

The Magic of Squatting - Interview with Hans Pruijt

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Bernd Upmeyer: Your main topic of interest is empowerment in various contexts, especially in relation to urban social movements. Where does your interest in empowerment come from when it comes to cities?

Hans Pruijt: When I moved in 1974 as a student to Amsterdam I had a lot of difficulties in finding a room, but eventually found one in the "Oosterparkbuurt", which is a 19th century neighbourhood. At that moment the city was just beginning its urban renewal there starting demolishing buildings. And there was a neighbourhood group, which I joined immediately and which members were a mix of old established participants and students. To join this group was very interesting for me as I saw the chance to influence the city planning together with these people. Ever since then I am interested in such issues.

BU: Another frequently reoccurring very urban topic of your writing is squatting. Were you squatting this room that you found at the beginning in Amsterdam?

HP: No, not yet. First I was renting, but when in 1977 the lease of my room was cancelled, I discussed this with my fellow students and one of the students said that there was a lot of squatting going on in the "De Pijp" neighbourhood, and she gave me a phone number of someone, who was organizing it. The squatting was actually initiated by a property owner, who hated to see empty apartments from across his building and organized a squatting group. So, I became part of that group and that is how everything started. At the beginning it was certainly a lot of fun first of all, but later I got more interested in the wider picture of the neighbourhood discovering the reasons behind the vacancy of the building that we squatted. And then there was this neighbourhood committee in which tenants participated but which consisted mainly of young people. With this committee we tried to work together and created, for example, a newsletter for the neighbourhood and tried to influence the politics and urban planning with it. Because we discovered that the city wanted to tear down everything and wanted to change the entire street grid wiping out many of the affordable houses. Then we started fighting to preserve the 19th century street grid of the neighbourhood. Later I also joined larger squatting groups that acted even on the level of the city helping people that could not find houses. But in 1978, after I was once badly beaten-up by the police, I decided to be more in the background, writing, lobbying, for example against the anti-squatting legislation, and doing research, while still taking part in squatting actions and trying to prevent evictions.

BU: But your original motivation to start squatting was based on the fact that you lost your room?

HP: Yes, it looked like a solution for myself. That was the first motivation. So, first it was a very practical motivation to improve my own housing situation.



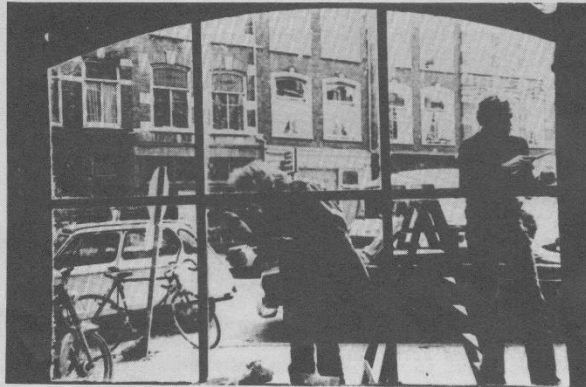
Photo 1 The squat in De Pijp neighborhood, late 1970s. Photo Hans Pruijt

BU: These neighbourhood groups and committees that you joined, did you help creating them too? How can we understand their power and influence when it comes to urban design and city planning?

HP: The neighbourhood committees existed already since the 1960s and there was also a network of city-subsidized district centres (“wijkcentra”) that supported citizen’s initiatives for improving living and housing conditions in the city. They had staff members that were very sympathetic towards urban activism. They were very helpful and they shared, for example, lists of apartments that were going to be empty, because the city wanted them to look after people that had to move. So, they gave us the lists and then we knew where to squat. These district centres also offered the use of stencilling equipment and paper, which was a very useful tool back then when there was no internet to get information out. Everybody could start a new neighbourhood committee and get help from their district centre. The neighbourhood group that I joined, the one in De Pijp, was a very small one that only catered for two streets. Where the two streets joined we had a small neighbourhood centre in a squatted storefront. But such committees, large and small, were everywhere.

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gerard dou / quellijn

Photo 2 Newsletter for the Gerard Doustraat & Quellijnstraat in De Pijp. The top photo shows member of the beighborhood group repairing the window of the squatted neighborhood house. This window had been smashed by someone associated with a car repair business company as a retaliation for complaints about noise and pollution.

BU: And how was the link to the city and the urban planning created?

HP: The official district centres were institutions paid by and run by the city but they supported very much activism. What they were doing was basically subsidized activism. However, they could work autonomously. An institutional infrastructure to improve the cohesion in the neighbourhoods and

the wellbeing of the people still exists until today in basically all Dutch cities. Such institutions tend to be open to activism and have open doors for people that want to organize something or need help for something or some information. Additional to that some of the people from the neighbourhood action movements went into politics themselves and vice versa, so there was a lot of exchange between the neighbourhood action groups and the cities. In the 1970s there were even some anarchists that themselves entered party politics. They started founding their own party and had electoral success. One former anarchist, Roel van Duijn, became, for example, an alderman in Amsterdam's city administration at one moment. There were anarchist members of the city council who were active in squatting themselves. So, activism existed in the neighbourhood groups, the subsidized district centres and within the municipality, which created a lot of links among them. And in general at that time, politics tended to be relatively open to activism.

In the late 1970s in Amsterdam there was actually a split within the city government and strong disagreements, especially between the department of public works and the department of housing, two big and powerful departments within the municipality. The department of public works wanted to tear down as much as possible of the old housing stock that was not protected as listed monuments. They also pursued the policy to send away large parts of the population into so-called "overloop" cities or satellite cities, because they felt that Amsterdam had become overcrowded. And they wanted to tear down houses of these people to make space for big roads and business districts with big office blocks and a subway system underneath of it, which meant a complete transformation of the city. The department of housing was on the other hand more interested in preserving affordable housing and keeping people in the city. But for the department of public works the oppositions, activism and protests that came from neighbourhood action groups were a complete headache. It was not uncommon at the time that activists were throwing building machines into the canals, organizing lots of protests against construction activities in general, and were squatting buildings slated for demolition. And these protests were very effective and managed to derail many things exposing the vulnerability of the city government. An important tactic of the activists was also to ridicule political leaders exposing them as liars, which made them lose credibility. In turn, the department of housing was encouraged by the activities and activism of the neighbourhood committees, groups and centres.



Photo 3 Demonstrating against speculation with houses in De Pijp neighborhood , 14-1-1978. Photographer unknown.

Squatting as a Form of Protest

BU: Coming back to squatting. As what kind of “Protest Urbanism” would you describe squatting in general? What are its methods and strategies in time and space?

HP: There are special features that make it really great. Squatting is a form of protest. But it is many other things at the same time too. It is helping yourself or helping other people to get a place to stay, so there are some immediate benefits. So, it is quite rewarding and it is a direct action, which means that it is not symbolic like a demonstration that hopes that authorities might be moved, touched, or react to it. It certainly has some symbolism to it too, but it is always direct. But if you are demonstrating against something or if you are making a petition, you never know whether there will be a result at all. A lot of times nothing happens after demonstrations. But while squatting you get at least some results right away, which is great and an immediate satisfaction. As a squatter you are also not dependent on other people. If you are doing other kinds of protests, you have to be noticed by the authorities and they have to react to you. But if you are squatting and are completely ignored, that is fine too. And then you can very slowly build up groups and communities with other people, mostly under the radar of the authorities. So, even with a small group of people you can already achieve something. Thus squatting is a very powerful form of protest. You can do things that nobody can do, which gives you some kind of superpower empowering you and providing you access to

houses that are neither to be rented nor to be bought and are off the market for an undefined period. That is really the magic of squatting.

BU: What would be the biggest impact of squatting on cities? On the bigger scale of the city, is it all about protecting buildings from being demolished or is there something else?

HP: I think that the success and impact of squatting on a bigger scale is clearly related to the amount of squattable buildings and the amount of actual squatters. If all the empty buildings of a city are being squatted, this is an indication that squatting is effective. In the 1970s and 1980s this was almost the case in Amsterdam.

When trying to make sense of squatting, it is tempting to ascribe some overarching goal to it, but on the practical level it is all about taking buildings, bringing them to use, repairing, reorganizing and reactivating them. These are the basic things, but from there it can grow out to other things. However, squatting is not like an organisation with a goal behind it to transform cities. Some squatters might aim to transform a neighbourhood but this can not be generalized.

BU: How would you compare squatting as a form of protests to other current and recent protest movements and social counter-movements all over the world that are mostly related to fairer distribution of wealth and affordable housing, commercial, social and cultural spaces and transport costs?

HP: In the way that also squatting is a part of larger movements. Because squatters have the experience of direct action and the knowledge of this form of activism, they can apply it to other things also. Many squatters joined, for example, anti-nuclear protests blocking nuclear power plants or blocking roads where nuclear waste was transported. In 1985 squatters even joined the protests against the arrival of the pope sabotaging his anti-gay policy. After that the pope never came back to the Netherlands. When in the 1980s the squatting movement was at its peak, squatters also helped sabotaging Amsterdam's bid for the Olympic Games. Squatters joined also when during that time around 500.000 people were protesting on Amsterdam's "Museumplein" against the planned installation of nuclear missiles in the Netherlands. Internationally, there were other movements running in parallel that Dutch squatters were in contact with. I remember that, for example, in our small squatting café in the Pijp at one evening we got people coming over who were involved in the UK miners' strikes, and the next evening activists from Solidarity in Poland. Entire networks of protest groups in which squatters were involved for all kind of things were created at that time stimulating each other.



PROGRAMMA KINKERBUURTTONEEL



Photo 4 Program Theater Group in the Kinkerbuurt Neighborhood. Shown is the eviction at which the police systematically beat up nonviolent squatters blockading in front of the building, 23-11-1978.

The Creative City, Impacts on Urban Planning, and Urban Movements

BU: In an article that you wrote in 2004 for the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research entitled “Squatters in the Creative City” you stated that there are squatters that try to play their cards in a way that is compatible to the hype of the creative city. Where do you see the relation of squatting and the creative city?

HP: I wrote this article, because I was attacked by a colleague after I claimed in an article comparing squatting in Amsterdam and New York City that squatting is not easily institutionalized or co-opted into the system. The colleague attacked me by stating that governments would like artists that squat and therefore help them and legalize them. But they would hate the critical squatters that push for affordable housing and that want to change city planning.

So, with the article “Squatters in the Creative City” I reacted to these statements and tried to find out whether the city of Amsterdam used artists as a kind of cultural service providers. Because the example given of squatters being used as cultural service providers was the squatted former Film Academy at “Overtoom” in Amsterdam, I went over there to see if I could interview someone. Straight away, I learnt that for the city officials, the most important was that the rent was being paid, and that they did not demand any cultural services. But it seems that it is relatively easy for artists to squat something, as strange or deviant behaviour of artists is generally more accepted. So, to some extent it is true that cities like to have artists, which fits to Florida’s ideas about the creative class. But cities seem not to go as far as to offer them a lot of protection, which leads to the fact that artist squats get evicted too, however not as fast as non-artist squats. Thus, to say that cities love squatting artists and hate the others appeared to me a bit exaggerated. Nevertheless I agree that including some artists into a squatting collective helps to get more accepted and less repressed by the city government. Squatters can use this as a strategy for recognition and to be able to remain in places longer. But for artists this is great too, as they can get great work spaces for free. Some famous Dutch artists such as Joep van Lieshout have squatting in their past.

BU: Would you describe squatting artists still as protesters?

HP: To some extent yes, because squatting artists occupy buildings with which not much money is made anymore, which is a certain protest against the capitalist city developments. And it is a non-profitable activity on expensive land, which goes against the system. And many squatting artists still have a relation to radical culture, like the ones in Rotterdam’s “Poortgebouw” , where until today political manifestations are organized involving themselves in local radical politics. They are also very open. If today somebody wishes to have a city-wide squatter’s meeting, he could use that space, where often also international squatting conferences are being held.

BU: Also in 2004 you wrote a piece called “The Impact of Citizens' Protest on City Planning in Amsterdam”. What did you argue?

HP: The main arguments of the article I had written down actually already in 1984, because they were part of my master thesis. But in 2004 I got the chance to publish some of the ideas. In the article I described how city planning looked like in 1968 when planners wanted to get rid of many 19th century neighbourhoods and create a subway network, making bigger roads, and a central

business district. I traced all these plans and showed what would have happened to them without the protests. As eventually most of them got derailed, because of the protests movements in which many squatters were involved that I described earlier. And in the article I described how the protest made the projected central business district in the Eastern part of the inner city less feasible, especially since a viable alternative location in the south was available. This location, now named the “Zuidas”, was eventually developed. I based my prediction on studies researching about what businesses really need and want. Because, what they especially wish is to have good access to roads so they can easily be arrived by car. And since the plans for larger roads in the centre of Amsterdam were thwarted and sabotaged by the protests that were squatting and blocking highway plans, Amsterdam’s inner city was therefore no longer attractive to larger businesses. But as building larger roads were still possible in on the south side of the city, Amsterdam’s city planning was changed accordingly, which demonstrates the impact of protests on city planning.

BU: In 2011 and in “The Logic of Urban Squatting” you explain that squatters’ movements can overlap with other urban movements in protest waves. How does that work and how powerful are such amplified protests waves?

HP: Social movements typically occur in waves and one of these waves occurred around 1980. That happens when at the same time in different locations and different countries protests take place on different topics that are somehow interconnected and inspiring each other. One of the recent protest waves is the Arab Spring . Populism, whether left-wing or progressive, I would describe also as a protest wave. And squatting was especially important in the protest waves of the 1980s and also important in the protest wave of 2011 in Southern Europe, the 15-M Movement, when a lot of young people were unemployed and had no future, who then organized big occupations and protests. There are always enough reasons to protest, like the fact that today it is almost impossible for young people to find an affordable place to live here in The Netherlands, where we have an enormous housing shortage.

Creating Spaces for Protests

BU: What could cities do to support a culture that is more open for protest and to create more opportunities for a more democratised form of urban design?

HP: I think for a city having a university is very important leading to more people with social, political and cultural capital. Because of that, a university city is more difficult to control for city planners. Cities should certainly also create more affordable spaces so that people - and especially young people and people that are not rich, but have this social, political and cultural capital - can actually afford to live in it. I think that this is good for potential protests and it is good that such people are part of cities to be able to analyse situations, write pamphlets, and explain what is going on. That is really important I think.

BU: What role do you think architects, urban designers, urban planners, and other stakeholders in our cities play in shaping, defining, and limiting protests?

HP: There are many possibilities. If they have, for example, a position in an institution they can leak information, which can be very useful. But they can of course also offer their expertise as many legalized squats need to be renovated and repaired. So, there is a lot to do for architects to support those initiatives. Of course, they can be in their spare time activists too, helping to explain what is happening. They can also talk to the media and use their professional skills in many ways, which they actually do already. I have seen a great example of how an architect can be very supportive to protests in the outskirts of Rome in an old salami factory called “Metropoliz” that has been squatted. In Metropoliz, which has its own website, there are artists that have workspaces and there is even a gallery. One especially interesting part of it is a concrete structure with only pillars and floors in which Romani people were invited to build their houses. And when I visited it, I saw a tag on the wall saying “SPQR’DAM” , which reminded me to the abbreviation of Rotterdam, which is “R’DAM”. It turned out that the local architect of these Romani people was a young Italian architect, who had studied at the TU in Delft, which is close to Rotterdam and with the tag he expressed his relation to the city. He was designing these houses for the Romani, which turned out to be really interesting inside of this artsy looking squatted factory. So, I think that the project is a really great example that demonstrates what role architects can have in designing and shaping spaces for protest. It shows also that there is a strong connection between architecture and squatting.



Photo 5 Metropoliz Squat, Rome, 2014. Photo Hans Pruijt.

Hans Pruijt is an assistant professor at the Sociology Department of Erasmus University in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. His research and teaching focus on organizations and organizing. His main topic of interest is empowerment in various contexts, especially working life and urban social

movements. In the late 1970s he has been involved in the Dutch squatting movement occupying buildings to fight against the demolishing of entire neighbourhoods in Amsterdam. As a sociologist he has written extensively on the topic of squatting in articles such as "The Impact of Citizens' Protest on City Planning in Amsterdam", "Squatters in the Creative City", or "The Logic of Urban Squatting".