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Meditations on Housing as Commons: A Solution to the Amsterdam Housing Crisis?

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As living space in Amsterdam is becoming increasingly scarce and expensive, and gentrification is rampant, the call for a reassessment of the way in which the city is shaped is getting louder and louder. This was very noticeable in the run-up to the Amsterdam municipal elections of 21 March 2018; the first elections in decades in which housing was without a doubt *the* central theme that all parties, from the far left to the far right, felt they had to address.

What struck me the most amongst all the saber-rattling and show-wrestling that we call political campaigning, was the militant tone that the centre-left parties adopted on this subject. For example, the election manifesto of the Green Party, GroenLinks, stated in no uncertain terms: “We are going to curb the much praised free market”. The diagnosis is rightly made that if the market forces were to be unleashed, Amsterdam would soon transform into an enclave for an economic elite surrounded by the various peripheral misery belts for those who are lagging behind socially and economically. To avoid this, and to maintain the social mix that characterizes the city, the sale of corporation-owned housing must be curbed. The election manifesto of the Dutch Labour Party, PvdA, also explicitly places the problem in the context of a rampant housing market:

Amsterdam is a city for everyone. But our housing market is overheating. The city is in danger of becoming unaffordable. We do not want Amsterdam to become a city for the rich. We want to prevent houses from becoming even more expensive. We will protect Amsterdam from slum landlords, bad investors and commercial holiday rentals. (...) Amsterdam must remain Amsterdam. But Amsterdam’s social character is at stake. The city is increasingly in the grip of the pursuit of profit.¹

Such campaign language reveals that, thank God, the political stale-mate of the third way-ish market-friendly socio-liberalism of the 1990s and 2000s is finally losing traction. Not too long ago center-left and center-right parties basically agreed that urban growth can best be achieved through public-private partnerships, deregulation, and state-led gentrification. It is a relief to see that parties such as PvdA and GroenLinks are now retracing their steps. It is also encouraging that a municipal administration is currently being drawn up with no fewer than three parties (GroenLinks, PvdA and the Socialist Party, SP) that, in the run-up to the elections, have called for more social and affordable housing and for restrictions on investors

in the housing market. They will most likely form a coalition with D66, a liberal centre party that calls for social housing dwellings to be transferred to the free market in order to keep the city accessible to middle-income groups. According to local daily newspaper *Het Parool*, housing is therefore in all likelihood the most important stumbling block in the formation of a coalition.

Nevertheless, some reservations regarding the new political wind blowing in the Stopera, Amsterdam's city hall, seem justified. To begin with, many policies effective today are still implicitly or explicitly market-oriented and pro-gentrification. This means that the tough campaign language of GroenLinks and the other left-wing parties will have to be followed up by a considerable administrative effort. In addition, the electorate has not forgotten that the same center-left itself has been at the heart of a whole series of measures and reforms that have deepened the housing crisis in Amsterdam. These include the privatization of housing corporations in the 1990s, the gentrification-friendly 'Broedplaatsten'-policy (Creative Incubator policy) designed by GroenLinks alderman Maarten van Poelgeest in the 2000s, and more recently the introduction of new precarious, temporary tenancies by the Rutte II cabinet, in which the PvdA took part. This warrants doubts about the political 'stewardship' of the city administration, regardless of the political color of the parties participating in it, and it also raises questions about the endurance of 'good' housing and planning policies in face of ever changing political undercurrents and priorities. Can political parties in our representative democracy be entrusted with public housing, given their track record, including that of the Left, of squandering the public housing legacy in the recent past?

Even more important is the question of whether the current housing crisis in Amsterdam can be resolved politically at the municipal level. *Can* the housing market still be contained, or are we witnessing a tragic case of 'too little, too late'? Can the local government regain control? This problem is nicely illustrated by the double legacy of the outgoing Housing alderman, Laurens Ivens of the SP, the most outspoken left-wing politician we have had in that position for decades. Following the example of the illustrious housing alderman Jan Schaefer in the 70s and 80s, Ivens has himself presented as an alderman who prefers the construction site to the conference table; a politician, moreover, who believes that the state should take the lead in urban development. And his figures are rather impressive. Under Ivens, more than 9,000 homes were completed in Amsterdam last year; which is approximately 15% of the total number of homes completed in the Netherlands. However, despite this astounding figure under his period in office, the number of social rental dwellings and middle-cost owner-occupied and rented homes under his control has actually fallen, while the segment of expensive homes rose from 21 to 29 percent. While under Ivens construction is progressing at record speed, the sale of social property continues at an even faster pace, especially in the centrally located districts. Ivens himself sighed that it feels as if he is "cleaning up a flooded room without turning off the taps" (*dweilen met de kraan open*).

Sadly, the truth is that a return to the vigorous Amsterdam housing policies of Schaefer is not very feasible. For many reasons: the financial stakes have become too high; political

mandates are limited; the public planning apparatus has weakened considerably over the last few decades; and national legislation is still encouraging housing corporations to continue to sell off social housing. Moreover, private stakeholders today are much wealthier and more powerful than in the past: the market parties with which the city is now negotiating and competing are no longer yesteryears picturesque local slumlords, but internationally operating investment funds and venture capital firms, who have ample means to resist regulation. In addition, Amsterdam's public housing policy has traditionally been linked to urban expansion, but space for large new housing developments is quite simply lacking.

Housing beyond state and market?

But if local government *can't* and the market *shouldn't* be in charge of the future of the city, to whom or what should we turn? In order to escape this conceptual impasse, more and more people are attracted to the idea of the 'commons', the popularity of which is underlined by endless stream of lectures and workshops, research groups, articles and books recently devoted to the subject; a young tradition that the Urban Commons of Culture platform is now seeking to join.

The term 'the commons' is, of course, notoriously unruly and elastic, but in its most minimal definition it describes a symbolic space that exists alongside the spheres of the market and the state, a space that is given substance through collective use and management. Examples of urban commons that recur frequently in the extensive popular literature on the subject include bottom-up social centres, squatted or improvised public hangouts, community gardens, but also to the temporary protest settlements of the so-called 'movement of the squares' of 2011. As a variant thereof, housing activists, architects and scholars are increasingly referring to the 'housing commons', although what is meant by this may differ per author. Some use the term simply to describe the rise of co-housing initiatives, others use it more ambitiously as a kind of conceptual horizon of what a public housing model for the 21st century could, or should, look like: namely, an network of radically democratic and citizen-controlled housing projects. There are also those who use the term to describe experimental forms of non-hierarchical, egalitarian and participatory communal life at the micro level – "living-in-common" –, with the underlying idea that such a form of *commoning* in the domestic sphere can "prefigure" larger societal changes. And there are those use the concept of the commons to reimagine the existing social housing system as a form of decentralized collective property beyond the market and the state.

What this indicates is that the definitions of the housing commons differ widely, but also that these definitions spring from very different positions. The discussion about housing commons is bringing another discussion back to the foreground: the discussion about scale and organization of housing systems. From a socialist or social-democratic logic, the solution to the housing crisis is often sought in large-scale state intervention, and it is no surprise that this point of view is often accompanied by a certain nostalgia for the vigorous "municipal

socialism” of interwar Vienna (“Red Vienna”) or Amsterdam (“the Mecca of Housing”). Echoes of this are currently reverberating in the election manifestos of the left-wing parties in Amsterdam. But centralist housing policies, based on top-down planning and infinite space for urban expansion, have historically always received criticism from the Marxist side (“Mass-housing stems from social democratic reformism and pacification politics”) and from the anarchist side (“Mass-housing alienates and deprives residents of the possibility of self-determination and self-government”). On the other hand, advocates of a large-scale and centralist housing system point to the painful similarity between the rise of alternative, small-scale forms of housing and neo-liberal fantasies about the ‘Big Society’ or ‘Participatory Society’. It is a credit to the discussion on the housing commons, that it has led to a focus on such fundamental questions and oppositions within the housing struggle. What are we actually striving for: a democratic reboot of the existing centrally organised public housing system? Or an archipelago of radically egalitarian communities? In what follows, I would like to offer a few personal reflections on this discussion, against the background of the broader struggle for affordable housing in Amsterdam and elsewhere.

First of all, there is a practical issue. The idea that the creation of new housing commons is inversely proportional to the dismantling of the old public facilities seems to me to be a case of wishful thinking. In theory, the 2015 Dutch Housing Act, which is disastrous in most other respects, opened up new possibilities for citizens to initiate self-organized cohousing projects. But unfortunately, there’s a huge gap between theory and praxis. The rules are often unclear, the involved parties (municipalities, housing corporations, developers) not always willing to cooperate, and banks are hesitant to provide the necessary capital. And although some very important initiatives have been launched in recent years, it is also necessary to reflect on the fact that many have been nipped in the bud, or have only been implemented in a diluted form.

In theory, it is all too simple: housing corporations have large chunks of property that they need to sell in order to comply with national and European neoliberal legislation. On the other hand, it is increasingly the case that collectives of tenants present themselves as a interested party to acquire a property listed for sale—often the building they occupy—in order to safeguard it as social property and ensure its affordability. But time and again housing corporations show little willingness to take bids from residents’ collectives seriously, because they know that they can expect a much higher bid from an investment fund.² Indeed, investment funds are salivating over the prospect of transferring social housing to an explosive private rental market after purchase of a building. Such ‘worst cases’ need to be taken into consideration, because they reveal that a great deal needs to be done before cooperatives can offer a viable, affordable and accessible alternative to a housing market that is too expensive and a public housing sector does not function properly.

Secondly, I see little point in the current fetishisation of small-scale initiatives. Small-scale-ism is not a sacred principle. Yes, next generation co-housing initiatives can act as an incubator for new forms of collective life and political action. But the ultimate challenge is to invent larger, more robust structures to link and empower small-scale initiatives. This will

require a form of upscaling that is not yet possible. What worries me is the coverage rate, so to speak, of the new cooperative-based, grassroots housing schemes. Housing cooperatives—and this is what they have in common with the numerous health insurance, co-working and energy cooperatives that have been established since the crisis—tend to reproduce existing networks, as their recruitment often takes place via informal channels. You know someone, and that person invites you to partake. Needless to say, these are often networks of highly educated, young people with considerable social capital.

Thirdly, we must do away with the idea that co-housing experiments by definition have a beneficial effect on the broader housing struggle.^[3]³ In the best cases, that is true, but in the worst cases, these initiatives are only depoliticized enclaves of residents who have “bought themselves free” and now, above all, want to be left alone. Such projects have no added value for the broader ‘struggle for the city’, precisely because they are not reproductive. I agree with Stuart Hodkinson that we “should ensure that these new spaces of commons actively support existing housing commons and undermine enclosure and accumulation”.^[4]⁴ Connection therefore seems to me to be a crucial next step, and there are various approaches at home and abroad that could serve as examples.⁵

The crucial question is of course: will cohousing remain the middle class facility that it is today, or can it develop into a valid alternative to state-controlled social housing? Not any time soon, I suspect. This does not mean that we should uncritically eulogize the social housing system as it developed in the post-war welfare state. From the social movements of the twentieth century we have learned that this system were by no means blind to differences in background, gender, class and education. Still, the public housing system that we presently have, however flawed, still has a far greater public reach and potential than an archipelago of loosely connected co-housing initiatives, and therefore is worth defending.

¹ Translations by the author unless stated otherwise.

² One recent and much publicized case is the Copekcabana cooperative housing initiative, which tried to acquire 30 social housing units from the Ymere housing corporation in the Van der Pek neighbourhood in Amsterdam-Noord. Copekcabana offered 5.5 million euros for the houses, no small feat for a citizens’ initiative, but this offer was refused because according to the owner it was 35 percent below the market value. The crux of the matter is, of course, that this market value has been artificially inflated in recent years by a steroidal gentrification policy, and that Ymere is anxious to fully capitalize on the colossal “rent gap” that has thus been created. After considerable pressure through the media, a compromise was reached: Ymere remains the owner of the houses, but the Copekabanians are allowed to pay rent collectively.

³ More generally speaking, we must do away with the idea that ‘urban commons’ or innovative, experimental housing projects are by definition ‘leftist’ or ‘progressive’; the highly successful neo-fascist social center/housing project Casa Pound in Rome is a case in point. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/22/casapound-italy-mussolini-fascism-mainstream>.

⁴ Stuart Hodkinson, ‘The return of the housing question’, *ephemera* 12 (2012) 4, pp. 423-444, 437.

⁵ One very interesting example from Germany is the Mietshäuser Syndikat (apartment-house syndicate), which has been active for more than twenty years and comprises 128 housing projects and 17 social initiatives. The Syndikat functions both as a solidarity network and as collective “bank” to invest in projects in order to take them off the real estate market. Each new project thus also strengthens the solidarity infrastructure of which it is a part, making new projects possible, making the infrastructure stronger, and so on. The Amsterdam based organization Vrijcoop is attempting to translate the model of the Mietshäuser Syndikat into a Dutch context.