

# Squatting in the Netherlands. The social and political institutionalization of a movement

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This chapter is an attempt to cover the development of squatting in the Netherlands, from its spontaneous beginning and experimentation around 1963 to the present day. It describes how *kraken* in the Netherlands gained a measure of legitimacy based on shared norms and expectations, in other words, how it became socially institutionalized.

My work sees squatting primarily as a means of practical empowerment. As a tool for making sense of the variety within the squatting experience I previously proposed the following typology<sup>1</sup>:

- 1 - Deprivation based squatting, middle class activists helping poor people;
- 2 - Squatting as an alternative housing strategy, home-seekers organizing squatting for themselves;
- 3 - Conservational squatting, squatting used as a tool to preserve a building, neighborhood, landscape or a function (especially social housing);
- 4 - Entrepreneurial squatting, squatting as a means to create any kind of establishment, for example a social center;
- 5 - Political squatting, squatting for an ulterior political goal, which involves gaining power, the ability to make others do what you want them to do.

The reason for choosing a restrictive definition of squatting is analytical sharpness. This history of squatting in Amsterdam, and in the Netherlands in general, is a straight success story of squatting as an alternative housing strategy, conservational and entrepreneurial squatting. The verdict on political squatting is much more ambivalent.

## Spontaneous beginnings and experimentation

Empty buildings that the owner does not care about create relatively stressless opportunities for squatting. In the 1960s and 1970s, urban renewal in the Netherlands produced these opportunities in large quantity. When city planners deemed that a neighborhood should be razed – often long before definitive redevelopment plans appeared – authorities began to move tenants out and made it impossible to re-let the emptied apartments. This type of policy, against the backdrop of a housing crisis, did a lot to get squatting in Amsterdam and other Dutch cities started and to make it grow.

In 1963 and 1964, empty houses on Amsterdam's Kattenburg island, which the city planned to raze completely, offered unique opportunities for an alternative housing strategy by people who had no chance of finding a rental apartment. The city was moving out tenants in a piecemeal way, apartment by apartment, partially destroying apartments as they became

empty to discourage squatting.<sup>2</sup> The authorities systematically ignored the needs of the squatters. Services were denied, squatters obtained water from neighbors and electricity from illicitly tapping into lampposts. Already established squatters welcomed and assisted newcomers and gradually, a community developed.<sup>3</sup> The satirical student weekly *Propia Cures* advised its readers: “save a house, occupy a house”.<sup>4</sup>

In the Kattenburg case, there were no indications that owners or authorities saw the squatting as an obstruction to their plans. They correctly assumed that squatters would leave in anticipation of the wrecking ball. However, there was controversy caused by the arrival of squatters who were seen to exhibit disrespectful behavior. Saskia Poldervaart, describing her experience as a squatter on Kattenburg, mentions American junkies who let their dogs shit in the house and ether consumers whose nightly noise disrupted their neighbors’ sleep.<sup>5</sup> The *Telegraaf* newspaper called squatters on Kattenburg “human rats” and some of the remaining tenants and their friends threatened to evict the squatters altogether. To avert this threat, squatters took action and expelled the ether users.

In 1965, a more coordinated squatting action took place in Amsterdam when newly-wed couples took over a row of city-owned houses slated for replacement by a garage for garbage trucks. In contrast to Kattenburg, this action was more clearly in conflict with owner interests. There was a lot of sympathetic media attention and public support, but the city promptly evicted the squatters.

#### Social institutionalization followed and enhanced by political institutionalization

Social institutionalization involves the social construction of reality<sup>6</sup>. This process is based on repeated actions that various people interpret in the same way, and see as self-evident and legitimate. I use the adjective *social* to distinguish it from the *political* institutionalization that can happen when a social movement organization gets access to the political system. This applies to squatting as well, albeit at a later point in its history. Social institutionalization of squatting is conducive to relatively relaxed and informed responses from parents, friends, neighbors and authorities. This, in turn, helps to make squatting more efficient in terms of its ability to turn a higher proportion of the existing ‘squattable’ properties into actual squats.

The social institutionalization of squatting was helped by groups that introduced it as a social innovation. In 1966 the Provo anarchist group promoted squatting as a “white houses plan”<sup>7</sup>, alongside their more famous “white bicycle plan” that entailed making bicycles available for public use. The Provo’s intervention was playful and semi-serious, but in 1969 another group, Woningbureau (Housing Bureau) de Kraker, published the first squatting manual that directly targeted the ordinary home-seeking person. The manual offered

practical advice, while clearly suggesting that squatting should be done in an orderly fashion and in harmony with the neighbors: “Furnish your home as quickly as possible. Invite your neighbors to come over for coffee [..]. Clean your windows, paint window frames and exterior doors, enter into a dialogue with the neighbors.” The Woningbureau de Kraker also popularized a special term for squatting, *kraken*, which means to crack, and *krakers* for people who squat.<sup>8</sup> Hitherto, squatters tended to be labeled as clandestine occupants. “Krakers” originally meant criminals who specialized in breaking into bank vaults. The media helped the activists to popularize the concept of *kraken*.

At the same time, there was a movement under way in which activists created alternative social service organizations. These were designed to help people and change society at the same time. Squatting easily fulfilled the combined goals of helping individuals in obtaining a roof over their head – which by itself makes it easier for them to sort out their lives – expressing discontent about the authorities’ approach to the housing crisis and exposing the stock of unused buildings.

Soon, resources flowed into squatting. A number of alternative social service centers received government subsidies, and the squatters inspired the wealthy former marketing consultant André Schmidt, who was about to start an alternative social service center, to focus entirely on squatting. Schmidt provided an office and funds for a new squatters’ organization: Aktie ’70. He also applied his talent, honed by his experience in marketing, to optimize mass media exposure. In the meantime, former Provo leader Roel van Duijn, had founded the political organization Oranje Vrijstaat (Orange Free State).<sup>9</sup> It embodied a Hippie take on political organization, took part in elections and sponsored and coordinated various initiatives undertaken by activists identifying themselves as “kabouters” (gnomes). Participants positioned Oranje Vrijstaat as an alternative state, an emergent new society poised to replace the alienating and crisis-ridden consumer society. Its organizational structure was a bit of a parody of a communist bureaucracy. Oranje Vrijstaat co-opted Aktie ’70 to become its “People’s Department of Housing”. The Kabouters’ ideas and actions appealed to many Amsterdammers, as evidenced by the 1970 municipal election when the Kabouters won five seats and became the fourth largest party. The Kabouters’ popularity boosted the number of volunteers engaged in squatting, while the squatting actions in turn increased the Kabouters’ popularity<sup>10</sup>. Aktie ’70 a.k.a. Oranje Vrijstaat’s People’s Department of Housing made it easier for people to start squatting by offering regular consulting hours at its office and by reaching out to home seekers. Because at one time or another most home seekers went to the municipal housing office to get on the waiting list, Aktie ’70 set up a stall next to the entrance. The presence of Kabouters in the city council helped to win concessions: the city made two buildings available for communal living. These concessions did not slow down the pace of squatting, however. Even the Kabouter council members continued to break into buildings to open new squats. Oranje Vrijstaat drew a wide range of creative people who provided an expanding repertoire of non-violent playful action that was applied in protests against evictions. For example, Kabouters took the

impressive Mayor's seat from the city council chambers and, in public and with the press present, sawed off its legs. Days later, it turned out that it had been a replica, and that the original had been put in a storage space in the town hall. Such protest against evictions played an important role in contributing to the Kabouters' oppositional identity. Oranje Vrijstaat's kabouters pioneered Kindergartens and organic food stores in squats, and the fact that they were represented in cities across the country helped to spread the idea and practice of squatting. 5 May 1970 was declared the first National Squatting Day<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, the alternative social service centers, including Streetcornerwork, set up a collective platform, called "Holding", that opened the Kraakpandendienst (Squats Service), to cater for squatters in need of assistance. The Kraakpandendienst also aimed to involve homeless people and junkies in fixing up squats. Promoting squatting as empowerment of the ordinary home-seeker and the link between squatting and social reform enhanced the legitimacy of squatting. A very consequential development was that progressive lawyers started to devote attention to the issue. In 1971, George Cammelbeeck, a well-known Labor Party-affiliated lawyer, achieved a breakthrough when he convinced the Supreme Court that the existing practice of evicting squatters as if they did not enjoy the normal right of domestic peace was not consistent with the law. The effect of this new legal protection clearly shows in the history of squatting in the Netherlands<sup>12</sup>. Prior to that point, the police was able to evict squatters swiftly, and therefore it was impossible to establish long-term squats. This changed completely. Squatters were now even able to re-squat and secure a number of buildings from which they had previously been evicted<sup>13</sup>. The fact that squatting was no longer seen as illegal (until 2010) continued to be a big selling point.

In 1974, Oranje Vrijstaat collapsed following organizational troubles. The open assemblies became long and ineffective when marginal individuals started to use them as an outlet for their rants. Rank and file participants started to distrust their leaders, fearing that they would use the movement as a springboard for their political ambitions.. However, the social institutionalization of squatting had progressed to the extent that squatting itself was no longer "news", it did no longer need a media-oriented organization to promote it. In Amsterdam, the alternative assistance organizations either closed their doors or were absorbed by the mainstream social service sector. However, autonomous squatting in Amsterdam became stronger and more efficient, leaving few if any suitable empty buildings in Amsterdam without squatters. The pattern followed by the alternative assistance organizations, that is middle class activists helping deprived people squat, continued as an activity of autonomous squatters, for example by taking in or caring for illegal immigrants. In Groningen, a section of the local squatters' movement was running a short-lived housing program for deprived people who needed homes urgently<sup>14</sup>

The social institutionalization of squatting inextricably led to a distinction between "good" and "bad" squatters, a distinction made by members of the public, authorities and commentators. Some squatters made this distinction themselves, but tended to keep it internal. For other squatters, this was a taboo subject. However, the classifying of squatters

according to whether they respect the building and the neighbors can be seen as a manifestation of the norms and expectations that are part of the social institutionalization of squatting. It shows an acceptance of squatting itself. Some even believed that the status of squatter, in contrast to the status of tenant or owner, implies an obligation to make an extra contribution to society.

### Links with the neighborhood struggle

Amsterdam is an example of a city in which squatting was instrumental in the conservation of old neighborhoods. Urban renewal on Kattenburg, the scene of much squatting in 1965, was only the first step in a planned transformation of Amsterdam that affected the other eastern islands, the western islands, the seventeenth-century working class neighborhood Jordaan, the eastern part of the city center, and the ring of nineteenth-century working class neighborhoods that surround the inner city. A large part of the old housing was earmarked to be demolished and to be replaced by a smaller number of larger units, office buildings, hotels and streets for increased car traffic. A key step in opening up the city for traffic was to be the construction of a four lane road with a subway line underneath. Subway construction was done by building a segmented concrete tube above the ground; in a second step individual segments were lowered into the ground. This method required a wide path to be cleared of all buildings.

The envisioned modernized city was to have a smaller population, the excess was to be spread among surrounding towns, including the new towns Lelystad and Almere. Resistance came from conservatives who wanted to preserve the monumental character of the inner city, from longtime residents who wanted to be able to stay and from squatters. In the Nieuwmarkt neighborhood, resistance against bulldozer planning reached a peak. City planners wanted an urban motorway with a subway line below, office blocks and a hotel. Squatting-based protests against this plan originated in a subsidized experimental project in which the city made empty buildings available to be used artists and artisans. The project met with a negative reception from the neighborhood residents, and this led its initiators, among whom the well-known activist, artist and archivist Tjebbe van Tijen, to reorient the project towards involving the neighborhood more actively in the use of the buildings. The *Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt* was started. Subsequently, *Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt* began to distribute empty housing to people who were prepared to take to squatting and join the fight. Squatters paid into a collective fund for repair costs, collective tools were made available, and rehousing after eviction was organized. The leaders exercised control in the neighborhood, up to the colors of the paint that could be applied to building exteriors<sup>15</sup>. Drug addicts were expelled and the legitimacy of squatting reinforced as much as possible. For example, the squatters who made their homes in the commercial buildings on the Zwanenburgwal, including a former brewery, reported in a newsletter about their construction efforts and about children being born in their building.<sup>16</sup> In an architecture,

housing and urban planning magazine, Auke Bijlsma and others promoted squatting as an important tool for citizens who want to help conserve their city and neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> They stated that squatting could thwart property developers' attempts to get around demolition permits by damaging roofs and by leaving doors open for junkies who were prone to create a fire hazard.

In the Nieuwmarkt neighborhood, squatters were successful in preserving their buildings on the Zwanenburgwal and Ververstraat, and were able to turn these into their permanent legal residence. The subway line was built as planned but the motorway project never progressed beyond Jodenbreestraat. Activists influenced the city council's vote against its continuation, which in turn made the area much less attractive for office building development. The activists successfully demanded that the original street plan be restored. In 1974, just after squatters in the Dijkstraat had caused the police to retreat by throwing tiles and stones from the roof, the city pledged to plan new housing that blocked any chance of a re-surfacing of the urban motorway project<sup>18</sup>. The city also decided to allocate funds for the construction of new housing above the subway tube.<sup>19</sup> In 1975, when it became clear that the squatters were planning to resist the last batch of subway-related evictions, the city council decided against pursuing the development of additional subway lines any further. The Nieuwmarkt neighborhood re-emerged as a lively area with social housing, a sharp deviation from the original plan. A new subway was only constructed once the new technology of drilling a tunnel in soft soil underneath existing buildings became available. The Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood is only the most spectacular case in the Netherlands in which squatting was used in an effort to conserve a neighborhood. Because planned transformations often entail a period in which buildings stand empty, at various occasions squatting has offered itself as a useful tool for citizens wanting to intervene.<sup>20</sup>

### The birth of a specialized squatter's movement

Around 1976, squatters began to talk about a squatter's movement.<sup>21</sup> We can see this as a movement in which squatting is not only a means but an end in itself. In Amsterdam, the idea was to unite squatters citywide, to stand a better chance to prevent evictions and to expand squatting. Working groups were set up for scouting out empty properties, planning technical and strategic defense, investigating real estate speculation, setting up links with lawyers and legal experts and creating a bi-weekly squatter's newspaper. Regular plenary meetings were set up to coordinate the work. An advisory service for squatters was organized based on the following guideline: "Emphasize right from the start, that the squatting action itself, the fixing-up or rebuilding, and preventing eviction, are based on the initiative of the home-seekers themselves – if this is not the case, it is best to abandon the plan of squatting."<sup>22</sup> This is a departure from the approach of the alternative social service organizations in which activists squatted to help home-seekers. In 1979, Amsterdam numbered fourteen squatter advisory services. Squatters' bars, eventually spreading to

most neighborhoods, offered opportunities for drinking and socializing, while sponsoring the squatting groups' funds, organizing meetings and events, and functioning as assembly points for protest actions. Regular meetings started to be scheduled in various cities, as well as on the national level. Many young people had a lot of time to invest. They belonged to a "lost generation" for whom there were few jobs available. Also many students were not in a hurry to complete their studies, also because of the lack of jobs. Being funded by welfare payments or student grants, they were eager to engage in productive work outside the labor market.

In 1979, *Kraakkrant* #28 introduced the squatting symbol consisting of a circle and an arrow, the hobo sign language symbol for "continue on". In 1980, the arrow became lightning-shaped. As the squatter's movement internationalized, Dutch squatters visited activists in other countries and the Dutch squatting scene received visitors from abroad; the logo quickly spread from Amsterdam around the world.

According to a 1981 study, Amsterdam housed around 9,000 squatters.<sup>23</sup> At least temporarily, squatting made a dent in the city's housing problem. Eric Duivenvoorden estimated that between 1965 and 1999 in the Netherlands as a whole, 50.000 people lived in squats at one time or another.<sup>24</sup> A strong factor in the growth of squatting in Amsterdam was the availability of empty buildings. Amsterdam's city planners envisioned the demolition of the nineteenth century working class neighborhoods, condemning the housing as outdated and low-quality. Instead, they touted the extreme modernist Bijlmermeer city extension with its supersize flats. An example is the ten-story flat Kleiburg, with 500 appartements. Hundreds of houses inside the nineteenth century ring were stripped of tenants and left empty without any more concrete plans. The vast majority of these houses were turned into squats. Meanwhile, the waiting list for social housing measured in the ten-thousands, and young people were not even entitled to register for the waiting list. Ironically, most of the new Bijlmermeer flats have eventually been demolished, and the nineteenth century ring neighborhoods are now highly popular and partly gentrified.

Moreover, there was a frenzy of real estate speculation in the city center, followed by a bust in 1978. This left a variety of larger buildings, including monumental canal-side houses, empty without immediate plans. Ever since 1971, when Cammelbeeck secured the granting of domestic peace to squatters, the legal situation had been relatively relaxed. If squatters could show that their freshly squatted building had indeed not been in any kind of use, the police tended to leave them in peace. Owners had the option of starting a civil-law case, but only if they had the name of one of the squatters. Therefore, squatters adopted the habit of keeping their names secret. Owners sent in squads of thugs, sometimes successfully, but often squatters were able to repel these attacks by a quick mobilization. Sometimes the police even helped the squatters against an aggressive owner. In the case of the nineteenth-century ring tenements, the owners had received orders from the city to stop renting them

out. In exceptional cases, owners had plans to rent out their buildings illegally, but these owners could not count on the state to aid them by evicting squatters.

Evictions happened when owners managed to obtain an eviction order from the courts, or when the police decided that a squatting action constituted trespassing of a building that was not empty but in use. Squatters staged protests and re-squatting actions, especially when they perceived social injustice. The record for re-squatting is held by the building Singel 114: this canal house was re-squatted six times.<sup>25</sup> Given the housing crisis, owners and authorities were often subject to a bitter onslaught of criticism when they put forward any plan but the creation of low- or moderate-income housing.

### Organized resistance

Some observers<sup>26</sup>, and some squatters as well<sup>27</sup>, see the squatters' movement as a protest movement, and seem to attach considerable importance to the role of resistance. Probably this is because the biggest riots that occurred in the Netherlands after the 1930s were related to squatting. However, the majority of squatters never actively confronted the state or its institutions, and the squatting experience in general was more about homemaking than about resisting evictions. In the majority of cases in which squatters lost their squat, there was no resistance at all.

Nevertheless, there was an, albeit limited, turn towards organized resistance. This can be clearly linked to a particular eviction in 1978 of an otherwise unimportant house in the Kinkerbuurt neighborhood. Controversy arose about the question whether it had to be demolished immediately or whether it would still be usable for a few years. Possible new construction on the site was a long time away. City officials deemed the building unsuitable for habitation and wanted to replace it with a temporary green space. Squatters and neighborhood associations dissented and tried lobbying and legal appeals to no avail.

Three developments coincided at this juncture. Political squatters gained influence. All squatting can be seen as political, but I define political squatters as activists who value confrontations with the state as part of a revolutionary development, and who turn to squatting to create opportunities for such confrontations. The idea was that confrontations helped to build a counter-power vis-à-vis the capitalist state. An integral part of this position was the ambition to act as a militant vanguard of the movement as a whole. Theo van der Giessen, the top leader of Amsterdam's political squatter group, had already made a name for himself taking charge of the defense of one of the Nieuwmarktbuurt houses. Continuing on this path, the political squatters' strategy was to offer assistance to squatters who faced an eviction and were interested in putting up some form of resistance. The political squatters' team would try to barricade the building as solidly as possible and attempt to 'radicalize' the original occupants and bring about a shift to more militant tactics. Such a



partial takeover of other people's squat was not too problematic since the original squatters were already facing the perspective of having to move house anyway. Inside the Kinkerbuurt squat, the political squatters' team prepared to defend the building by throwing a combination of oil and soapstone powder to create slippery surfaces and kapok to make police officers look ridiculous. They also brought sticks to push police ladders away.

Apart from the ideologically motivated and hierarchically organized political squatters, there was a mass of people who had started squatting in the more relaxed years of 1975–1977. They had chiefly turned to squatting to meet their housing needs and were used to creating security by means of solidarity with other squatters and mutual assistance. All across Amsterdam, such squatters were included in a telephone tree campaign, a warning system against evictions, without necessarily providing them with complete information about their political strategy. In accordance with a plan that had already been set out by the original squatters and their supporters in the neighborhood, they formed a peaceful blockade in front of the house expecting the police to do nothing more but drag them away. However, the police showed up in riot gear, which came as a surprise because since the 1975 Nieuwmarkt evictions, which had caused many complaints about police brutality, police had only approached squatters in their regular uniforms. Moreover, the squad instantly started to beat down on the nonviolent protesters. When individual officers hesitated, senior officers using loudhailers pressed them to go on.

Afterwards, Theo van der Giessen made it clear that he was happy that the “naïve” nonviolent squatters had been beaten so severely.<sup>28</sup> The incident was filmed by a filmmaker who had been expressly invited by the squatters. The shocking footage was screened over and over again. Part of the squatters decided that they would never go to an eviction again; others started to debate the possibilities of active resistance.

In 1979, the political squatters tried to induce a full-blown confrontation by taking the lead in the elaborate fortification of a row of five monumental canal houses on the Keizersgracht (“De Groote Keijser”) with tons of steel plates, framing the action as a protest against the housing shortage and real estate speculation. Eviction was imminent based on a court decision. The owner had used an infiltrator who found out the full name of one of the squatters. A combination of police and military units prepared for the eviction, but the Mayor of Amsterdam called it off at the last moment fearing that there might be casualties. He had an alternative because already in 1978 an initiative had gained steam in which squatters, architects and city officials discussed the possibility that the city would buy squats. This meant legalization and, at the same time, an implementation of an already drafted policy to create housing for young people. The city created an official procedure and framework for the various feasibility studies that were undertaken. Real estate was cheap, and the city bought De Groote Keijser for 1 million guilders in total. Some of the political squatters expressed dissatisfaction that the hoped-for confrontation did not happen, at least not yet.

In 1980, police evicted a recent squat in the Vondelstraat because of a (false) claim that there was still a tenant using the house. Activists planned to re-take the building. The police suspected this, and several squads were present in the area. Part of the squatters started a demonstration towards the mayor's residence to lure the police away, and the police followed them. The squatters quickly succeeded in re-occupying the house. When the police realized this, they rushed back to the Vondelstraat, but the squatters forced them to retreat by means of sticks and stones. Roadworks that were going on in the neighborhood provided materials for building barricades around the square. Squatters held the site for three days, thousands of citizens came to take a look, bands came to play in support of the squatters, and meetings were held. Politicians started negotiations. It transpired quickly that the eviction had indeed been unlawful. The squatters cleared the tram tracks and declared that they were prepared to clear the barricades.<sup>29</sup> However, the national government intervened, and army tanks equipped with bulldozer blades and an overwhelming police force crushed the barricades and chased the protesters. Hans Wiegel, the conservative<sup>30</sup> Minister of the Interior, inspected the scene from a helicopter prior to the decision to send in the army. A peaceful resolution would have been easy, as evidenced by the fact that the house was not even evicted, neither at the time nor subsequently.. Apart from not evicting the house, squatters also demanded the withdrawal of the police. This happened as a consequence of the fact that the eviction was called off. The final demand was the release of a particular young woman who had been arrested on suspicion of spray painting a slogan on a police building. She was quickly released simply because there was no evidence. Thus, the military operation against the squatters did not serve any rational purpose.

After the Vondelstraat incident, political squatters and others were preparing for a violent demonstration in the center of Amsterdam on Queen Beatrix' coronation day on 30 April 1980.<sup>31</sup> City administrators tried to defuse the situation by speeding up the buying process of several large squats, most notably the NRC-Handelsblad complex located right next to the royal palace. The demonstration and anticipated riot drew crowds of people from outside the squatters' movement, while a large part of the movement did not want to participate. Fear of a backlash played a role here. In the Kinkerbuurt, squatters decided to take advantage of the situation by taking over a new building and organizing a street party on the adjacent square, reckoning that the police would prioritize the protection of the coronation ceremony and the hundreds of distinguished guests. Contrary to this expectation, police squads sped to the Kinderbuurt and tried to remove the squatters. An explanation for this police action, which proved counterproductive because it drew people into the coronation riot who originally had been determined to stay out of it and use the opportunity to do some undisturbed squatting instead, is a lack of coordination between the police and the city administration because of radio problems. These were caused by a group of activists who succeeded in jamming the police radio at carefully chosen moments<sup>32</sup>.

What the police and military had in mind for the abortive eviction of the Groote Keijser, and had trained for in a military facility, became apparent in the summer of 1980. During the

eviction of a number of squats in former luxury apartments in the Prins Hendrikkade, the army used cranes to put marksmen in high-up positions. However, the squatters had already left the complex by a secret passage they had built to the basement of an adjoining church. Only one squatter stayed in the building to talk to the media.<sup>33</sup>

Tanks appeared once again in 1981 in the city of Nijmegen where squatters were evicted to make way for a parking garage that was never built. After this, the role of the military in actions against squatters decreased. According to police sources, the military police were banned from any further action against squatters because of their violent behavior.<sup>34</sup> It seems that the police learned to cope with resistance in the streets. For example, they obtained shovels, equipped with protection against stone-throwing, to clear barricades. In addition to police in riot gear, groups of plain clothes policemen tried to make arrests. Meanwhile, regular joint meetings between squatters and police had been established where both parties had the opportunity to talk about their experience and feelings during protests and riots. Among protesters, a certain consensus seems to have existed that they should not cause serious injuries to the police. An indication is that cobblestones tended to be thrown in the direction of officers in riot gear, not towards police in regular uniforms. An oft-cited example is one that happened during the 1980 coronation riot: after a mounted policeman fell from his horse and lost his gun, protesters helped him back into the saddle and handed him his gun. However, there were incidents in which police personnel were seriously injured. The police commonly used the officially sanctioned batons and tear gas. There were cases of plain-clothes officers who, frustrated by the official limitation on the use of violence, attacked protesters in the streets. Occasionally, people were run over by police vehicles. One squatter, Hans Kok, died in a police cell after being arrested at squatting action. Investigations excluded police violence as the cause of death. He seemed to be under the influence of a high dose of drugs. There were accusations of negligence on the part of the police but the exact circumstances remained unclear.

The police developed standard operating procedures for evictions, for example the use of cranes and containers to put special teams on the roof of squats. An indication for the increased ability of the police to predict squatters' resistance is that there were no longer any incidents in which the police made a retreat. However, evicting a few squatters by means of 1200 police while deploying an array of special vehicles and equipment was costly, and some squatters figured that they could deter the state from pursuing evictions by making these costly. Legalizing a squat was cheaper than a large-scale eviction. Among those squatters who were interested in resistance, a debate started about the problem of violent clashes with the police. Some felt that the regular scenario of squatters in motorcycle helmets fighting police in riot gear obscured what squatting was about. The idea came up to replace fights against the police, which had almost become a ritual, with systematic retaliation against the banks. Squatters systematically investigated the real estate development companies that owned squatted buildings. This included the financing behind these developers' operations. In the early 1980s, there were few bank branches and

offices in Amsterdam that did not suffer broken windows. This critique of the financial sector preceded the emergence of a more general critical awareness, and experience, of the banks' involvement in real estate development by 25 years.

### Militancy vs. political institutionalization

The tightly-knit group of political squatters embarked on a project to re-take a house in the Concertgebouw neighborhood, called the Lucky Luijk, that had been evicted by a gang of thugs and had since been protected by guards.<sup>35</sup> Leaning on a team of 200 people, they meticulously prepared for an assault that succeeded in pushing out the guards and securing the building. When an eviction seemed near in 1982, they started to erect barricades. Meanwhile, the city bought the building from its owner who was known to be a real-estate speculator. It was decided to use the building for social housing but with the stipulation that the city, not the squatters, would decide who was to live there. Instead of claiming the transfer from speculative property to social housing as a victory, the core group of political squatters refused to hand over the building. An eviction followed, and a burning street barricade completely destroyed a tram. Commentators have identified this action as the critical incident that cost the squatters' movement a large part of its public support (Van Noort, 1988). The political squatters' group alienated other participants who grew wary of the manipulative behavior of the leaders as well as their militaristic tactics and hierarchical structure.

A larger part of the squatters' movement did not choose the route of confrontation. Instead, they wanted to use the opportunities offered by left-leaning policy makers. A key example was the case of Weijers, a large store plus office building in the city center. Squatters opened it up to the public. Apart from housing, there was a squatters' bar, a restaurant, an espresso bar, and it was used as a venue for concerts. Arrangements were made to divide up space to accommodate startup companies. The activists lobbied politicians to get the project a more permanent status. Finally, Weijers was evicted to make room for the construction of a Holiday Inn hotel. When Weijers was evicted, there were several hundred supporters inside. A wide range of people appreciated the creation of cultural venues, artists' workspaces, art galleries, restaurants and bars, workshops for printing, beer brewing, bike repair and cooperatives such as the Spruitjes greengrocer next door to the royal palace, all in the middle of the early 1980s economic crisis.<sup>36</sup> Especially squats that comprised workspaces for artists or small companies succeeded in getting some official recognition as "breeding places" that provided a justification for legalization that fitted in with the contemporary discourse on the "creative city" (Pruijt, 2004).<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, politicians noted the shady character of many of the real estate owners that the squatters dealt with. Squatters successfully lobbied the Municipality of Amsterdam to buy squats. As a result, the city bought two hundred buildings<sup>38</sup>, thereby legalizing them.

Established semi-public housing associations took over most of these buildings, and offered the squatters contracts.<sup>39</sup>

The process of legalization involved intensive contact between squatters and officials. Many squatters, for example in Amsterdam's Eastern Docklands, started to participate in the urban planning regarding their neighborhood. In the 1980s and later most active squatters distanced themselves from party politics, but in some cities, such as Haarlem and The Hague, activists from the squatters movement created local political parties.

Meanwhile, the political squatters complained that the power base of the squatters' movement had been eroded by the eagerness to cooperate with officials.<sup>40</sup> In 1987, under the name "Political Wing of the Squatters' Movement" they published a book length pamphlet on what they saw as the loss of the political character of the movement, leading to widespread "treason".<sup>41</sup> What they called "treason" was basically talking to the police after being arrested. This was the start of an attempt to purge and reconstruct the movement, which included a physical fight for the control over an infoshop. This attempt backfired, and after violent incidents within the movement, the political squatter group gave up. Theo van der Giessen, the undisputed leader, moved abroad.<sup>42</sup>

Political institutionalization did, at least, not lead to a loss of identity in terms of willingness to cause disruption. Wim van Noort suggested that legalization made the movement more radical.<sup>43</sup> Thus, political institutionalization was not terminal, in the sense that it caused the end of a disruptive social movement. The process can more adequately be described as "flexible institutionalization".<sup>44</sup> Squatters continued to defend buildings which the municipality was unable or unwilling to buy and legalize.

Squatting in Amsterdam continued to be effective. Between 1978 and 2000, squatters missed few opportunities. Occasional resistance at evictions continued. In 2000 in Amsterdam, for example, squatters mobilized to defend squats in former warehouses, which involved raising drawbridges. More recent examples in which squatters tried to resist eviction include De Blauwe Aanslag in The Hague (2003), Ubica in Utrecht (2013), De Valreep (2014) and the Tabakspanden (2015) in Amsterdam.

#### Curtailling squatting and attempts to de-institutionalize

An important development in terms of curtailing squatting has been the success of the 'anti-squatting' industry. This industry consists of companies that offer to protect vacant buildings by putting residents in them. Such anti-squatting occupants have few rights, for example they may not be allowed to have visitors or pets and must be prepared to leave on short notice. Anti-squatting companies get around tenants' rights by giving the residents a form of employment contract, not a rent contract. Large buildings are often protected by

only a handful of anti-squatters. Anti-squatters can be estimated to outnumber the squatters by a wide margin. One of the companies, Camelot, is now active in five countries.

The social and political institutionalization of squatting had their limits. Nationwide there was never a majority of the population that supported it. Geographical differences were significant, polls in Amsterdam, for instance, tended to show wide popular support for squatting.<sup>45</sup> Rightwing media, such as the newspaper *De Telegraaf* and its popular website *Geenstijl* were mainly negative. Concerning the remainder of the media spectrum, there was an interest among journalists to cover the core experience of squatting, i.e. fixing up abandoned buildings, living in them and using them for social and cultural activities. Such stories were not exactly newsworthy but could be piggybacked on stories about impending evictions and resistance. Nevertheless, there was a tendency among the public to associate squatting with the spectacle of cobblestone-throwing protesters.

Legislation was central in attempts to de-institutionalize squatting. This started in 1971, right after the Supreme court ruled that squatters were entitled to protection of their domestic peace. The basis of this ruling was not an approval of squatting but juridical consistency. An indication that appreciation for squatting did not play a role is that G. E. Langemeijer, the chief adviser to the Supreme Court, made a plea for the drafting of an anti-squatting law. He was joined by real estate owners and rightwing members of parliament.<sup>46</sup>

The process of making squatting illegal took almost forty years, notwithstanding that the political parties to the right of the Social Democrats were always the majority. Part of the delay was caused by lucky circumstances for the squatters. After an anti-squatting law had been drafted in 1973, the government fell and the plan was put off. Squatters had protested by organizing a national squatting day. In 1975, legislation attempts were resumed, the Parliament passed the bill. The government fell again, and the Senate only started to discuss it in 1977. Meanwhile, squatters had started lobbying Christian Democratic politicians via the national Council of Churches. The latter took Senate committee members on a tour visiting squats in Amsterdam and published a report. Langemeijer changed his mind after having personal contact with squatters. Squatters organized the second national squatting day in seventeen cities. In Amsterdam, for instance, three large buildings were turned into squats. Finally, the Senate indicated that it was not ready to accept the proposal as it stood.

Then two social democratic members of parliament stepped in. They were antagonized by the resistance that squatters in Amsterdam had displayed, especially at the Groote Keijser, and proposed a law with a double aim: curtailing the number of empty properties and putting an end to squatting. The government came with its own, similar proposal. The idea was that each municipality would keep a register of empty buildings, and if at all possible, requisition the buildings that were lingering on the list for more than six months. It would also be a criminal offence to squat in a building that was on the list. In 1981, the *Leegstandwet* (Law on empty properties) was passed, but the registers of empty buildings were never implemented. Thus, there was still no criminalization of squatting. However, the

new law did weaken the position of squatters because it opened the possibility for owners to start court cases against anonymous squatters.

In 1994, a new article was put into the penal code that made it illegal to squat in a building that had been empty for less than a year. This was the last time that a Dutch government took an active interest in squatting. However, a few right-wing members of parliament started to promote the idea to completely criminalize squatting. In 2003, their line of argument was that squatting was no longer an idealistic activity, as evidenced by examples of profit-generating Tekno parties in commercial buildings especially occupied for the purpose. The squatters' movement tried to show that their detractors were wrong by showcasing squatting projects that combined living and working.

The parliament passed a motion to make squatting illegal, but the government was not really interested. Then, members of parliament drew up their own proposal for an anti-squatting law. The window of opportunity was opened in 2007 by a moral panic sparked by two incidents in Amsterdam in which the police claimed that squatters had left booby traps: a roof allegedly rigged to fall down when someone entered the building, and a gasoline-filled jerry can placed behind a steel plate; according to the police, an explosion or fire could have resulted if the police had tried to cut through the steel it with an angle grinder.<sup>47</sup> In a nation-wide mobilization, squatters tried to stop the criminalization by, for example, organizing city walks with visits to squats, decorating the many cultural venues that emerged from squats with banners declaring that these were made possible by the squatters' movement; a white book was published with positive case stories about squatting.<sup>48</sup> This campaign was successful in getting political support, not only from the radical left but also from the Social Democrats (Partij van de Arbeid) who, during the 1980s, had partly come out in favor of criminalization. Unsurprisingly, given the rightwing majority, the law was passed, and in 2010, squatting became a criminal offense that carries a maximum prison sentence of one year, or two years and eight months if squatters use violence or threaten to use it. In practice, sentences tended to be fines of several hundred euros. Lawyers who represented squatters successfully argued that European law precludes evicting anyone without the opportunity to present her/his case to a court of law. The outcome was that the Justice Department adopted the practice of warning squatters a few weeks before a planned eviction date. However, squatting continued after the squatting ban. An example is the Social Center De Valreep, near the Muiderpoort railway station in Amsterdam, turned into a squat in 2011 and evicted in 2014. It hosted a constant stream of cultural and political activities, and it was used by neighborhood residents, including their kids, and by urban gardeners. It was possible to turn this building into a squat because there were no anti-squat guards/residents. This was probably due to the complete lack of connections for water, wastewater, electricity and gas on the site. Squatters used a rented Portaloo and carried in water. They lobbied to get a more permanent status for the project but were evicted to make room for upscale commercial development of the building. Despite the squatting ban, efforts by an Amsterdam group of squatters continued to

provide shelter for refugees who were neither accepted nor deported. Several times the group was able to set up a new squat after it had been evicted.

It seems that the partial de-institutionalization of squatting affected especially those people, such as students, who engaged in pragmatic, organized, respectful but non-ideological squatting. Previously, the fact that squatting was not illegal had been a key selling point. On this basis, for example, a subsidized institution in Rotterdam, JIP (Young People's Information Point) was able to host a squatters' advisory service. After the ban, this became impossible. On the other hand, squatting by ideologically motivated, highly organized and resourceful activists seems relatively unaffected by the criminalization. Their community is small, but it draws strength from the internationalization of the squatters' movement.

The deterrence emanating from the squatting ban also seems to have relatively little effect on people who do not have much to lose. This includes individuals who care little for preserving the building (for example because they steal copper from it) and/or the neighborhood. Certain drug users, whose communities exist outside the squatters' movement, find squatting practical.

Existing squats, such as Landbouwbelang in Maastricht, continue to run successful cultural programs. Survival tends to be at risk once property developers get interested in the site. In 2015 in The Hague, a coalition fought to save Culturele Vrijplaats (Cultural Free Space) De Vloek, located at the port of Scheveningen, from commercially driven redevelopment into a sailing center. De Vloek was a vibrant center that united housing and social and cultural initiatives such as a popular vegan restaurant. The restaurant was frequented not only by activists but also by other people of all ages and income levels. There was also a concert hall, a bike workshop, a boat workshop, and workspaces for artists who use recycled materials. De Vloek, previously an industrial building, was turned into a squat in 2002 and subsequently legalized as a temporary project, but finally evicted in 2015.

## Conclusion

When analyzing how squatting has changed, we have to make a distinction between squatting as a socially institutionalized practice and as a social movement. Because of the violation of property rights, the political right always wanted to de-institutionalize squatting. Criminalization was the main avenue for this. Notwithstanding the fact that the political right was always in the majority, it took forty years to criminalize squatting in the Netherlands. An explanation is that not many windows of opportunity appeared that were big enough to successfully promote repression. Squatting openly but without causing too much disruption, except perhaps for the owner, which was by far the most frequent type of squatting, did not trigger the opening of such a window; Nor did resisting evictions as part of a clearly argued wider effort to stop speculation, preserve a neighborhood or call for



affordable housing. An incident, however, that did trigger the opening of such a window of opportunity was the resistance against the 1982 eviction of the Amsterdam squat Lucky Lwijk *after* it had been bought by the city and earmarked for affordable housing. Even more decisive were the already mentioned accusations leveled by the police in 2007 against squatters that they left booby traps in barricaded squats. This was enough to make squatting illegal. Nevertheless, to some extent it remains socially institutionalized; at the local level, squatters still find some acceptance and approval. For example, in the case of the Vloek the squatter group was offered an alternative space after getting the eviction order from the court .

The political squatters aimed to turn the squatters' movement into a violent protest movement, but they were ultimately not successful. It was flexible institutionalization, networking and deal-making with officials while continuing to turn new buildings into squats while maintaining the capability to cause large-scale disruption, which turned the squatters' movement, especially in Amsterdam, into a power factor. The success of flexible institutionalization and the demise of the subgroup that I called the political squatters seems consistent with a key characteristic of Dutch culture: a preference for consensus , dialogue<sup>49</sup> and pragmatic tolerance<sup>50</sup>.

Squatting still appeals to imaginative young people, and it fits in with – and actually prefigured – the current emphasis on do-it-yourself empowerment instead of relying on the state. However, in the Netherlands, squatting is much smaller now than in the 1980s, largely because opportunities diminished due to the rise of the anti-squatting industry and because the squatters' legal position was weakened by criminalization, which effectively raised the barriers against entry into this activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Pruijt, Hans, "The Logic of Urban Squatting", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37,1 (2013), 19–45.

<sup>2</sup> The city tightly controlled most rental housing, regardless of ownership.

<sup>3</sup> In 1946-1949 there was some scattered squatting in the Netherlands without consequences for later developments. Continuous, socially institutionalized squatting took off in 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Hubers, A., C. (1964) Redt een pandje. *Propra Cures* 14 nov.

<sup>5</sup> Poldervaart, S., "Vrijplaatsen door de eeuwen heen", *Easycity. Interventies in een verscheurde stad*, ed. F. de Graad, H. vd. Horst, F. Kallenberg and I. v. Liempt,) Amsterdam: De Vrije Ruimte, 2004, 120–128.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, P. L. and T. Luckmann, *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1967.

<sup>7</sup> Pamphlet "In Holland staat een huis", 25 april 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Duivenvoorden, Eric, *Een voet tussen de deur. Geschiedenis van de kraakbeweging 1964–1999*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> The description of Oranje Vrijstaat is taken from Hans Pruijt and Conny Roggeband (2014), "Autonomous and/or Institutionalized Social Movements? Conceptual Clarification and Illustrative Cases". *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 55(2), 144–165..

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<sup>13</sup> Duivenvoorden, Eric, *Een voet tussen de deur. Geschiedenis van de kraakbeweging 1964–1999*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2000, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Poppe, I. and S. Rottenberg, *De kraakgeneratie. 18 portretten van krakers uit de lichte 1955–1965*. Amsterdam: De Balie, 2000, p. 78,

<sup>15</sup> Bosma, J. H. Bijnen, S. Davidson, J. Eissens, K. van Harn and T. Nijenhuis, *De beste actiegroep ter wereld. 40 dorpsverhalen uit de Nieuwmarkt*. Stichting Uitgeverij de Oude Stad, Amsterdam, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Actiegroep Nieuwmarkt, *Bouwen voor de buurt?* Amsterdam, 1977, p. 11, continued on 13).

<sup>17</sup> Bijlsma, A., R. Brouwers, D. Oosterbaan and D. Schuilting, "De ontwikkelaar heeft vrij spel!" *Wonen TA/BK* 2.19, (1974), 1–32, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Hoekema, A. J., *De uitgespeelde gemeenteraad. Beschrijving van de invloedsverdeling bij een rooilijnbesluit in een grote gemeente*. Deventer: Kluwer, 1978.

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<sup>20</sup> Pruijt, Hans, "The Logic of Urban Squatting", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37,1 (2013), 19–45.

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