year and a half is dedicated to setting up infrastructure, facilities and a garden. That's the point we're at now. Last summer, we hosted a lot

of events here and we've been able to set up a great garden. But once you know you might be able to stay somewhere indefinitely or ten years or so, the plans you make change as well. You need that stable foundation for the community to really blossom. This precarity we face at the moment, that's the really big challenge.

All three of your locations so far have been in Amsterdam. What is the significance of land squatting in the city rather than in the countryside? How does the eco-village form part of the urban environment?

R Amsterdam and other large cities attract people who want to do things in new or different ways. Even though space is limited, it's important that these people have a place here. The more difficult squatting gets in a city like Amsterdam, the more it matters that there are other places for people who love community living. The work we do here proves that it's possible. It takes time to develop a place like this, but you can create something nice on a plot where there's nothing.

At the same time, the authorities are getting more and more strict. There's fewer people than before living in motorhomes, trailers, or boats in the city. At some point, it will reach a critical level when so few people live like this that the government will just outright ban it all. That's why it's so important that people keep living in these ways in our cities, consciously. There's plenty of people occupying vacant lots in secret. But we consciously chose to live publicly and out in the open. We tell the world: "Look, here we are." We either get accepted or we don't, but we are not going to hide. I think that's crucial: that people who live in non-traditional ways, in motorhomes or trailers or boats, can continue to do so; that public opinion and the government learn to take less issue with that.

Do you see all this as climate activism?

N If we want to tackle the climate crisis, we need massive system change. Everything needs to change, we can't continue in this way, on any level, either personal or political. The majority of emissions right now are by companies producing junk, not by regular people and the ways they live. I also do more obvious climate activism. The way we live here... is experimentation. The point of it all is not to say: "Everyone should live like us." The point is to show that we need places where we can experiment and live sustainably in our communities. We're only a small group, but when people come here for the first time, their reactions clearly show there's a widespread desire to live more ecologically. But let's say you rent a flat and have to work to pay the rent each month, where's the space to experiment with different forms of living then? In my eyes, the way we live here is not an example for how to do things, but rather an example for daring to experiment.

R But you are making use of something that would not be used otherwise. That's super sustainable. This plot was abandoned for twenty years, and now we've been living here for a couple of years and it's getting used well again. The same goes for squatting empty buildings. In a way, there's always an aspect of sustainability when you reclaim abandoned spaces.

Do you see yourselves as pioneers? Do you feel you are showing the world new possibilities?

R Well, what we do is not particularly new, people have been doing this for a long time...

N I do think people get that feeling here, especially in the summer when the trees start to show their leaves and you can walk around surrounded by greenery. That really seems to amaze people. I don't see us as pioneers, but I get the feeling that other people do look at us that way – and that's nice. I like that people look to us and get their own ideas for how their lives could be different. People interested in land squatting have come to us for a chat and a look around to exchange knowledge for their own projects. This place has been here for quite some time now, so we have built up skills and know-how that we are always happy to share.

In building up the village, do you keep in mind the potential need to relocate to a new place later? Have you found ways to build with mobility in mind?

R Yes, of course. You always try to create things that are mobile and can be taken with you. But every place you go, you'll always build more permanent things at a certain point. Take our kitchen, for example. It's built out of wood and other things that we can't really take with us if we would have to leave. Of course, it's practical to keep everything mobile but there's also people who come here and live like this for the first time, like Noa. You usually start by buying a caravan, which eventually starts to feel too small, so you build something connected to it or around it. Bit by bit you keep adding on. It might not be the most practical seeing as we often don't really know how long we can stay in one spot, but it's the way things go.

It's a lot of improvising then?

R Definitely. Once you find a spot where you know you can live for longer, you do things completely differently.



N I don't know... before I came here, I was constantly moving from flat to flat. In all, I had to move thirteen times. I never had a chance to do or build anything. Here, I've been way more comfortable building things, even if I know I have to break them down at some point. People who have never squatted before ask me all the time how I can live with such uncertainty, but honestly this is the most permanent spot I've ever lived in!

In terms of the climate crisis and ecological alternatives, how do you see a place this like developing in the future?

N I try to not to think about all that really... I want to stay focused on what's happening now. It's all so crazy and ridiculous, in so many ways. Everything is really going to get so much worse.

R When I started living more outdoors like this, solar panels were much more expensive than they are now. Wi-Fi was tricky too. Ironically, technology is also making it easier to live off the grid. When I started out, I was

completely off-grid and that was really tough. But it felt good to be autonomous. That self-reliance is really important, especially if you're far away from any basic utilities. Thirty years from now, batteries might have gotten even better, and off-grid living might be a whole lot more luxurious than it is now. Of course, this all still rests on the most important element: that you find a spot where you can set down roots for the long-term.

Do you feel you are gaining followers? That people are taking up your example?

R We are involved in an eco-village network. There are more and more eco-villages being set up nowadays. Of course, they're not usually squats, but a fair few of them are. The majority are set up more officially with all the right approvals. There's a lot of really interesting initiatives among them and in that sense, we are one of many projects like us. We have a particular vision for our development, and others have their own. It's really a wide range: from religious and spiritual initiatives to more commercial projects. Some projects we don't share as much with as others, but it's all people who think that the way most of us live – the individualism, everyone in their own apartments – is just not a natural way to live. We all believe that people organised in small groups, can be part of a community while still being free to do their own thing. This is something we all really cherish.

And is that what you share with those other eco-villages?

N That's definitely some common ground we share with this network. But we also engage with more climate-oriented groups in and around Amsterdam, not just squats or other alternative living communities. Groups like ASEED,

with whom we share more in terms of ideology than our specific practice. I think it's interesting to be a part of all kinds of different networks and engage in different kinds of exchange.

R Our group is really open to others engaged in things like climate activism or coming from groups like the queer community. People can have their own projects and goals, with our community as a solid base to fall back on, or to use our resources, or even live here.

What are the biggest challenges you face?

N Number one, rain! But really, I think the toughest obstacle is accepting that things don't always go the way you want them to when you work with others. Maybe you feel someone isn't doing what they should be doing, or there's a tension between you and someone else in the group. These things are only natural in any relationship and it's important to accept *that* and trust that things will be different again. And then when things do change, to accept that – that is the real challenge. Besides that, I think the challenges of our way of living also really depend on the person. As a non-technical person, I worry about the water a lot. Or I worry I might not be able to repair things when they break.

R I agree! And if I could add one thing, it would be: worrying about what the future will bring. That's a real challenge.

Are you still optimistic for the future and your project?

R I'm still optimistic.

N Yeah, I'm hopeful.

Do you still see opportunity for alternative modes of living?

N We have to. I don't think despair and resentment will get us anywhere. Those are the least productive emotions. You have to keep trying right?

R That's right. We've been around for a pretty long while now and we aren't planning on disappearing any time soon. And in a way, we feel we are part of the city too. We deserve a place here.

Lev & Boris (EC)

Piep, knars, krijs, kraak: exhibiting in a city with no space

October 28th 2022: Het Monument opens its doors for the first time. Five days ago, the house on the corner of Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal and Rosmarijnsteeg was squatted. For a moment, the decaying building, owned by a landlord living in a townhouse on the Singel canal, is liberated from the logic of rising house prices and speculation. Now, there's an exhibition: *Piep, knars, krijs, kraak*. It's a prototype, an experiment: using grant money to do something that the law prohibits. Swiftly the space has been cleaned, extra walls have been built, lighting has been installed, fire safety has been taken care of. The thirteen exhibiting artists have had to make work without knowing what kind of exhibition space it would end up in.

That Friday afternoon, you make your way through a crowd enjoying the balmy weather in front of the entrance, and step through the door. The space is stuffy and smaller than you expected, but cosy. Right away, you notice a strange rumbling sound – a motorcycle outside? The neighbours? Is it... *snoring*? Wait, isn't the sound coming from the clock hung inconspicuously next to the entrance? It's the work of Nezhla Imanzadeh, an Iranian artist from Amsterdam. According to her, it's above all the sound of blissful ignorance, an encouragement not to take the time we have for granted.

People keep coming in. Gently, they push you from the doorway into the increasingly crowded space. You turn around and see two banners attached to the ceiling. They look like bedsheets that were sewn together, and one of them shows an image of a folding bed, a table and a chair



within a tightly framed square. The squatter kit, you think. Then you read what's written underneath: SET ME FREE. We Sell Reality, an artist collective that originated in We Are Here, wants to show that migrants who can't gain official status are still confined by Dutch borders – even inside the Netherlands. The outlines of other beds, tables, chairs, crowd barriers and a sports stand suggest an emergency shelter or a dormitory. When survival is a primary concern, privacy disappears into the background.

Your eye catches a TV, balancing perilously on a stack of bricks that look like they came loose from the house's outer wall. You sit down on the salvaged couch and watch for a while. On the screen, Lisette Olsthoorn talks to Uber drivers in desolate parking lots. It's a part of her long-running project *Fantasies on How to Strike*, in which she investigates precarious labour in the Netherlands.

On the other side of the space, where the crumbling wall is held up by breeze blocks, an archive has been pasted up: forms, photos, a pair of headphones playing a barely intelligible phone conversation. Later tonight, artists Lina Selg, Dario di Paolantonio and Ben Maier from The Hague will explain what you're looking at: a summary of years of squatting attempts from their student days. Though by now they call themselves "ex-squatters", as a result of the increasing difficulty of occupying buildings, they want to show that civil disobedience can still be a powerful tool to combat systemic injustice and provide the basic need of housing.

In the back, next to a small screen showing an adjustable desk moving endlessly up and down (Paul Bille's *hotdesk.*), another sheet is hung from the ceiling: an undyed roll of cotton, wrapped around long sticks at the top and the bottom. The part that has been unrolled shows screen printed

← Two visitors watch Lisette Olsthoorn's film *Fantasies on How to Strike*, next to one of the banners by We Sell Reality, *I Can't Breathe*

Hokusai waves slowly dissolving into green meadows. This seventy-metre-long banner was made by Lily Lanfermeijer, Smári Rúnar and Nína Harra to protest housing association Lieven de Key evicting them from their artist housing on Zomerdijkstraat, and covered the full width of the famous building's facade.

It's crowded on the small spiral staircase leading to the first floor. Why is everyone stopping halfway, you're wondering, annoyed, until you see people reading the work that has been hung in the stairwell. In a series of illustrated panels, Victoria Hoogstoël tells the story of a ghost of a dead squatter looking for a quiet place to haunt.

Upstairs, you see a grubby sink and a mirror mounted on a plaster wall. You try turning the tap, but no water comes out – the squatters didn't get to the plumbing yet. The basin is surrounded by warped ornaments out of aluminium and plastic, and where the plasterboard meets the ceiling, a print of a sea creature (a *kraken*...?) watches over the visitors. Decorative folklore, is how Heleen Mineur describes it. On the textile print next to the sink, checkerboards morph into doors with squatting signs. You move closer, wondering *what am I actually looking at?*, when you're startled by a person appearing from behind the screen. The work also functions as a "door" to a hastily installed toilet (which, thankfully, *is* hooked up to the piping).

On the wall, you see several blue protest posters. These, you're aware, are part of the audio work of sound

↗ Performance *Through the Window* by Repelsteeltje. In the background, the banner by Lily Lanfermeijer, Smári Rúnar and Nina Harra, and Paul Bille's, Hotdesk. are visible.

→ To the left, Nadia Baxşı's *Cerca, Trova*. Against the back wall, Victoria Hoogstoël's *Looking for a quiet place to haunt peacefully*, next to the print and sink that belong to [*tailored bird nests, wood-carved candle light, occupied neurons, musels on stones and stones on mussels*] by Heleen Mineur.



artist and DJ Femke Dekker, or Loma Doom. You'd like to listen, but the leather sofa where the headphones are attached is already full of people. You look over the shoulder of a few other visitors playing Nadia Baxşır's game on a foam-wrapped computer screen. They slowly move through an abstract, glitching landscape, in pursuit of a flying building that always remains out of reach. Next to the computer, a poster is hung in the window that you recognise immediately, even if the printing is so bleached it's nearly unreadable: an *anti-kraak* poster ["anti-squat", a form of temporary guardianship of vacant places]. "Tijdelijk bewoond", or temporarily inhabited, you can just about make out. How often do you see that lie repeated when you walk down the street?

You walk past the golem-like sculptures of Daniel Dmyszewicz, constructed from "urban waste" (*what does an urban spirit want, who does it haunt and who does it protect?*) The colossus in front of the window looks just as lost as some of the visitors. Outside, an enormous banner reading KRAAK MOKUM – squat Mokum – flutters against the facade. All of a sudden you're warm, and tired. The last corner of the exhibition seems empty – until you squint your eyes and look again. Against the wall, Pablo Rezzonico Bongcam has drawn two sitting figures out of decorative tilework that, while not typically found in a traditional Amsterdam house, blends perfectly into the dilapidated wall. Are they waiting for something, or someone? Are these the traces of people who have gotten up long ago? How many people have sat here, in joyful anticipation, in desperation or fear, in this house, in the five hundred years it's been here?

The perfect place, you think, as you slowly move to the exit. Yes, the floor might be uneven, the walls might be

→ Two sculptures by Daniel Dmyszewicz. In the background, a sculpture by Pablo Rezzonico Bongcam is mounted to the wall.



stripped to the bricks, you might be able to see outside through the cracks and it will probably be tough on the squatters once it gets colder. But up against the problems that the works address and that you recognise – problems of precarity, of the search for a place you can call your own, of having to live in circumstances you didn't choose and that don't fit you – the small rooms of Het Monument suggest a way out. *It's possible, after all.* It's possible to resist investors who push the rent to unaffordable levels, and a state that does nothing to stop them. It's possible to exhibit in a city with no space, that would rather not have people like you, or not here anyway, in the smooth city that the city centre has become. You can exist as an artist without having to accept the deal that your work will automatically contribute to gentrification and segregation. That is the escape route kept open by the Het Monument and the exhibition – until the inevitable eviction. *Law or no law...*

Lev (EC). Photo's: Tommy Smits

→ *Het Monument*, the evening of the opening.



KRAAK



MOKUM

CBD

CBD

300

Squatting in the smooth city

René Boer

December 2022: the protest against the eviction of the squat Het Monument on Amsterdam's Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal made for a painful and telling picture. The building had been squatted only recently but was already going to be evicted. The squatters and their supporters gathered in great numbers the night before on the recently redeveloped public space around Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, to make their objections loud and clear. The famous slogan – “wet of geen wet, kraken gaat door!” (law or no law, squatting continues) – was chanted with conviction, but didn't resound much in the straightened out, sanitised and lifeless streets of today's Amsterdam. The city seemed to calmly wait until this last eruption of protest too would be smoothed out by the authorities.

Contemporary Amsterdam is best described as a *smooth city*: a glossy, polished and inauthentic city with no imperfections or irregularities. In the book I recently published on this topic, I explain how this urban condition is on the rise worldwide and is characterised by an increasing obsession with “perfection”, optimisation and control, and relatedly, the repression of anything that causes real friction or simply deviates too much from the norm. For many Amsterdammers, the phenomenon is familiar at this point: the entire city is renovated and sold or rented out to the highest bidder, expensive furnished apartments pop up everywhere, shops and cafés are transformed into unaffordable concept stores, and streets and squares are all clad in the same smooth, “high-quality” materials.

Characteristic of this ongoing *smoothing* of the city is the rapid elimination of everything and anything that does not fit into the “perfect”, efficient and profitable

picture: there is no space for abandoned buildings on the fringes, nearly no social housing or independent stores are left, and practically no colourful personalities or graffiti. Squats and the space for alternative ways of living they provided have largely been disposed of. Amsterdam has devoted itself to enforcing the squatting ban with full force, and even with a “leftist” mayor repression has increased in order to clear the way for the smooth city. De Valreep became a hipster brewery, the Vluchtflat was converted into a luxury apartment building and ADM became a shipyard for superyachts.

Not only have hundreds of existing squats been weeded out as a result of this increasing repression, it has also become harder and harder to squat new buildings. Often the cops will try to evict immediately because they caught squatters “in the act” or else the eviction notice gets delivered within a few days. Generally, squats have an increasingly short lifespan and their survival becomes ever more unsure, which in turn makes squatting a less viable option for providing long term housing. Simultaneously, the smooth city provides less and less vacant and thus squat-table buildings, simply because every square centimetre is worth fortunes and demand for housing is infinite. In short, almost every building is being used at the moment, making it virtually impossible to find a new place after an eviction. The irony is that the squatting movement has always fought against vacancy, but now there are hardly any vacant buildings left where that same movement can reproduce itself.

The “smoothification” of Amsterdam is not a new phenomenon. It has been going on for years and in some places has by now taken on extreme forms. It has been able to grow over the last three decades mainly as a result of the adoption of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology in city development and everything that comes with it: for-profit

real estate development, the large-scale selling off of social housing, and the constant city-branding through “IAmsterdam”. The impact has been significant because in the meantime a broad middle class, including expats, developed a preference for moving back to the city. Additionally, the ever-continuing process of digitisation plays an important role in improving the efficiency of all kinds of processes in the city, ranging from the emergence of convenience culture all the way to the permanent surveillance of public space.

In different cities, these factors have led to various degrees of smoothness. The Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal for example, has certainly been completely optimised, with carefully landscaped greenery and sleek, renovated buildings. The very last ruin of a building in the city centre was squatted for a short time – Het Monument – but even that is history now. Incidentally, back in the early 2000s a group of squatters were quick to notice the birth of the smooth city. They tried to raise attention for what they called the “easyCity” with a playful squatting action and a “guerilla exhibition” in the Kinkerstraat. During a performance, a man in a three-piece suit exclaimed: “Welcome to easyCity! A carefree city full of comfort and ease. A city where you’ll feel at home immediately because it’s just like everywhere else [...] easyCity is a success, its appeal is great [...] total control is our trademark.”

EasyCity was a parody of the companies of easyGroup, like easyJet, which appeared at the time. In the accompanying book, developments that are in this text referred to as the smooth city are often called “vertrutting” [literally “tartification”, *trut* being an offensive term for a stuck-up woman]. Because of its rather misogynist character, the term should be avoided. Not least because it has recently been adopted by the far-right to refer to the – in their eyes problematic – feminisation of society.

Gentrification is another term that is heard increasingly often, mainly in the last ten years, and that is sometimes used rather indiscriminately. It's important to reserve the use of this concept strictly to the very troubling phenomenon it originally referred to, namely the displacement of lower-income groups by higher-income groups.

The smooth city refers to a broader process of urban optimisation, although in many cases gentrification is an important part of this process.

In any case, it is certain that Amsterdam has become a textbook example of the smooth city, where those with the least money are being pushed to the edges of the city and beyond, all irregularities are polished off and there is barely any room left for whatever cannot be expressed in monetary value. As a result, the smooth city doesn't just undermine the urbanity of the city, it also poses a threat to its democratic character. In its final form, there is almost no space left for less wealthy groups to participate in shaping the city according to their ideas and wishes, and thereby to recognise themselves in their own living environment. In such a city, norms relating to perfection and optimisation are cemented into public space, leading to the exclusion or removal of anything and everyone that causes friction.

This is why the need for squatting is more urgent than ever in the smooth city of Amsterdam. Squatting isn't only about opening up space where people without a roof over their heads can sleep or where groups can build political movements. It's also about providing room for experiments that push boundaries and where young Amsterdammers can shape the city according to their vision, outside of or against existing norms. However, even though squatting has a long history and has taken many shapes and forms in Amsterdam, the question is whether the smooth city leaves any opportunity for squatting

to continue. It's clearly not easy at the moment – partly because of repression, and partly because of the lack of vacant buildings – and it's also clear that it's not going to *get* easier. At the same time, buildings will be squatted as long as space is needed and available. Squatting continues, even in this smooth, polished city, but how?

For starters, it's important to realise that the smooth city is more fragile than its slick, neat and expensive character would suggest. Sustaining it requires permanent maintenance and control of urban space. This requires constant effort and is very costly. All kinds of crises or the tiniest bit of social unrest can lead to a quick unravelling of the whole thing, as a recent strike of garbage collectors demonstrated. But developments within the smooth city itself can also lead to a “desmoothing”, whether temporary or not. If Google Maps launches an in-app, one-touch, immersive reservation system for hotel rooms, things could quickly go south for Booking, after which their beautiful glass palace on Oosterdok would be vacated, ready to be squatted.

Of course, the squatting movement should take up their crowbars and not just wait around until the smooth city unravels of its own accord. But following the analysis of the smooth city and the change in circumstances that it represents, it could help the movement to consider the next four ideas and proposals. First, it would be good if the squatting movement would shift the reasoning it uses to justify itself away from the larger, traditional themes, like fighting vacancy (which is barely there anymore) or saving monuments (of which there are plenty). It could even be worthwhile to consider putting less focus on solving the housing crisis, even though it's an important societal issue, as well as often an urgent personal one. After all, within the current context and with the current repression, it is virtually impossible to make squatting the secure and reliable type of housing for everyone that it once was.

Questioning the major battlegrounds that squatters have fought in for decades will without doubt lead to much indignation, and my intention here is certainly not to dismiss them entirely. However, it could be a strong move if squatters would look to *themselves* more as a way to justify their actions, considering that their very presence is at odds with the smooth city. By squatting, they breach the smooth city's hermetic perfection, setting in motion a wave of subversive opportunities for the urban landscape, opening up space for everything that does not comply with optimised norms, normalising the abnormal, the unregulated, the suboptimal, the inconsistent and the anti-commercial. Simply by being themselves in the heart of the city and by doing what they do, they leave a burn mark in the perfect fabric of the smooth city. Today, this can be an end in itself and it will give the movement more energy than whatever external societal justification ever would.

Second, it is essential to maintain the "institutions" of the squatting movement as much and as long as possible. Squatting in Amsterdam, contrary to what is sometimes suggested, has always been a remarkably organised and regulated phenomenon. Squatting assistance hours and squatting manuals, but also close links to lawyers and set rituals with the police are all examples of institutions that have made squatting a routine method of intervening in the city. In our publication *Architecture of Appropriation* we describe how this has made squatting a "spatial practice" that has been utilised by various groups for various purposes throughout the years. The way that the refugees' collective We Are Here was able to squat many buildings years after the squatting ban was implemented is largely thanks to the fact that many of these institutions still existed and people had experience making use of them. Sustaining (and updating) these institutions takes a lot of

time and energy but will ensure that it is always possible to strike when necessary.

Third, it is fundamental to form new coalitions. Squats have always formed an important basis where all kinds of political movements, from environmental groups to antifascists, found space to organise themselves and all kinds of radical intersections could materialise. The act of squatting was, however, (nearly) always carried out by self-appointed squatters, according to their own methods and in relative isolation. Within a movement that is becoming smaller and more fragmented, it could be effective to squat in collaboration with groups that fight for their “right to the city” in different ways, from social movements that bring people together on the neighbourhood level to resident groups that fight for the preservation of social housing. This way, mutual understanding is fostered and it becomes easier to join forces at crucial moments – from evictions to demolition plans. In this case, the shared experience of breaching the smooth city in the interest of everyone’s right to the city will resonate much more than any explanatory press release ever could.

Finally, it’s high time that the legalised squats, communal housing groups and free spaces make room for the current generation of active squatters. These places usually have their origins in the squatting movement but are currently inhabited by people who are not or barely involved in the struggle today. By collectively making spaces available, active squatters can get a chance to rest and recover after the umpteenth speed-eviction, or can continue to squat buildings that are not immediately fit for living from a less precarious starting point. Besides, many of these places have public space that is used below its capacity and is thus, ironically, often vacant. This space should also be made freely available to the current generation, so that they can use it to organise themselves or use it as they see fit.

Through coordinated use, these existing spaces could mean a lot to the current generation of squatters, who face significantly more pushback in claiming their own place in the city.

Despite the fact that there are fewer and fewer squat-able fracture lines to be found in the smooth city of Amsterdam, and the fact that repression leaves little room to explore remaining options, squatting will always continue to happen, either because of direct necessity (for housing) or because of the desire to collectively turn the city inside out. Considering the above suggestions will hopefully contribute to making squatting an effective and relevant method of action in the 2020s. In justifying squatting not by referring to larger social themes but on the basis of the importance of non-normative living in a normative city, by forming new coalitions and with the active solidarity of existing alternative spaces in the city, squatting could focus on creating alternatives to the smooth city. This way, especially here in a spotless and slick Amsterdam, squatting can continue to serve what might be its most important function: to claim a collective right to the city for all.

Anarcho-kids: the ultimate newcomers

AN ENCOUNTER

The first time I saw Rosa was at a demonstration. She was fourteen years old and giving a speech to a group of mostly adults about the importance of squatting. For many, addressing a crowd can be scary, but for her it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. This strikes me as characteristic of the new generation of activists. In a country that prides itself on its supposed normalcy, until recently being an activist was considered a bit embarrassing. Now, young people are proud of it. They naturally adopt ideas about politics that usually take years to formulate. They think intersectionally. They are against the police, against colonialism. They desire emancipation, they want higher wages. They speak up and don't shy away from confrontation. And they can't wait to make their voices heard.

A few months later I was visiting a newly squatted building, where I ran into Rosa again. She was checking out the place while someone else was asleep on a mattress. I asked her where the squatters were, so I could give them my housewarming gift. "Oh, give it to me, I live here," she replied. I hadn't considered that Rosa could be a squatter; given her age it seemed inappropriate for her to live there. Although I feel admiration for underage people who are politically active, I was also worried. Squats are not always a safe or stable living environment. The place where I saw Rosa, for example, was evicted after two weeks. Squats are rarely preserved for a longer period of time. And even when they are, one wonders what such an environment has to offer to a teenager. Living in a squat is a solution for people who cannot or do not want to pay rent. Why would

minors, who are supposed to be under the care of parents or guardians, seek recourse in a squat? Who keeps an eye on them if their parents don't, and who takes care of them?

An easy answer to that last question would be other squatters. But it's not that simple. Various people in the squatting movement have told me that they don't feel like playing mother to young people who have just joined the movement. They chose not to have children out of feminist convictions, but suddenly find themselves responsible for underage people. This quasi-parental role clashes with their self-understanding. In the squatting movement, autonomy is arguably the most important principle: people treat each other as equals without hierarchy and are given the responsibility to make their own choices. This principle is complicated by the presence of minors. They may want to be treated as autonomous individuals, but they also need guidance. They cannot be left entirely to their own devices. The enforcement of the squatting ban, at the same time, has made the movement more protective. Squatters have strong political convictions that they will vigorously hold on to. Would an underage person have the self-confidence to disagree with them and speak up for themselves? Especially when depending on the same people for basic necessities, such as shelter and food?

To find answers to these and other questions, I visit Rosa in her new squat. She has kept busy since the last eviction, living in various places and attending demonstrations. This makes her one of the most active "anarcho-kids", a term I use to describe young people in the movement. Rosa recently moved into a squat with about seven others, all adults. We sit down in her living room, joined by other members of the collective. They will occasionally help her out when she can't find the right words.

I ask her how she joined the movement. "It started with creating political awareness. I didn't know exactly what

I wanted, except that it had to be political. That's why I became active in Volt [a centrist, pro-European political party], although I don't support that anymore. Through social media, I ended up at Hotel Mokum. I visited the expo at your place and then came to the eviction, where I experienced police violence for the first time. I found this very intense, but I kept going to squats. During the eviction of the Waldeck Pyrmontlaan squat, there was even more police violence, which radicalised me and made me even angrier and more political."

I ask her if she feels safe in the squatting movement, to which she replies, "Yeah, funny story, in the first squat where I lived, there was also a paedophile."

SAFETY VERSUS SECURITY

This is of course anything but a funny story, and I think Rosa said this mainly to signal that I shouldn't ask too much about it. A predictable response to hearing about paedophilia and police violence in the squatting movement might be: get those children out of there. It's clear that the community is not safe enough for them. My question to that reaction is: where should they go? Show me a place that is free from police violence and abuse of power and I'll pack my bags too.

Squatting doesn't adhere to accepted norms, and people will condemn it more harshly for it. Whatever goes wrong is prone to be magnified and considered emblematic of squats in general. But those same squats also take care of each other and, in this case, Rosa. The whole collective, and of course Rosa herself, make sure she has food, shelter and clothing. People turn to squatting because they want to get away from something. Some do it to avoid living in the streets or to find relief from poverty. Others seek to evade the strictures of a society in which they don't feel

at home. And there are those who flee paedophilia and police violence. Police violence is widespread, though cops seem to entertain a particular dislike of squatters. Paedophilia and sexual violence usually take place in domestic settings, among family or acquaintances. But in squats, police violence and abuse of power are at least addressed and taken seriously, which cannot be said of many other places.

Yet something has obviously gone wrong here. Rosa and her friends even left the movement for a while. "I was especially disappointed because I was initially very enthusiastic to join the movement," Rosa continues. "After what happened I really wanted to distance myself from squatting. But that's unfair. Why was I the one who had to leave?" To properly accommodate the presence of young people, squatters need to seriously consider how to ensure their safety. Fortunately, the squatting movement has in fact developed ways of looking out for people who are more vulnerable. For example, people of colour are routinely informed by the AG [Arrestee Group, people who deal with the legal side of activism] about the increased risk they run during an action. White people are informed that their comrades of colour run this increased risk and will try to take that into account. And many activists speak English in jail in solidarity with those who do not speak Dutch, so the non-Dutch speakers can't be isolated from the group. These kinds of precautions, however, do not seem to exist in the case of minors. I ask Rosa if people have ever warned her about the risks involved in joining a group of adults as an underage person. She replies matter-of-factly, "No, but sometimes when I enter a squat, people say: 'Go away, you're too young!'"

The squatting movement can be quite restrictive when it comes to welcoming new people, and that goes for minors as well. There are various reasons for not letting young people in, but the most important argument

is safety, both for the squatting community itself and for the minors involved. Since the squatting ban and the increased repression that came with it, squatters have had to be very protective of their homes, ideals, and community. The times are long gone when squatters would simply take to the streets, crowbar in hand. Actions are organised in a much more secretive way. A leak of information can mess up everything. Some would say that young people are less concerned with safety precautions. Cliché has it that teenagers act more impulsively, share information on social media, and cannot (yet) foresee the consequences of their own actions. Sometimes it seems safer to tell them to go away and come back when they're older. Of course, this can be a matter of genuine concern, and because as an adult squatter you don't always feel capable of creating a safe situation for someone who, in your eyes, is still a child.

Fortunately, there is now a collective that cares about Rosa, with whom she has found a safer home. But why come back at all? What is it about the movement that is so attractive to someone who is underage? Or, conversely, what is so bad about "regular" life that one would want to get away from it?

FAMILY AND SCHOOL

Compared to adults, young people are barely granted the space to develop their own ideas and shape their lives accordingly. As a society, we patronise teenagers and impose all kinds of obligations on them, out of fear or concern. The latter two perhaps coincide more often than we would like to admit to ourselves.

When I ask Rosa whether she finds compulsory school attendance oppressive, she anticipates my next question: "For me, my parents are the most oppressive. I mainly find school annoying because it's hard to reach from the squat

and because I have to do things all day that I don't actually like." The day before, Rosa skipped a class: "Our squat had a court case where the future of the place was going to be decided. Besides, the class I missed was unimportant, so it wasn't that bad." This is a clear example of a conflict between an interest and an obligation. A court case is a stressful and significant event for a squatter. Your right to housing stands or falls (usually the latter) on the judge's ruling, possibly turning your entire life upside down. It's too easy to dismiss "the class was unimportant anyway" as a typical teen comment. For Rosa, I can very well imagine that class feels unimportant in light of such a potentially life-uprooting event – a class that she never asked for, and which she apparently doesn't even see the importance of. Two months after this conversation, she quit school to start an electrician course, which will give her the means to provide for herself.

She had little choice. Recall Rosa's earlier comment that she finds her parents the most oppressive factor in her life. She cannot and does not want to live at home anymore and has largely broken off contact with her parents. There's no need to explain exactly what happened. It's self-evident that being dependent on one's parents can be oppressive. Nobody chooses which family they are born into. The relationship between parent and child, moreover, is mostly a private matter, characterised by a serious power imbalance. Children depend on their parents' willingness and ability to meet their basic needs.

At school, kids at least have the freedom to decide for themselves whom they hang out with. And even if school does not always offer children the opportunity to develop their own talents and identity, it does not have the power to determine, limit, or deny them entirely either. Parents do. Rosa brings up an example: "I have been having respiratory problems for a long time and I'm pretty sure

I have asthma, but when I go to the doctor they say I need my parents' permission to take medication. It's not possible for me to get that permission, so now I have to make do without medication, with all the possible consequences."

Because the family is relegated to the private sphere, it appears to be a neutral and apolitical domain. As long as family relationships are presented as natural, it is difficult to resist this appearance. But neutrality does not exist and leaving essential care to families is a political choice. In the Netherlands, a clear case is that of *mantelzorgers* [carers]: family or friends who take on major responsibility to care for their loved ones, without any financial compensation. About 35% of people over sixteen perform this kind of care work.¹ The reason *mantelzorg* is so widespread in the Netherlands is not because it is the best way to provide care, but because of the budget cuts in public healthcare. Yet this type of informal care work is presented as a voluntary commitment to one's loved ones rather than work. Relegating care work to the private sphere of the family fits into a larger neoliberal economic strategy. Margaret Thatcher explicitly talks about the role of the family in this famous quote:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand "I have a problem, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or "I have a problem, I will go and get a grant to cope with it!"; "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are *families* and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first.²

The full quote is necessary to understand where these kinds of social and political constructs come from. When

right-wing politicians say they are there for “individual men and women”, they actually mean that people should first turn to the family before they can expect anything from the state.

If we need care, we have to look to ourselves, according to Thatcher. If we are homeless, we have to solve it ourselves. Rosa has basically complied with this task by squatting and providing for herself. But squatting is obviously not what neoliberals have in mind. And this is characteristic of the housing crisis we are in. The state clearly falls short on all fronts and no longer has the capacity to manage any crisis, but has at the same time become increasingly repressive towards any solution that people come up with themselves. Especially when those solutions are a form of withdrawal from the ruling norms.

When a minor can no longer live at home, there are two possibilities. Usually, a child care institution assumes guardianship and the child is once again contained within rules and bureaucracy. The other option is to seek refuge elsewhere, for example in the squatting movement. Squatters may be a little unsure of how much autonomy or independence an underage person can handle. That children and teenagers are less able to make responsible choices, however, is a logical consequence of the fact that they are generally not allowed to make them. But precisely because of the suppression of their autonomy and the desire they have for it, young people generally have a strong sense of its importance.

Rosa gives a nuanced answer to the question of how autonomous teenagers should be: “Well, I think it’s useful when people call me out on ‘stupid’ choices, especially if I may regret them later. But I also think that’s something me and my friends can do for each other. I don’t really need to solve everything on my own, I can’t, no one can. For me, autonomy is that no one can force me to do or not do

something. If you have to force someone to do something, that's always a form of violence."

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

The makeup of the collective that has taken Rosa under its wing is diverse: many are non-Dutch, women and non-binary people form the majority. They recently moved into a place where the doors are kept open for everyone in need of housing. It makes sense that Rosa lives with this collective. It strikes me that all the anarcho-kids I know are queer. What makes the squatting movement so appealing to these young people in particular?

Rosa doesn't want to answer right away when I ask her if she knows why so many anarcho-kids are queer. Her hesitation prompts another member from the collective to intervene, pointing out that there are generally more queer people in the squatting movement than outside of it, so this isn't specific to minors. Rosa responds: "Yes, but I don't know any minor in the squatting movement who isn't..." "Queer?" I interject, "No, in fact, I don't know any underage squatters who are cis." Rosa continues: "In general, young people today are more aware of gender than previous generations. That doesn't mean they're all very respectful towards people who are gender non-conforming though. At school there are cliques and as a non-cis person you are more of an outsider. That makes you go look for new places where you do find a connection."

"How come you find that connection in the squatting movement? What does this movement offer that other places don't, besides accommodation?", I ask. Rosa says she doesn't know, but Lola, a member of the collective, jumps in: "We had a conversation about this recently, remember? Queer kids find out at a relatively young age that our society doesn't treat everyone equally and that

this also affects policy. Like health care, which structurally disadvantages trans people, and especially children. The assumption that the state has your best interests at heart is debunked at an early age, which causes trans kids to start looking for alternatives sooner. At least, that's how I remember the conversation, do you agree with that Rosa?" Rosa nods in agreement.

Queer children are at much greater risk of becoming homeless than other young people. A coming-out or an argument may lead to "acute homelessness". When that happens, they need an alternative community to fall back on. It is no accident, then, that the word "family" has acquired a special place in queer history. In a biological family, the promise of "unconditional love" is not always fulfilled when it comes to queer family members. Queer and feminist groups, on the other hand, have always worked on creating safe communities and relationships. A queer family is often based on voluntary commitment rather than biological similarities. Rosa's earlier remark that no one should be able to force her to do anything, but that she does need care, is a perfect example. In the seventies, "mother" was a term used for an older queer person who took care of younger queer "children". And in the eighties, queer families had the additional function of providing protection and care during the AIDS pandemic. Older "family members" provided young members with essential information when the government failed to do so. Such families ensured that vulnerable young queer people had an alternative structure to rely on. These structures also enabled a strong political movement to emerge, giving a marginalised group the chance to fight for their right to care.

Building political structures and movements by living together differently: it's familiar terrain to squatters. Squats do not only serve as a refuge for queer people, but in fact for all sorts of outcasts and misfits. The principle

on which squatting relies is that no one should be excluded from basic necessities such as shelter, food, and medication. If the state doesn't provide, squatters will arrange it themselves and for each other. It is a common practice to have communal kitchens in a squat where volunteers prepare food that would otherwise be thrown away. As a guest, you pay as much as you can spare and sometimes that's nothing. As a result, squatters know many homeless people and local residents with limited incomes. Squatters are there for those who cannot make it on their own. But it's not only out of necessity or poverty that people come to the squatting movement. Or rather: necessity is not only expressed in despair, but also in the hope for a better alternative.

By going against the law, squatters enact the freedom to create places where their own rules apply. New social relations may emerge while old ones break down. It is no coincidence that there are now so many queer and feminist squats. One could even say that queer politics is inherent to squatting. Squatting makes public those practices commonly consigned to the private sphere, such as living together, and politicises those practices. By famously stating that "the personal is political", feminists have seen through the lie that was meant to preserve this separation. It is precisely in private spheres that queer people and women are oppressed. The abolition of the distinction between the personal and the political, by contrast, makes it possible to assume collective responsibility for each other's well-being.

It seems to me that the care duties in this collective are evenly distributed, on the basis that everyone is equal. They regularly get together in house meetings to make consensus-based decisions about their squat. This is very different from "normal" households, where hierarchy is the convention. Squatting offers an alternative

perspective on the housing crisis. Not just in terms of how we should distribute homes, but also in terms of what we imagine a home to be. The squatting movement has the potential to become a true alternative to the family. The question is: does it succeed?

ANTI-CONCLUSION

There is no simple answer to this question. While writing this piece, Rosa's situation has constantly changed, sometimes for the better, sometimes not. In finding her way around the law and other obstacles, ideals and actions would sometimes contradict each other. It would be too easy to conclude this piece with a purely positive message, because that wouldn't do justice to Rosa's situation. She now works as an electrician and has a somewhat stable home, but it hasn't been easy.

We live in a society that atomises people and privatises care. In cities where people worry about unaffordable rents, isolated from their neighbours who struggle with the same problem. We have learned to walk past the homeless quickly, eyes to the ground, so we don't have to be confronted with poverty. The housing crisis is a crisis of care, and only by taking care of each other can we get out of it. A starting point can be found in squats. Because of the scope of the housing crisis, there will be countless reasons for people to turn to squatting, each with their own stories and struggles.

The politically committed young people I mentioned at the beginning of this piece are not simply idealistic. They have justified concerns about the state of the world, feel abandoned by institutions, and often have no other place to go. It is our job not to abandon these young people. First, by taking them seriously and listening to them when they stand up for their rights. It is them who are most attuned

to social injustice and have the ability to look open-mindedly at old habits and question them. Secondly, we must support young people by always putting care at the centre of our politics, because care *is* our politics. Let's be there for each other. Let's squat places and make food and shelter available for everyone. Let's reclaim the city and give it back to those who thought they had been abandoned.

Lente (EC)

NOTES

- 1 Alice de Boer et al., *Blijvende bron van zorg. Ontwikkelingen in het geven van informele hulp 2014–2019* (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau: Den Haag, 2020).
- 2 Margaret Thatcher, 'Interview for "Woman's Own"' ("No Such Thing as Society"), 1987: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>. Emphasis by EC.

Occupy your neighbourhood: squatting as a tactic in the fight against gentrification *a conversation*

Over the past decades, the process of gentrification has wreaked havoc on Amsterdam. Wealthier new residents are drawn to what were often poorer working-class neighbourhoods, causing property values to rise. New amenities are created, such as public transport lines that better connect the area to the city centre, and trendy cafes and boutiques catering to the changing demographic makeup appear. This results, among other things, in the displacement and replacement of, as well as a lack of appreciation for, the original residents and their cultures. A number of neighbourhood initiatives and activists have been resisting these negative effects of gentrification on their living environment. Building a strong movement, however, is fraught with challenges.

This conversation brings together four Amsterdammers, all active in different neighbourhoods and organisations, working to strengthen and protect local communities. How do they oppose gentrification, what unites them, and what challenges do they face? And how do they relate to the squatting movement? The participants were invited by myself, Penny, and my fellow squatter Ronja. The meeting takes place on a Sunday in November 2022 in the newly squatted Monument in the heart of Amsterdam. For most participants, it was their first time in an active squat. Conversely, much of the local resistance against gentrification does not directly resonate within the squatting scene.

But we want to fight gentrification together. Clearly something has gone wrong up until now. Is the squatting movement sufficiently connected to neighbourhoods? Of course, the ambitious ideals of the squatting movement do not always translate into reality, which may be due to a lack of time or knowledge. Moreover, the squatting movement is often seen as homogeneous. Those who find refuge in squats are mainly, though not exclusively, white squatters, anarchists, students, artists, and their subcultures. We see this in our own collective, Mokum Kraakt, as well. Why is this the case? Do people who do not identify with these groups feel unwelcome, or is squatting simply too unfamiliar or dangerous? Is the squatting movement perceived as a problem rather than a solution in reclaiming our city? I do not want to make a rigid distinction between whiteness and the squatting movement on one hand, and neighbourhood residents and people of colour on the other. However, I do observe various rifts between these groups, which I want to take as my focus. What are the prospects for joining forces within the – often still fragmented – housing movement?

This conversation addresses the racist and classist nature of gentrification, whether the squatting scene inadvertently plays a role in this process, as well as the role privilege plays in adopting squatting as a method and collaborating with the squatting movement. Suggestions are made to recognise and overcome these obstacles. Squatting can contribute to a better future both on the neighbourhood level and city-wide. And vice versa: the future of squatting may well lie in neighbourhood organising. The conversation below also considers the untapped potential of squatting as a tool in the anti-gentrification struggle. In what ways can squatting support the sabotaging of bulldozers and help to strengthen local communities?

The participants in this discussion are *Melissa Koutouzis*, co-initiator of the Woonprotest (the main protest movement against the housing crisis in the Netherlands) and organiser within the housing movement; *Elaine Michon*, resident of the Kleine Die neighbourhood – threatened with demolition by housing association Ymere since three years ago – and affiliated with Red Amsterdam-Noord, a collective of residents' organisations fighting for the rights of residents in the district of Amsterdam-Noord; *Soumeya Bazi*, writer, born in the district of Nieuw-West and part of Nieuw-West in Verzet, an activist group fighting for housing security and against gentrification in one of Amsterdam's fastest-changing districts (her piece *Benti* also appears in this book); and *Wouter Pocornie*, architect and urban planner, born and raised in the district of Amsterdam-Zuidoost, who is currently working with The Black Archives and The Black Archives Bijlmer on decolonising urban processes and raising local awareness about gentrification.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST GENTRIFICATION

Could you briefly explain what you are currently working on?

M I am working on bringing various housing struggle initiatives together. That's quite complicated because most of the protest derives from local issues. It's logical that organising happens at the local level, and initiatives in Noord do not necessarily communicate with Nieuw-West or Zuidoost, or vice versa. We've now started a small initiative with, among others, Red Amsterdam-Noord, Verdedig Noord, Nieuw-West in Verzet, and Hart voor de K-buurt. We try to meet every few weeks. What we see is that everyone is basically working on similar things.

E I live in Nieuwendam in Amsterdam-Noord, in a house that has been threatened with demolition for three and a half years by Ymere, the social housing association we rent from. It's a garden village with 114 single-family homes that have to be replaced, or had to be replaced, for many more smaller social housing units, like they do everywhere. But the neighbourhood has shown substantial resistance, which means that the state of our houses has been deteriorating for the past three and a half years and we are not really making progress, except that we have made ourselves heard in different ways.

We, as a residents' committee, are affiliated with Red Amsterdam-Noord, which I have been involved in from the start. Red Amsterdam-Noord is a collective of various residents' organisations from Noord, by residents, for residents. We are currently about 24 groups, including Verdedig Noord and the NoordAs, church groups, but also ANGSAW, Amsterdam-Noord Groene Stad Aan het Water. We're all very different and that makes us elusive to policymakers because they can't label us as one thing or another, since we are a bit of everything. We are also elusive to ourselves because it's quite chaotic, but it still works quite well.

Amsterdam-Noord is a district that has been left to its own devices since the very start. All the difficult, maladjusted people were sent there, as well as workers, which basically came down to the same thing for those in charge. As a result, the people here have fixed up and maintained everything themselves.

w I have lived in many different cities, but I was born and raised in Amsterdam-Zuidoost. I graduated as an architect and urban planner in Delft and have done many projects abroad. I mainly work with the idea that bottom-up perspectives should become part of the entire urban planning

process, regarding both the planning as well as the design language, and in doing so should work from the existing culture. For a while, I worked at architectural firms, and I've had many research positions, and then I also worked for the municipality for two years, as an urban designer, always with the idea of eventually working elsewhere or independently. Eventually, I got that opportunity through Hart voor de K-Buurt, so Kraaiennest, 1104, which was then still an activist group.

My goal would be to really decolonise area planning, or at least provide examples of it. I started actively speaking out against gentrification. Of course, this topic was already an important topic for Hart voor de K-buurt, and with The Black Archives we also started to work on it. I do this by using my academic knowledge and my research and giving “intermediate products” to the people I work with from Zuidoost: maps or designs that show where the policy comes from, who the actors are, what the development phases are. By increasing knowledge about this, and because of the things various organisations ultimately do with this knowledge, a bit of pressure from Zuidoost is put on the municipality.

s I was born and raised in Nieuw-West. The district has fascinated me all my life because it's so unique, with a lot of character and a very close community. I've always felt like I came from a sort of village within the city itself. I've observed a lot in the entire city for years and I have noticed how segregated our lives really are. Later on, I found out that this is actually how the city was planned, so it was designed on the basis of a certain vision of what the city is and how we live.

At the end of 2021, we founded Nieuw-West in Verzet with a few people. It's very difficult to find the time and energy to keep such a movement going without ending

up with a burn-out. So what we want to focus on this year is really getting to know more residents from the district itself and forging connections with them. And yes, we have to create a strong foundation for ourselves before we can forge alliances, so we will mostly focus on that this coming year.

E Something I notice in the whole housing struggle is that unfortunately, you need to have people in the neighbourhood who speak like I do, who can take a lot of hits and also hit back, to even be recognised as residents. And housing associations expect you to be disorganised, to not practice solidarity, to be uneducated, that you can't read and write well, because that's really how they approach you and how they treat you. Delays are created all the time to ensure that there is no movement, so that everything depends on us. And within the municipality they believe that tenants' advocacy group **!WOON** helps us, and that we are therefore actually on an equal footing with the housing association.

M Millions of people are victims of the housing crisis. The big question is: how are we going to organise these people to actually become a threat together? Our focus now is mainly on the sale, demolition, and liberalisation of social housing, the fact that we have lost hundreds of thousands of social housing units in recent years, and a new vision for the Netherlands: namely that public housing should be a priority again. And gentrification plays an important part, because gentrification means that social housing units disappear from neighbourhoods. The original residents are driven away and no one knows where they will go or can go. Amsterdam is an absurdly segregated city. The centre is just for white people. It is completely unmixed.

Squatting, of course, is a big part of the housing struggle and I am very happy to see that squatting is happening

both in the city centre and outside of it. If squatting happens outside the city centre, it may attract less attention, or there might be some kind of mistrust from the neighbourhood. Another question is how can squatting really contribute to actual housing for homeless people? The culture around squatting is also important. You don't have to squat just for housing, because subcultures and the arts have also disappeared over the past twenty years. You have to reclaim that too. Just like the right to just be somewhere without having a lot of money to spend. Of course, here and there there's still community centres that are cheap, but nearly all of them have disappeared due to budget cuts in the past ten, twenty years. So we have a lot of catching up to do. Everyone is important to the struggle as far as I'm concerned. We just have different strategies and priorities because the housing crisis also has many aspects, and many problems. As far as I'm concerned, it's all hands on deck.

How do you see gentrification policy from your experience?

s When I was in my early twenties, I started to notice that after years of neglect of Nieuw-West, there was a sudden increase of attention: projects were set up and suddenly all kinds of studies were conducted about the district. That happened all of a sudden and it was very strange, because all those years before it was dead silent and we were ignored. Or the neighbourhood was talked about, but only when it came up negatively in the media: Moroccans from Slotervaart, Moroccans from Osdorp, youths around Slotermeer, it was always very negative. Now, all of a sudden there's a lot of interest in Nieuw-West, which has to do with the fact that it is the largest district and there is thus still a lot to "gain" there. So my whole life all I heard was: Nieuw-West, you wouldn't want to be caught dead there. And now I see those same people living here and shutting

themselves off from the rest of us because they have no connection with the district at all.

I also realised that even though my generation is precisely the one that gives it this character, that actually shapes it, we can no longer stay in this district. And we do not only shape it, we've also been negatively affected by way the municipality has dealt with the district; the neglect, and how the media has treated the district; the negative portrayals. These are all blows that we have had to deal with for decades. Now it is suddenly being swept clean: okay, you don't fit in here, so get lost, you are literally in the way, make room. We are going to build this, these people are going to live here, and you'll just have to figure it out. This makes me very angry. Because who are these, I don't know what to call them, powers that be, money-grubbers, people in power who overwhelm us like a bulldozer? I don't want to let myself be overrun like that.

w I have many examples, of course, but sticking to ones relating to the system: civil servants work from fixed positions and departments. So if I wanted to speak to someone, it would take weeks to schedule an appointment with someone who had somehow convinced everyone that he is the relevant person to talk to about social urban issues. For example, some white civil servant would be tasked with charting the young people of the Bijlmer. That's a very cumbersome way of doing things. So I said: this is not going to work. Moreover, I come from that neighbourhood, I actually still go there a lot because of family, I'll just start my own network. And besides, the municipality works with key figures, fixed tokens, and thereby circumvents a lot of responsibility and difficult conversations. I've seen who the municipality has put in certain positions, supposedly on behalf of the neighbourhood, and then I started to speak out more.

E Half a year ago we had a so-called city conversation with Terra Dakota of Verdedig Noord and municipality officials who came to listen to us because we were the “participation monkeys”, so to speak. And that’s exactly what they do: they’ll look at residents who think they mean something. And then they’ll lecture them. There was a former councillor from the municipality there who wanted to tell us how to handle things. Terra and I kept saying: “Yes, but we already do that, we already knew that, yes, but we’ve already done that, yes, look, we’ve already written a book...” Just leave!

The municipality organises these participation meetings about their housing policy approach, and I recently attended the meeting on sustainability and housing quality. There were six tables with participants. At my table, there were two tenants, three people from housing associations who were there on their paid work time, someone from the Amsterdam Federation of Housing Associations (AFWC), one landlord, and two people from the municipality. And this was the case at every table, even though it was arranged randomly but that’s how it was. I was sitting there and I said: “I find something very strange, because I think we have more tenants in this city than there are landlords. How is it possible that we are even letting this gathering take place and not cancel it since the representation really is just very shitty. And it’s not just this table, but every table around us. What are we going to do about it?” But they’re not afraid of me. That guy from the AFWC just laughed at me when, for example, I said during our conversation that single-glazed windows should be considered an economic crime. That’s what WOON says, I didn’t come up with that myself. That man just laughed out loud! And during the first meeting with Gerritzen – the director of Ymere, newly appointed – he said: “Yes, Elaine, I’m really telling you this to help: if a

resident takes on the associations, they usually end up getting the short end of the stick.” And then I explained to him quite clearly that that wasn’t true. But the problem is... those are the people in power.

w What precedes this “participation phase” in the process, is strategic decisions about urban planning. And Nieuw-West, the Bijlmer, Noord, indeed have to absorb the blows, we have for years. These blows also include urban expansion and increasing building density. The number of homes being built is enormous. Look at Nieuw-West, for example: because it is such a product of urban planning, resulting from the historical “general expansion plan” of Amsterdam, many architectural studies have been conducted on it. I find that most comparable to Zuidoost: there is a sort of super-fascination with these districts in the fields of construction and planning. And a narrative also needs to be created around that, to convince developers to invest money in it, and to attract newcomers, so that they think, “Oh, it’s going to be buzzing in former Bos en Lommer, now ‘BoLo,’” haha.

E [sarcastically] We’re finally becoming hip, hurray!

M Architects, architecture schools, and designers, they are still missing in the movement. They can bulldoze an entire neighbourhood because all they think is “this is just an assignment I’m getting”. Many architecture firms and schools are now also completely individualised and commercialised, so they don’t see themselves as part of the housing movement. If they were to take social responsibility for their role in the design of our city, then the likelihood increases that profit-oriented projects won’t get through so easily. They could do more to resist a little bit: first talk to the residents before building, and for example

refuse when it's unaffordable for the people who live there. And say: we're just going to do it differently. This is an important lesson that can be learned from the squatting movement in the eighties, which did have those ties.

w The connection with bottom-up initiatives should already be made in the urban planning phase. That's where the general outlines are set out, in consultation with or commissioned by the government. Then you get tenders, and only after that architects come into play, but by then it's already taken over by the private sector...

e Yes, Verdedig Noord is now also trying to participate in those tenders. Which is also quite interesting.

w And that consultation with the neighbourhood, that's even mandatory, right! But if you then say "difficult" things, which do not match the existing plans, they can always find people with the same "profile" as you, who say exactly what they want to hear...

s We were just talking about project developers, and that we actually need to reintegrate architects into social housing policies, but I notice such a huge chasm between ordinary neighbourhood residents, and all those big, often international...

w Investors, developers...

s Yes! The way these things are determined is so big and complex that the neighbourhood residents could never keep up with it. And that's not out of pessimism or anything, but just purely realistic. All sorts of things are going on behind closed doors, which we can never find out about, or are even allowed to find out about. What bothers

me most is the way information from the housing associations is provided to neighbourhood residents. It's so bad! Everything is deliberately kept vague and unclear. And in Slotervaart or Nieuw-West, if you ask the often older residents "What do you think of the renewal plans?" they say: "Oh yes, great. Yes, it was about time. Yes, it needs to be demolished."

E True, a lot is determined beforehand, but movements and new ideologies all start at some point. In that respect, I am a hopelessly optimistic person. There are all kinds of rotten people who use their social capital to do the wrong things, but you have it too and you can do it differently, to change things. Just do your thing. Ymere, for example, no longer writes us letters. Ymere writes a draft, and our residents' committee rewrites everything because we have respect for our neighbours and want them to get good letters that they can read and understand, and with good information that actually leads to something. Because we mess with Ymere's language, we are now at a point where they no longer have control over the way they address us. I like that.

s Oh, that's a good one!

w In a way, you keep them on their toes by doing that, and you provide much more than just the translation. I do this visually. Clarifying and informing in just a few sentences, doing one or two more steps myself, because it's just not really happening yet. Diagrams and infographics, for example. Which I then literally put out into the streets, thereby showing people in the neighbourhoods: this is what the planning process looks like, these are the actors, these are the consequences. And you can see that neighbourhood residents benefit a lot from this approach.

E Those housing associations are not going to do it themselves...

w They are not going to do it.

E They literally tell us: "Yes, but we speak 'Ymerian!'"

w They are institutional, and they know it.

M It's also just a tactic of exhausting us, isn't it...! It's just policy.

s I'm currently working on a documentary about Osdorp, a part of the city that is changing a lot and very fast. The contrast there is really bizarre. So that's my way of showing things, of visualising what's going on. Often, people don't realise what's happening around them. Because we have become so used to seeing construction sites and cranes and things like that... And we often don't realise it until it's too late. And then we suddenly go: huh?

w Once it's actually there, right. Planning is not sexy, people just really don't look at that.

E The awful thing is that it only becomes tangible when those new towers are finished and when they are filled not with the people who lived there but with new people who come from outside the neighbourhood.

s The sad thing is also that neighbourhood residents think, if something is being built, that it's for them!

M So let's talk about what we can do with squatting!

SQUATTING AND SABOTAGING GENTRIFICATION

How do you relate to squatting and the squatting movement?

M Many forms of activism are now quite institutionalised. I see a lot of neighbourhood initiatives looking for places to get subsidies, but that's actually the beginning of the end. That way you'll develop a dependent relationship with the municipality. And then you are less likely to really resist. By contrast, squatting is autonomous. But because of the hyper-criminalisation, through the squatting law and the legislation around it, squatting is also a huge risk. So it's a balancing act: how big is the risk that I'll get a criminal record, that I can't work later, that I'll be stigmatised, and thereby hindered in my career ambitions...

W And the risk of being detained, the impact of that on your CV, and on everything...

E I think there's only a small number of people who squat because there are all kinds of barriers. Why doesn't a big rent strike work? Because you're afraid of bailiffs. In the Netherlands, just by being a person with less money, you're considered a bit suspicious and fraudulent by default. Even if the personal consequences of squatting may be minor in practice, people are scared. The mental space it takes to even start thinking about squatting could and is often filled up by many other things.

S Not everyone has the privilege to think about it. "Privilege" in quotes.

E Red Amsterdam Noord does want to occupy buildings, but we don't know what we should do, we don't know

where to start, and we're stuck in all kinds of petty mental boundaries...

M That's the whole thing! The neighbourhood has so many ideas about properties that have been unused for too long, that have been vacant for too long... We need to make sure that Nieuw-West in Verzet knows and Red Amsterdam Noord knows: I can call the squatters!

S In Nieuw-West, squatting, as far as I know, is a completely unknown phenomenon. To this day. I didn't grow up with it myself either. I know squatting from images of the eighties, during the housing struggle at that time. I know some things about it, but the practical side of it, how it works? What happens? Or whether the risks mentioned before are real? I have no idea. And I'm not the only one. Moreover, for certain groups in the Netherlands, resisting carries a much greater risk than for others.

W I think the first generation of migrants won't start squatting.

S Not even the third generation! In Nieuw-West, for example, you are cautious. In the past decades, the experiences you've had are: yes I am here "as a guest". So you don't take that risk.

M In the beginning, the squatting scene was actually very diverse. The Black Archives has played an important role in showing that in the Bijlmer, Antillean and Surinamese collectives have also squatted a lot. For some reason, the general belief is that only white people in the city centre were squatting. That is not the real history of squatting.

w In general, I think it's not well known in what ways squatting has left its mark on the cultural infrastructure in Amsterdam. This was also the case for me, and it probably is for most people, even in Zuidoost. Attention is now being brought to the Gliphoeve squat action, partly through The Black Archives. That action arose from an urgency to create an alternative to the boarding-houses and bad living conditions of recently immigrated Surinamese people back then. Squatting in the Bijlmer started because of the serious failure to address this issue. Mainly white Bijlmer residents stood up and created facilities. Noord and Nieuw-West, and certainly Zuidoost are relatively "monofunctional" districts, so anything you manage to organise in terms of facilities there is quite innovative. And you also hear a lot that the squatting movement is not inclusive. The image I have of squatted free spaces and so-called "creative hubs" now, is that they don't have a strong connection to the neighbourhood.

s And the influx of artists, that's the first phase of gentrification...

m Exactly, you want to prevent that. Because squatted places now have a very short life span, that's tough for squatters! A way for legalised free spaces or creative hubs not to participate in gentrification is to not follow the logic of a commercial assignment. So no: "we as a group of artists can do our thing", or, "we are asked by the municipality"... That's a way to divide us. If you as an artist say: "We only do it under these conditions" and you create those conditions together with the neighbourhood, maybe you can turn the tables.

s So, squatting is unknown for all these reasons. That

means we actually need to find a way to reintroduce squatting to the groups that don't know about it.

E In my neighbourhood, people also see that ex-squatters like city councillor Rutger Groot-Wassink, who have reached high positions in policy making, have made the housing situation even worse for everyone, contrary to what they once fought for. But they still project this image of themselves. It's exactly the same as housing associations that say they once started from socialist ideals. That makes me think: get lost! You can no longer rely on that legacy, with everything you've destroyed. My neighbours from the Jordaan, people who now live in Noord after being pulled out of the Jordaan, they see squatting as an elitist left-wing hobby. So yes, there is work to be done there.

What are the prospects for more collaboration with squatters?

E What I would find really cool is if there would be a connection between squatting and the right to live and exist with little money in the city. I think if you were to systematically squat all those social housing units that are for sale, you would annoy the associations endlessly. With that, the state of those houses they're selling should also be exposed: they're in a completely worn-out state, getting sold for half a million! If you could make such a connection, then you would get all the people of Amsterdam-Noord on board. Because that helps to preserve and to cherish their living environment.

M Maybe to segue into the question of collaboration, and how to facilitate it. If you look at the climate movement versus the housing movement, you see different roles there. There are the larger institutions, like Milieudefensie [a major environmental NGO in the Netherlands], and

they've got lots of capacity to lobby, but are also quite far away from ordinary people. Then you have the broader climate movement, the people who occasionally go to a demo but aren't so active in other ways. And then you have the radical occupiers of Extinction Rebellion. I see them as a kind of soldiers of the movement, and I see squatters as the soldiers of the housing movement.

Suppose there is a problem in a neighbourhood: all kinds of properties are being sold soon and we don't want that. We can lobby with the city council, complain, set up petitions, organise the neighbourhood a little. But squatters can just physically occupy it. That way we can form a real threat. We are not only going to negotiate and talk with the associations, but we're talking to the squatters, so they know what's going on. They know: this property needs to be saved, and they then take that risk. Then maybe another question is whether we want more people to dare take that risk. We want to take away the fear and the stigmatisation, but maybe squatters should just start knocking on the door of Verdedig Noord or Nieuw-West in Verzet. Which property is being sold, which property are you about to lose? What budget cuts are implemented? Which community centre is now empty? And then they'll just take it.

E Ymere is going to sell the Melkhuisje [an iconic building in Amsterdam-Noord]. The neighbourhood residents tried to put a stop to it with a lawsuit, but that failed. If squatters occupy that property, and make it a social community space for the neighbourhood, and restore it to what it was, then you have something to offer each other. When we heard from Ymere in a newsletter that they wanted to demolish our homes...

s Wait a minute, by newsletter?

E Yes.

S Wow, that had to sink in.

M Imagine you're not signed up for the newsletter!

E When we heard from Ymere that they wanted to demolish our homes, someone from !WOON came who said: "I come to make peace!" To which I responded "Yes, but, I need an army! So, please, make room so we can build that army!" That's kind of the thing, we're missing an army. We don't pose enough of a threat, even though we're with more! If we have an army, then we as less courageous and often impoverished residents feel strengthened to actually believe that what we do makes a difference. We can be helpful to each other and actually act, because talking alone won't work...

M Then we'll say in negotiations: "If you don't listen, we'll call the squatters. Good luck!" The squatters can then open a building for the neighbourhood and hand the responsibility over to them. This way, neighbourhood residents also learn to squat themselves, eventually.

E And conversely, residents' groups have access to very different knowledge. About what the neighbourhood really needs. And what to do with these reclaimed spaces. We shouldn't lecture each other, but learn from each other. Because we need more autonomous – squatted – spaces in our neighbourhoods. To bring the housing movement together, and also to be able to truly reappropriate space as a neighbourhood. In order to strengthen each other, we need to recognise that we have different strengths, and we shouldn't expect that to be the same thing for everyone. That's a waste of energy. But if we acknowledge

our diversity and build on that, then we're really fucking strong.

s It's all about sharing knowledge and resources.

w I'm thinking it's also about sharing facilities. Quite a lot of people need a space to do various things. If you can provide that by squatting, that would be a strong point. I think the success of a squatted multifunctional space depends on the programming you link to it. So, I'd say, at least once every couple of months we bring certain groups together, or we have a movie night, or a group discussion with local residents. If you ensure that neighbourhood residents are part of the core team that runs a place, other residents will feel more at home there. Such places could be an alternative to the current free spaces and creative hubs... It's very interesting to imagine that.

m And I want to say one more thing: a win is so important to feel that there's a point to it. Hotel Mokum was a win, Monument is also a win. It's all short term, but still.

So, suppose squatters take the first risk for a property that Nieuw-West in Verzet points out, and then it's just open. And the neighbourhood can make use of it. Although it's of course a problem that the squatting movement is also quite precarious, that squatters also often get burnt out. I keep hearing stories like, we want to squat but everyone is too tired, we have no energy, everyone is leaving. So there is also a problem with sustainability there. We have to take that into account. I say "I want to use squatters as soldiers", but those are also just people, with their own lives, studies, work and limited capacity. So it goes both ways: our collaboration must grow, but the squatting movement must also grow, and hopefully that will be mutually inspiring – so that soon people in

Nieuw-West think I get it, I've learned it, I've seen it, this was an example, and now I'm going to do it myself.

In that way, squatting is the ultimate "show, don't tell": you can tell people how it should be done, the second step is: we are going to do it ourselves now! And squatters maybe take a bit more risk the first time, or the second time. But by doing it, and witnessing it, people slowly learn and think, okay, maybe I can do it myself too. With the necessity of equality, solidarity, anonymity and collective strength, and so on. We know it works, so it makes sense. Because I think the biggest thing we are all fighting against is people thinking there's no point to it. That a rent strike is pointless, squatting is pointless. You're going to be evicted anyway, the rent is going to go up anyway. But the fact that we're sitting here now shows that it's possible.

OCCUPY YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

Gentrification is best understood as a continuation of the structural neglect and undervaluation of neighbourhoods, under the guise of upgrading them. Urban planning is strategically kept undemocratic, social housing is demolished or sold, working-class neighbourhoods are crammed full with expensive new construction projects, rents and house prices skyrocket, and local culture is replaced by "profitable" monoculture. This intrusive process causes the displacement of less wealthy residents from the neighbourhoods they have given the particular character that is now suddenly considered "attractive" for real estate speculators, project developers, and the intended new residents.

The squatting movement builds counter-power against wealthy actors that drive gentrification by appropriating their properties, fighting landlords and real estate

speculation, and sustaining an alternative. Squatting is a method to increase the autonomy of the neighbourhood: it allows resistance to coincide with the needs and the preservation of the neighbourhood. From these autonomous neighbourhood spaces, further resistance can be organised. This way, squatting can help sabotage gentrification policy, while at the same time protecting social structures and local cultures.

But the criticism of squatted spaces that have been transformed into trendy free spaces, squatted spaces that are perceived as inward-looking, or squatted spaces that seem to exist only for their own art practice, is still relevant. The squatting movement must take responsibility for actively working against gentrification. Every new squatting action should be considered in this light. And existing squats could take another critical look at themselves.

At the same time, it can be argued that squatters do not have the obligation to actively relate to the neighbourhood. Squatted spaces often do important things that don't necessarily have to do with the neighbourhood, such as providing shelter for the unhoused or (political) refugees, and creating space for alternative culture. The importance of squats should not only be determined on the basis of what they do for the neighbourhood. In the case of squatting in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, however, this does not apply. Solidarity with the interests of local residents must then be high on the agenda. This often goes very well, but sometimes there is a lack of time, knowledge, and awareness to achieve this. But the will to try cannot be lacking, squatters have to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

To a certain extent it's true that squatting is mainly accessible to relatively privileged groups, e.g. due to the ability to confront the police, or by being familiar with squatting subculture. But the assumption that only privileged

people have access to, or are interested in squatting, and that this privilege is maintained by squatting, is not correct. By opening up more and actively making contact with the neighbourhood, squatters can confront and eliminate prejudices that exist about squatting themselves. In this way, collaborations can emerge that make squatting as a practice more accessible and strengthen the neighbourhood in the fight against gentrification. The preconditions for such collaborations are solidarity and equality.

Squatters bring practical knowledge and experience in occupying and setting up autonomous spaces, and local residents could make use of those spaces according to their own particular desires. They know which places are under pressure and which they want to preserve and why. They know each other and the problems that exist in their neighbourhood and have already found ways to work together in difficult times. They can come up with new ideas to continue squatting in ways that suit them, which squatters can then learn from.

When we went our separate ways that Sunday, we did not do so without having exchanged numbers, with the prospect of further meetings, and full of inspiration for new collaborations. If squatters and non-squatting neighbourhood residents work together based on equality and solidarity, our different strategies are a strength, not an obstacle. By occupying together we can resist the destructive and divisive effects of gentrification. We can destabilise the prevailing paradigm of urban development and decide for ourselves how we imagine life in the city. We can stand up for each other and collectively make a fist. We can take back the city.

One thing was especially clear after three hours of talking: it's time for action.

Penny (EC)

AUTHORS

B.Carrot is a graphic novelist and illustrator. In 2019, she graduated cum laude from the Sint Lukas School of Arts in Brussels, and debuted in 2020 with the graphic novel *Alle dagen ui*, the story of an Egyptian asylum seeker. Her work is politically and socially driven as she writes about issues such as migration and border policies, feminism and the struggle for a free Palestine. Her second graphic novel *Uitweg*, on the topic of reproductive justice, was published in 2024.

Daniel Loick is Associate Professor of Political and Social Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. His work is situated at the intersection of philosophy, social theory and politics and stands in the tradition of critical theory. He is particularly interested in critiques of state-inflicted violence and politics of forms of life. He is the author of four books, most recently *Die Überlegenheit der Unterlegenen: Eine Theorie der Gegengemeinschaften* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2024).

Harriët Bergman is a philosopher and activist. She completed a PhD in philosophy, researching political emotions and climate justice. She has written for Hard//Hoofd and works as a commissioning editor for Jacobin Nederland. She is involved in multiple social movements.

Rodrigo Fernandez holds a PhD in financial geography from the University of Amsterdam. He was active in the student movement in the mid nineties and in the squatting movement in the nineties and 2000s. As a postdoc researcher at the University of Amsterdam, KU Leuven and Trinity College Dublin, he has done research into various aspects of financialised capitalism. He is a senior researcher at SOMO

(Stichting Onderzoek Multinationale Ondernemingen). He was a council member in the Amsterdam Centrum district council, and sits on the board of soc21, a research collective for socialism in the 21st century.

WERKER operates at the intersection of labour, ecofeminism, and the LGBTQ+ movements. The art collective, initiated by Marc Roig Blesa and Rogier Delfos in Amsterdam in 2009, released ten issues of a publication called *WERKER MAGAZINE*. Since then, *WERKER* has explored a variety of media, including installation art, performance, video, sound, textile, digital publishing, and has also developed community projects, reading groups, cine-clubs, radio podcasts, and publishing workshops.

Ivo Schmetz is a graphic designer, a music programmer at OT301, co-owner of Basserk Records and co-founder of media platform Amsterdam Alternative. He has recently worked on a multimedia web documentary about collective ownership.

Soumeya Bazi was born and raised in Amsterdam Nieuw-West. She is a writer, presenter and arts educator. Since a few years she has been working as a volunteer in her neighbourhood, Geuzenveld-Slotermeer. She is one of the co-founders of Nieuw-West in Verzet.

Billie Nuchelmans studied Cultural Studies, Art History and Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He wrote his master's thesis on the role of modernism in urban development in Amsterdam during the seventies and eighties, and conducted archival research into urban planner Jakoba Mulder on behalf of the municipality. From 2017 until 2021, he was an editor of *Propria Cures*, an Amsterdam-based student magazine.

Sorab Roustayar identifies as a trans muslim with Afghan roots. His activism centres around refugees rights and queer liberation. As a part of Queer Amsterdam, he has co-organised Amsterdam Pride for the first time in 2023. He is also an organiser for FNV, the Netherlands' largest trade union.

Hidaya Nampiima is a co-founder of Amsterdam City Rights. She was born in Uganda and trained as an electrical engineer, and has been living as an undocumented person in the Netherlands for five years. She is a feminist, identifies as a queer muslim, and campaigns for the rights of undocumented people and the LGBTQI+ community.

Nina Boelsums & Bambi de Vries care about housing security and communal living. They were residents of Startblok Riekerhaven and struggle for a safe home for themselves, their neighbours and the whole world.

René Boer works as a critic, curator and organiser in and beyond the fields of architecture, design, heritage and the arts. In his practice he seeks to articulate new perspectives on spatial matters and facilitate fertile ground for imagining and materialising alternatives.

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