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**Report on the eviction  
of ADM Free-space (Vrijplaats) community in  
Amsterdam**

*Prof. Dr Dimitris Dalakoglou*



**infra-demos**

**Report on the eviction  
of ADM Vrijplaats (Free-space) community,  
Amsterdam**

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**infra-demos**

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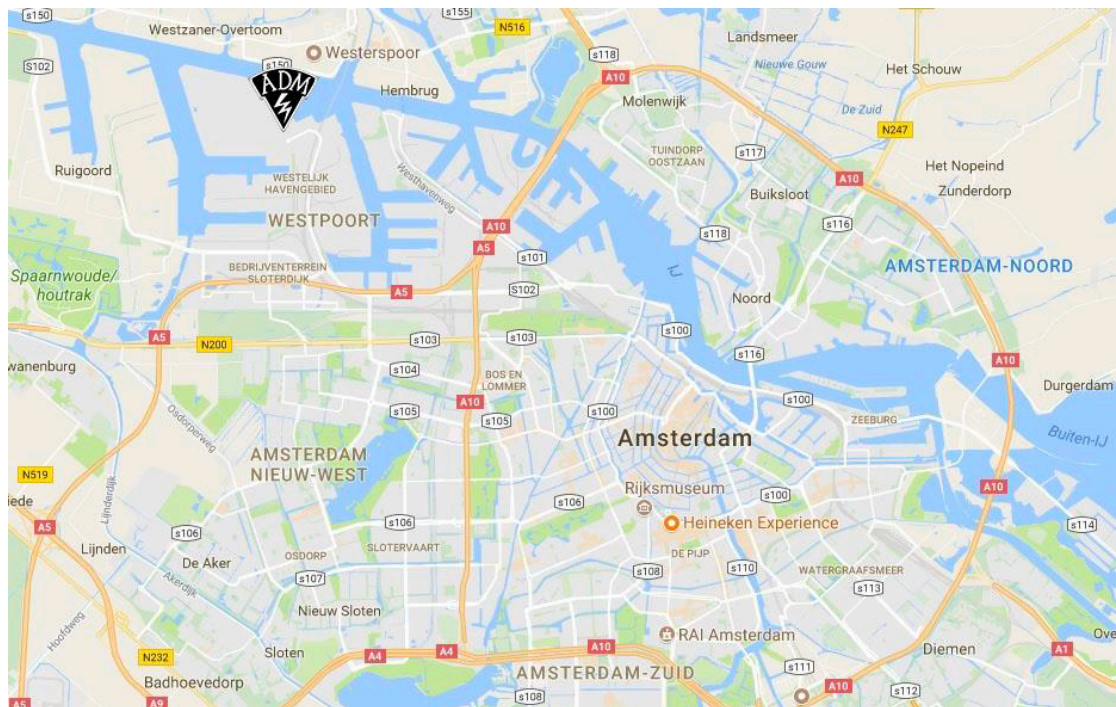
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## Background

ADM Free-space (Vrijplaats) is located in the old facilities of the Amsterdam Drydock Shipyards (ADM) in the western port of Amsterdam. ADM was abandoned in 1978 by the company and it is located on the address of Hornweg 6 (5km from Amsterdam Sloterdijk railway station). It was occupied by the ADM free-space community for the first time in the period of 1987-1992, it became famous immediately nation-wide for its artistic activity, especially the recording studio facilities that were made available to the thriving at the time alternative music scene of the city. The community was evicted in 1992. The site was reoccupied in 1997 and since then the community lives there. The same year (1997) ADM terrain was bought by a controversial real estate investor.



*Map of Amsterdam with the location of ADM marked (source: De Vries & Karis 2017)*

The ADM Free-space group is comprised out of pioneering and creative individuals who form today a community of 125 members that follow an everyday life characterized by unique forms of social coherence based on tight ties of solidarity. The community has developed its own economy, material and immaterial sub-culture that is radically different than the mainstream, following rare forms of conviviality with explicit and special bonds with the ADM site, which has been turned into a unique natural and social ecosystem for Amsterdam.

The community lives in three main forms of dwellings in the converted old office building of the company, in tiny houses (some of them on wheels) and on boats on the pier of ADM. In addition to the domestic places, in ADM, there is a number of communal areas and facilities, used collectively but they are also open to be used by people who do not live in the community: a café/communal kitchen where meals are cooked and shared (covering the expenses with donations) on weekly basis, moreover at least once per week the café's stage is open to performance artists from ADM and outside, including international artists; again performances and facilities are made available for free to artists and audience, the facilities also include ADM's office, the old shipyard's main gallery that is a communal workshop with collectively owned and used tools and machinery, which comprise an area of work, where several types of production are taking place, from the creation of objects of art and craft, theater stages, robotic inventions, up to restoration and maintenance of old vehicles and boats. Some of the ADMers do use the facilities to run small businesses mostly on arts and crafts sector, making their small-scale living. Furthermore, in ADM there is a commonly owned permaculture garden and green house/dome for growing food, playground facilities. The entire area has been transformed into a forest with its own ecosystem by the systematic efforts of the community to green this area of otherwise industrial activities (Arda 2015).



*The abandoned and derelict ADM Offices building and the surrounding terrain before ADM  
Free-space community moves there (source: ADM)*



*1998: Attempt by the controversial big real-estate investor Luske to evict ADM Free-space demolishing the building with the use of bouncers (source: ADM)*



*The same building today, the damages have been creatively fixed and the space reclaimed by ADM community, with the Backstage café/bar, but also domestic spaces (Source: ADM)*

The responsibility for the maintenance of the terrain is collective and carried out by the members of the community very effectively, as the conditions are good, with trees and plants cared, garbage collected, the scrap metal or other reclaimed material and goods arranged on specific locations and generally with an evident collective care for health and safety.

The various public events and artistic performances that take place in the café or the children Sunday activities attract people from all over the city, whilst the largest cultural events like the big annual ADM festival or e.g. the recent performance of Amsterdam philharmonic orchestra attracted audience from all over the Netherlands and abroad.

In 1997 when ADM was squatted by the ADM Free-space community, squatting was merely a small civil offence, tolerated and to an extent encouraged by the city authorities, but also the more mainstream communities of the city. In 2003-2004 was ethnographically evident that the district subculture and the anti-cultural production of free-spaces were disseminated in the city and were perceived by the majority as a distinct and authentic element of Amsterdam's progressive history and unique character. The ADM community is one of the last remaining samples of this vanishing socio-cultural minority of free-spaces (vrije-plaatsen) dwellers. Until 2010 this subculture was socially very significant and completely embedded in the history and the everyday life of Amsterdam, yet after the criminalization of squatting in 2010, squatters and their vrijplaats socio-cultural production, have decreased significantly.

### **ADM's ways of living and everyday life values**

According to my own ethnographic and historical research (conducted during the periods 2003-2004 & 2015-2018, based on first-hand accounts, qualitative fieldwork datasets, oral history and archives) ADM ways of life comprise the typical case of an intentional community that operates according to a special non-commercialized and no-profit DIY sub-cultural principles. This way of life is based on the principles of peer-to-peer sharing, social and solidarity economy whilst the members of the community apply ideals of commons and mutual aid along the DIY material culture.

The majority of exchanges and other activities within ADM are taking place within the framework of mutuality and an economy of affective labor aiming to the wider benefit of the group, without expectations of immediate reciprocity (and often no reciprocity at all). Potential problems, crises or emergencies of one member (e.g. damages on the domestic



spaces, breaks in bicycles and vehicles, illness of members, or personal emergencies [like loss of relatives, pets etc.]) are events of significance and concern for many more members of the community, whilst the majority of ADMers (if not all of them) will become aware of potential issues and will make themselves available to help the affected member(s). For instance, during a recent case of serious illness (cancer) of one of the members, she received systematic daily care shared among at least a dozen of other members. Issues like addition of new members or departure of existing members are matters of concern for the entire community and most members are getting involved, either expressing opinions or in order to help in the relocation etc. Communal eating practices are widespread and although they may not concern always the entire community, like the collective dinners at the café, it is common for smaller affinity groups (e.g. direct neighbors) to gather for meals much more regularly and spontaneously than average Amsterdam households. Whilst small and bigger rites of everyday life occur within ADM (de Vries & Caris 2017).



The start of the permaculture garden in ADM (Source: ADM)



*Visitors and ADMers interact with a robotic horse, a creation of ADM members, this is a sample of the creativity and experimental social energy that is gathered around ADM community (source: ADM)*

Overall the kind of affinity and this level of group solidarity, along the rites of everyday life that are marking these relationships, can be explicitly compared qualitatively with relationships and exchanges among members of the same kinship group. This is explicit also in the language as often the terms used for the members of the community to refer to themselves is 'family' or 'tribe'. A further evidence of the kind of relationships within ADM is not only that hardly any door is locked, but that hardly any door has a lock.

Decisions regarding the governance of ADM group are taken on monthly meetings based on principles of extended consent. Decisions about moving to ADM have to do with the wider 'neighborhood' namely the number of domestic units around the site that a newcomer will be located, who has to approve the good neighboring relationship and confirm that the new member is ascribing to the principles and values of mutuality that characterize ADM. Membership to the community comes together with responsibilities towards the rest of the members for the collective interest of the ADM.

ADM is following a typical lifestyle of the decreasing free-spaces communities, having a zero or even negative carbon footprint lifestyles and via practicing unique skills of DIY culture with know-how and creativity shared in terms of mutuality among each other, they shape the material and immaterial culture of their everyday life by themselves. This DIY culture is

reclaiming and using creatively waste and often is related to the refurbishing and maintenance of the urban materialities e.g. salvaging historical buildings (or other forms of heritage like antique cars) and creating immaterial cultural products that were disseminated and became ontologically embedded elements in the life and history of Amsterdam. There is hardly any parade or festival in Amsterdam where members of ADM creative communities are not involved.

ADMers have reclaimed creatively plethora of waste (e.g. metals, tires, wood, electric devices, vehicles etc.) using them within the context of their DIY culture in order to create houses, objects of art and craft or refurbishing them entirely in order to be reused (e.g. refurbishment and use of abandoned vehicles or conversion of old buses into caravans etc.)

The squatter communities, like ADMers, daily activities involve limited or no use of monetary exchanges, yet plenty of exchanges and interactions are taking place in the context of solidarity and social economic activities. Furthermore, ADM has pioneered several popular today trends in sustainability such as everyday life inspired by degrowth strategies or tiny house movement, permaculture etc.



*An ADM dwelling made out of cob, natural building and recycling of disposed materials for the creation of houses, art and objects of craft are typical practices in ADM (source: ADM)*

## **Placemaking in ADM**

It is crucial to establish that the ADM's unique ways of life are tied on the site where it grew and blossomed organically over the last 21 years. The community transformed gradually little by little the ADM site, adjusting it to their needs and adjusting their personal and collective practices, culturally and materially in absolute reference to ADM environment. Thus ADM's existence depends on the relationships between the community and the space they operate and interact with. Given the widespread and high-level of DIY skills and given all the manual labor and creative energy put by the members for the making of ADM's materialities and spatialities the last 21 years, one must state that ADMers have very literally produced with their own hands almost from scratch ADM. From the reconstruction and refurbishment of the previously existing facilities, which were abandoned for years, the fixing of the partially demolished facilities during a previous attempts of an illegal eviction carried out by the landlord, up to the individual dwelling units, the trees, plants and artistic installations, ADM community has created itself and its environment almost from scratch.

Material space is often defined by hard sciences as an abstract scientific or measurable conception that exists as autonomous phenomenon in relation to the human experience and practice. So, suggestions about relocating a community to a new place might seem sensible, yet they are not, as such an activity potentially means the end of the community as it is. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social sciences have spawned a number of research areas that examined physical space in its interaction with people in different sociocultural contexts, revealing another dimension. Namely the crucial role space plays in the production and the stabilization of identities, social groups, notions of the self, but also in the process of social transformation, progress and the renegotiation of the aforementioned elements. Therefore, it is a sociological axiom today that space is integrated in the human experience, worldview, and practice and participates in the human self-understanding. As Bender summarizes, "the landscape is never inert; people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group or nation-state" (Bender: 1993, 3)



*One of ADM's tiny houses (source: ADM)*

So not all spaces are actually places. For instance, in urban planning today one of the most significant school of thought is the placemaking<sup>1</sup> namely this involves practices that achieve the development of socio-cultural significance around certain sites (e.g. home is the archetypal spontaneous place for most people, in the case of public spaces sites that are used for pleasant daily activities like playing for kids, meeting for people, sitting/resting etc.) are also places. The sites that have none or limited social value and significance are called non-places (e.g. a shopping mall, metro station or a road) [Auge 1992]. Thus ADM has such a significance for the community that is a per se place for ADMers and the thousands of other people who use it on annual base.



*Drone image of ADM's main workshop facilities, the circus tent and various other installations and stages for performances (source: ADM).*

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<sup>1</sup> Project for Public Spaces 'What is placemaking?' <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>

Ethnographic research in late -capitalism mega cities have vividly shown how a certain spatial environment can function as a *de facto* community-maker by providing the symbolic and material boundaries that encompass a number of people in a particular time. In the context of extreme fluidity, constant mobility and the domination of individualistic cultural traits, the material space can provide to the people the *elementary community* at a given time, an element that consists of an anthropological prerequisite for the sense of orientation, purpose, political action and identity (Poulimenakos and Dalakoglou 2018).

For example, the study of ADM has shown how the place that is open on almost daily basis for events, live music, theatre and other performances and almost every Sunday for children activities, Sunday yoga sessions etc. operates as a wider cultural and social center and has become the point of spontaneous gathering of diverse people from all around the city, transforming in this way the life of many people with different socioeconomic background to a social group that refers directly to the place of ADM as part of their urban identity. ADM place provides the means by which different people can realize themselves as a collectivity, especially in postmodern societies where people are in a great degree disassociate from traditional sources of identity and sense of belonging as the village, the family and the profession.



*Kids playing in artistic installations in ADM (source: ADM)*

As a result, one should conclude that the human-space relation is very significant in the smooth production and reproduction of cultural lifeforms. Therefore, the protection and respect of the place that concentrates and realizes the meeting, the fermentation and the action of the people is the same as the protection of the alterity and the human diversity of ADM community itself.



*Two ADMers in their home (photo by Sanne Derks, the Guardian)*

### **The vulnerability of ADM community within the wider context of land-use in Amsterdam**

In 2010 the Dutch government criminalized squatting leading to the mass scale extinction of Free-spaces (Vrijplaatsen) ways of life that were crucial for the history and the reputation of a city as an alternative haven of human creativity since the 1970s. Very few such communities remain and among them is ADM. Meanwhile, there is very little space if any at all for such activities in the city of Amsterdam.

The prices of real estate are sky-rocketing the last 4 years and according to the UBS World Real Estate Bubble Index Amsterdam is ranked fifth in the world, well above cities that are considered archetypes of bubble in the bibliography like New York and San Francisco. The last three years the average price increase in real estate exceeds 10%, giving often the illusion of

wealth increase to people of the city, who have their real purchase power in fact decreased due to the rise of prices in food, utilities and services, led by the rise in real estate prices/rents etc. Meanwhile the number of speculative investors who buy properties to let in the city has been doubled in less than a decade, today there are individuals who own more than 100 properties to let<sup>2</sup>. This phenomenon is gradually pricing out the existing communities of the city pushing them further and further out of its core<sup>3</sup> and definitely leave very little space for non-commercial alternatives of social and solidarity economy, cultural and artistic activities like the ones practiced by ADM community.

During my first fieldwork in the city in the period 2003-2004 Amsterdam was a vivid cell of social and cultural activity: unpretentious public spaces, open spaces, community gardens, green spaces, libraries, squats, free spaces, small live music venues and inexpensive cafes, independent artists and craftsmen, colorful minority neighborhoods, small independent businesses, students and alternative thinking types of all descriptions were giving the rhythm and character of the city and they were its spirit, making the city different than most of the other global city that was under the nails of gentrification at that time. During my second field-site research (2015-2018) skyscrapers and other buildings have replaced green and open spaces of the city (e.g. around the station of Amsterdam Zuid) the small shops have been replaced by businesses owned by big chains, Free Spaces have been evicted violently by police forces out of their homes, which were cells of cultural, social and political activity for the city and have been replaced by Airbnb apartments for weekend travelers, ethnic and other minorities (e.g. socio-cultural ones) are segregated and gradually displaced out of certain parts of the city (e.g. the center) and the core of its daily life. Real estate agents and the property sale/rent websites, Airbnb management companies, landlords who buy to let apartments are setting the new rhythms of the city.

Thus, in fact, at the current stage of Amsterdam's urban history, evicting a Free space will not only endanger the community's distinct socio-culturally minoritarian ways of life, but

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<sup>2</sup> Risk Magazine, 2018 Overheated housing market in Amsterdam  
<https://riskmagazine.nl/article/2018-02-13-overheated-housing-market-in-amsterdam-what-is-the-solution>

<sup>3</sup> Bloomberg, 2018, Sizzling Amsterdam housing market pushes people to other cities.  
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-18/sizzling-amsterdam-housing-market-pushes-people-to-other-cities>



potentially the health and wellbeing of its members, as homelessness is increasing enormously the last 3 years in Amsterdam<sup>4</sup> and this is a probability.

### **Potential consequences of forced displacement**

The eviction of ADM planned after the deadline of December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018, is going to be a very critical situation that causes enormous stress to the community that feels not only that their right over the place they have created, but more widely their right to the city to be violated. The community's entire sense of belonging and existence that is so closely tied to the site is endangered by the forced eviction. The entire system of reference of the community and the special way of life, its immaterial and material culture that they have produced over the previous 21 years has been developed closely tied to their landscape and this continuity between lifestyle and the place that comprise the final result of ADM will be violently interrupted in the case of eviction and the consequent displacement. ADM cannot be the same in another place, if it will survive an eviction at all. Apart from the obvious practical difficulties, namely losing the building/house, café, communal workshop, the relocation will include activities like demolishing and rebuilding houses or abandoning the sculptures and installations that ADMers have produced over the decades and have been used by thousands of children and adults who visit ADM. These materialities have significance for the sense of belonging of the community<sup>5</sup> and indeed for the survival of its members when for example we talk about the workshop that all these craftsmen/women and artists are using daily.

The whole experience of eviction is potentially going to be traumatic, especially given the presence of children (and adults by now) who were born in ADM and have spent all their life there. As Bromet and Havenaar (2002) show forcibly displaced persons are typically exposed to many different traumatic experiences that can have a permanent impact on their mental health. Although the majority of bibliography refers usually to refugee populations one should not underestimate the consequences of an eviction and internal displacement for a district community with such a close relationship to its place. For example, one has to highlight that displacement-related stressors have impact on the mental health of internally resettled

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<sup>4</sup> NLTimes, 2018, Housing shortage increases homeless problem in Dutch cities.

<https://nltimes.nl/2018/05/25/housing-shortage-increases-homeless-problem-dutch-cities>

<sup>5</sup> Some of the artistic installations which carry enormous symbolic significance for the community are metal constructions that weight more than 3 tones each (e.g. the metal tree that was built in order to fix the demolitions done by the bulldozers of the landlord in 1998 costing more than 30,000 EUR or the UFO hydraulic installation)

refugee populations, above and beyond the effects of previous trauma that was caused due to e.g. war or other initial causes of displacement (Chu, Keller, & Rasmussen, 2013; Li, Liddell, & Nickerson, 2016; Schweitzer, Brough, Vromans, & Asic-Kobe, 2011). Such stressors compose the response association between past trauma and PTSD symptoms (Chen, Hall, Ling, & Renzaho, 2017; Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Porter & Haslam, 2005; Rasmussen et al., 2010). Depression (Bogic, Njoku, & Priebe, 2015) but also psychotic symptoms (Dapunt et al., 2017; Hollander et al., 2016) are among the recorded consequences.



Art installations in ADM. (source: ADM)

## Conclusions

ADM is one of the very last remaining free-spaces (vrijplaatsen) that historically comprised Amsterdam's urban character since the 1970s. The community follows very unique lifestyles and operates, socially, culturally, economically and politically in distinctively different ways than the mainstream population of the city. These distinct ways of life are tied with the specific place where they are located and thus an eviction will lead to displacement with potentially very significant negative consequences for the community.

In principle, the displacement of ADM is primarily a biopolitical measure that will engineer the potential destruction of the community and its ways of living and we cannot neglect that is related with the wider transformations in the real estate politics of the city that favor certain ways of life and aim to the control and suppression of alternative ones, like the one that ADM has.

It must be seen within the historical shift in Europe, towards techniques of ordering through administering people's daily life (Foucault 1980, Ong 2003). These processes of 'governmentality' are carried out by networks that materialize power through a 'general problematic of improvement' (Li 2005). So state authorities, police, municipal authorities, the landlord, real estate agents etc. are not oppositional but merged together, and particular 'solutions' are crucially linked to broader techniques of disciplining and control (Hedman 2009). So in fact the eviction, relocation, criminalization of support posters are all parts of a biopolitical logic that sees ADMers and other socio-cultural minorities as 'a problem' to be resolved via 'objective', 'technocratic' and 'nonpolitical' measures that in fact are very political (Hedman 2009).

So although the decisions about eviction might be based on potentially apolitical statements about rights of private property of the landlord of ADM terrain, in fact the technocratic administration of an eviction and the forced comply and governance of that process by the community potentially will cause such a transformation that might equal with its permanent change into something different than its current special and unique qualitative, but also quantitative (if one things the number of its members) characteristics.\_

**Bio of the author**

Dimitris Dalakoglou holds the Chair of Social Anthropology with emphasis on mobility, infrastructures and urban politics at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He holds a PhD from University of London (UCL), an MA from the University of Amsterdam and a BA from Panteion University of Athens. He has been awarded the Future Research Leaders grant from the Economy and Society Research Council of the UK for his project crisis-scapes that studied public urban spaces and he received from the Dutch Organisation of Scientific Research a VIDI Innovative Research award for his project infra-demos that studies infrastructures and democracy. *Thanks should be given to Caroline van Slobe, Giorgos Poulimenakos and Antoniosa Alexandirdis for their help with this report.*

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