

Squatters in the Creative City. Rejoinder to Justus Uitermark.

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The paper that started this discussion analyzed the effect of the urban regime on the opportunities for sustained squatting by means of a comparison between New York City and Amsterdam (Pruijt, 2003). I described two ideal-typical patterns of squatting and institutionalization:

- A pattern in which groups that initiate and lead squatting campaigns are quickly co-opted as service providers (such as acting as a landlord of a low-income housing project). In this pattern, squatting is abortive, but it may be a launch pad for third sector activities in cooperation with the state. This pattern can be seen in the New York City housing movement.
- A pattern that is long-term in nature. Long-term squatters' movements are the Amsterdam squatters' movement and the post 1983 squatters' movement of New York's Lower East Side. In this pattern, groups are not transformed into service providers. What may occur, as it did in Amsterdam since 1978, is legalization of squats. It may be an open question to what extent legalizations lead to de-radicalization, or instead stimulate squatting, or prevent squatters from being overwhelmed by repression. However, it is clear that legalizations in Amsterdam did not stop the tradition of squatting every squattable space. A (long-term) squatters' movement is immune to co-optation because there is commitment to squatting as a goal in itself. This means that, as some squats are evicted and some legalized, new squats will continue to be opened up as long as there are opportunities; an infrastructure directed to squatting, for example squatter advisory desks, is maintained and occasional collective action is taken. I have called this pattern "flexible institutionalization."

Uitermark claims to have detected that, recently, the artistic segment of the Amsterdam squatters' movement is being co-opted by the Municipality and transformed into providers of cultural services; the effects would be sidetracking from the original agenda, de-radicalization, fragmentation, particularization and the rise of a movement meritocracy.¹ My interest does not lie in assessing how subversive the Amsterdam squatter' movement might be or in judging to what extent has it remained true to whatever agenda. However, Uitermark's comments do raise the question whether recent events make the ideal type "flexible institutionalization" too much of an unrealistic abstraction.

Breeding-places

Uitermark focuses on the recent municipal Breeding Places Amsterdam (BPA) project. The BPA project, which started in 1999, entailed setting aside 41 million euros for the production of between 1400 to 2000 workspaces and living/working spaces for individual artists and groups of artists and cultural entrepreneurs.²

¹ Uitermark suggests that I missed essential information due to a lack of primary data collection. As I mentioned in note 4 on page 138, in the Amsterdam case I made use of documentation. These documents (periodicals, books, brochures, pamphlets, online documents) originated from within the squatters' movement and are therefore primary data.

² Funds for new projects are now depleted.

He takes the BPA project as "evidence that some segments of the movement are transforming into providers of cultural rather than social services", which he considers to be a "a dynamic that is of major political and academic importance". However, there are some inconsistencies here. Some squats are legalized through the BPA project, but this does not transform the activities that go on in the buildings. Legalizations and subsidies simply preserve artists' workspaces and performance spaces. Also, the artists' workspaces are often do-it-yourself projects, which is antithetical to service provision.

I was curious how people who were directly involved in Uitermark's breeding place case, the former Film Academy, would feel about this project being described in the literature as a case of state-initiated transformation of squatters into cultural service providers. I spoke to the artist Mr. Alex Fisher, who since a few years devotes much of his time to the Film Academy project, and to Mr. Jaap Schoufour, project manager at the BPA project. Alex Fisher expressed bewilderment, saying that the City takes no interest in the Film Academy's cultural programme whatsoever, and that the Municipality is only interested in the building. *The* transformation that Alex Fisher was worrying about is that in the near future rent (although below market rates) will have to be paid. This is just a normal problem of legalization and has nothing to do with co-optation.

Jaap Schoufour said that the state transforming squatters into cultural service providers sounds a bit too instrumental, because in fact the Municipality asks very little in return for its investment in the buildings, and does not interfere with the activities in the breeding places. In their mechanics and consequences the legalizations through the BPA project are not different from earlier legalizations. Long before the start of the BPA project, squats containing cultural functions were already being legalized. Examples are the Fabriek in the Van Ostadestraat and Tetterode, legalized in the 1980s, and the Binnenpret, Zaal 100 and Kostgewonnen, legalized in the 1990s. With Kostgewonnen as an exception, recognition of the cultural value did not play a perceptible role in legalization.

What sets the legalizations in the BPA project apart from earlier legalizations is the motivation. It is based on an explicit recognition of the value of artists and cultural entrepreneurs for the vitality of the city. However, the position of the artistic squatters seems somewhat less comfortable than Uitermark suggests. The risk of eviction did not wane.³ And the 1999 City Council's decision to go ahead with the BPA project did not constitute an endorsement of squatting. It only mentions artists and cultural entrepreneurs, not squatters; nor does the detailed project plan for the BPA project. Only implicitly is it clear that groups of squatters, along with any mainstream developers, can apply to be included in the project. Most of the projects in the BPA project are initiatives of non-squatting groups or developers. Therefore, the message conveyed by the BPA project can also be read as "squatters were great pioneers of breeding places, but we do not need them any longer".

Finally, on the national level the trend is in the opposite direction. In 2003, the national parliament passed a motion, introduced by the Christian Democrat Ten Hoopen, to outlaw all squatting of commercial property. Ten Hoopen had maintained that squatting in such property was dominated by foreign criminal organizations. Attempts by other politicians to extend this policy into a prohibition of all squatting, i.e. including housing, were not successful. Because of the need for large spaces, the artistic segment of the squatters' movement tends to be confined to commercial buildings. Any acknowledgement of their vital contribution to the culturally driven development of the nations' capital was at least not strong enough to dispel the now democratically sanctioned myth that they are criminals. What the artistic squatters

³ A triggering event for the start of the BPA project was an appeal that users of living / working / culture buildings made to the City Council in 1998 because they were threatened in their existence. The 2003 Progress Report of the BPA lists eleven of these projects and shows that in the meantime six were evicted, two legalized and three still in use. (Projectgroep Broedplaats Amsterdam, 2003: 9)

might hope for is that the very ambiguous “embrace”, that they may enjoy at the local level, somehow offsets the repressive tendency at the national level.

compatibility of state goals and movement goals

Uitermark observed that movement goals and state goals tended to become compatible. Such a correspondence is a factor that may increase the likelihood of co-optation, but it is not an indicator of its occurrence. In Amsterdam, urban movements influence municipal policy. These movements push for democratic planning based on citizens' needs instead of technocratic blue-print planning, for preservation of the fine urban fabric and against new structures that exceed the human scale, for diversity and non-commercial functions and against the dominance of big money. Around 1978, ideas that originated in the counter movement became incorporated in the mainstream of city planning: in Amsterdam, the "compact city" became the hegemonic planning model. This change was carried by the ascendancy of fresh politicians and civil servants who had ties with the movement. The "breeding places" policy can also be seen as one more instance in which the alternative vision informed the official model. Since 1978, there has always been a mix of agreement and disagreement between squatters and the municipality. There was *agreement* on the basic underlying model of the compact city that had originated in the countermovement; squatters *mobilized against* the municipality on deviations from the model and against the powerlessness of the municipality when it came to keeping speculators in check (Pruijt, 2004a).

A discussion on co-optation should preserve such subtleties, lest we run the risk of eliminating from our theoretical framework the possibility of movement success. Compatibility of state goals and movement goals has been there before. In 1974 the national government had proclaimed that every adult citizen had a right to independent, affordable housing. Especially housing for single and two-person households was problematic. Subsidies became available to get this underway. By 1979, little housing for singles and two-person households had actually been delivered, while at the same time young people were constantly opening up new squats. The result was that subsidies were used by the municipality for buying up squats and for construction work. This meant legalization of the squats. The Municipality paid a part-time official to assist squatters during the feasibility studies that led up to legalization (Slokker, 1981).

changes on the movement level

Uitermark reports various developments on the movement level that, as he suggests, can be attributed to the co-optation of the artistic segment: sidetracking from the original agenda, de-radicalization, fragmentation, particularization and the rise of a movement meritocracy. A problem of this analysis is that it attributes pervasive effects to an “embryonic” change. Also it does not take into account any factors besides co-optation that might affect the opportunities for the squatters’ movement. I will briefly revisit the analysis because the observations are problematic as well; there are also some inconsistencies.

sidetracking from the original agenda

Uitermark asserted that the original agenda of the squatter movement has been fighting for affordable housing for everybody. But this reduction of the squatters' movement to a housing pressure group is unsubstantiated. It seems that Uitermark was aware of this, because he also

wrote that “in the 1970s, at least two distinct political agenda’s emerged”. Indeed it is possible to distinguish several types of squatting projects that exist for well over 25 years now (Pruijt, 2004b).

The main form of squatting in Amsterdam was squatting as an *alternative housing strategy*. In this form of squatting, squatters create housing (or artists create workspaces) for themselves. The link with the wider housing issue is indirect: squatters at least remove themselves from the social housing queues. They tend to restrict themselves to buildings that are either too bad or too good to be rented out as low-income housing. Suitable buildings include commercial spaces that were never intended to be used for housing, tenements that are officially taken off the market, for instance because of planned demolition, housing which is (far) below rentable standard, or alternatively, empty luxury accommodation. The basic desire is to be left alone and in peace. Any demands made are mainly tactical tools toward the goal of being left alone. Framing is not very important, but it may involve reference to the general housing shortage. A second form of squatting that was important in Amsterdam is *entrepreneurial squatting* (often combined in one project with squatting as an alternative housing strategy).

Entrepreneurial squatting is using the opportunities that squatting offers for setting up nearly any kind of establishment, without the need for large resources nor the risk of getting bogged down in bureaucracy. Examples are neighborhood centers, squatters’ bars (proceeds of which may go into actions), bicycle repair shops, women’s houses, shelters for battered women, restaurants, print shops, theaters and movie theaters, tool lending services, alternative schools, daycare centers, party spaces, art galleries (Reijnders, 2003), book- and info shops, food shops, saunas, workshops (e.g. for bicycle repair or car or boat restoration). The scale varies from one small storefront to a large commercial center, a military complex, warehouse or shipyard.

A third form that has been important in Amsterdam in the 1980s is *political squatting*. This is squatting undertaken because it can seem a promising field of action to those who are engaged in anti-systemic politics. (And who may, tacitly or explicitly, identify with revolutionary or “autonomous” ideas.) For them, power - i.e. counter-power vis-à-vis the state - is important. In their organizational model there is distinction between a vanguard and followers. Squatting is interesting for them because of the high potential for confrontations with the state. In Amsterdam, there were occasions in which politically inspired squatters superimposed their goals on projects that were started as an alternative housing strategy.⁴

Not only does Uitermark’s analysis overestimate the importance of housing supply issues before the supposed cultural co-optive turn, but it also underestimates the importance of housing issues after the change. Typically, the squatted artistic free places / breeding places house people as well. Squatters tend to call these buildings living/working buildings.

Preserving the housing function of these buildings is a source of conflict between squatters and the municipality, because building regulations make it difficult to combine housing and other functions.

Moreover, the BPA project is largely concerned with meeting the special accommodation needs of artists and cultural entrepreneurs, i.e. relative low-income citizens who need a lot of

⁴ Two more types of squatting projects are:

- Deprivation based squatting. Here we find middle class activists who open up buildings for people who suffer deprivation. The message to authorities is: stop neglecting poor people, and improved the allocation of the social housing stock. In Amsterdam, the beneficiaries of these squatting projects tend to be (often undocumented) migrants.

- Conservational squatting

This involves squatting as a tactic used in the preservation of a cityscape or landscape, for example against the construction of roads or office blocks. Squatting is very relevant to preservation efforts, because impending changes in land use tend to result in vacant buildings. There was large-scale conservational squatting in Amsterdam from 1969-1975 as part of efforts to prevent the building of the subway across the Nieuwmarktbuurt.

space to exercise their professions; workspaces are a basic provision for artists and cultural entrepreneurs. In the BPA project, cultural manifestations are merely a fringe issue.⁵

de-radicalization

On the one hand, Uitermark rejected my argument for the continued radicalism of the Amsterdam squatter movement, while, on the other hand, he stated that some segments of the movement are co-opted but “retain their subversive identity”. Also, he fails to take into account that circumstances have changed. 1980 was a year of spectacular squatters protests. A typical media image from that era is squatters in balaclava standing on rooftops lined with refrigerators. This was part of a Europe-wide protest wave; protest was everywhere. Examples from the Netherlands are large demonstrations (such as a 500,000-strong demonstration against deployment of nuclear missiles), a blockade of a nuclear power station, and riots at the coronation of Queen Beatrix.

The current opportunity structure is very different. Especially in the last two years, the political right has become much stronger. Leftists are being scapegoated for problems in society. Moreover:

- legal rights of squatters have been curtailed;
- numbers of squatters dropped because of a dwindling supply of empty buildings and a sharp increase in the use of “anti-squatter” temporary occupant services;
- skyrocketing real-estate prices made speculators more keen to get quick evictions and made concessions to squatters more expensive;
- available time declined as the result of the shortening of academic studies and an improved labor market position of young people.

Nevertheless, the core business of the squatting movement, squatting itself has been taken up by yet a new generation of squatters. I propose to take this fact alone as ample evidence of continued radicalism.

Finally, it is not clear how co-optation of the artistic segment could ever lead to de-radicalization on the movement level, since the artistic segment is more known for artistic, playful protest than for hard-line political and disruptive protest. A typical example of a protest from the artistic segment is building a five meters high Trojan horse out of wood, and shipping it on a barge across the IJ river to the town hall to express criticism about the BPA project (that it seems to be a diversionary tactic while the destruction of existing initiatives continues.) (Elly, 2001).

fragmentation

The deepest conflicts within the squatters movement (i.e. the conflicts that led to the demise of the political "wing") existed in the 1980s and early 1990s, long before the supposed co-optive cultural turn. Also one may ask how much unity a squatters' movement needs. The key issue that mandates unity is external collective threats. In 2003, just like in the early 1970s and in the early 1990s, squatters again mobilized nationally against proposed anti-squatter legislation.

Uitermark suggested that the 2002 “rebellious poultry” protest is an indication of increased fragmentation. It does show that there were differences in preference for conventional,

⁵ For example the 14 page long 2003 BPA Progress Report only contains, apart from a few scattered references, the following lines about cultural services: "An important aspect of the realisation of breeding places is, besides creating spaces for artists, also the function of the building for the neighbourhoods. In some cases this is also tangible in the shape of concrete provisions that area available to the neighborhood (stages, spaces). Examples of these are the project Film Academy, NDSM/Kinetisch Noord, the Plantage Doklaan and Marcusstraat." (Projectgroep Broedplaats Amsterdam, 2003: 9)

reasonable debate vs. disruptive protest, but this tension already manifested itself in the 1980s case of the Wyers building.

particularization

Uitermark observed that particularization increased: "rather than formulating their own agenda, squatters argued that evicting a squat would contradict official municipal policies or would imply a violation of the law". It is impossible to understand squatting without realizing that, apart from a few highly exceptional cases, squats were people's homes. People who risk losing their home, and the investment they put into it, are - just like tenants or homeowners - bound to use every trick in the book to prevent this. Legal procedure may be more effective than using slogans concerning universal housing rights. It is true that, in the 1980s, squatters have chanted that the legal order of the authorities is not their order. At the same time, squatters have appealed to every rule that might support them. The Vondelstraat conflict of 1980, the one that brought tanks in the street, started when squatters re-squatted a building because it had been illegally evicted, i.e. police had evicted it on the basis of a fake rent contract. The army cleared barricades in the streets, but left the squatters in the building.

rise of a movement meritocracy

It is true that some squatters obtained (relatively) favorable deals while others did not. Again, varying outcomes of squatting are nothing new. One squatter died in a police cell after an eviction, while another sold his unit in the legalized Edelweiss building for 540.000 euros (Breek, 2001: 25). And, regardless of any possible changes in municipal policy, these two mechanisms help account for this:

- Politicians are likely to be more friendly towards those who do not challenge their authority (Gamson, 1975).
- Compared to non-artists, artists find more acceptance for more or less deviant behavior.

conclusions

Changes that occurred during the last five years in Amsterdam do not entail co-optation of squatters as providers of cultural services. Instead, they illustrate what I have called "flexible institutionalization". Just as squatters in the late 1970s en early 1980s have tried to latch onto policies for housing for singles and two-person households, and a few years later onto policies for "job creation" (i.e. in the Wyers case), there are now squatters trying to play their cards in a way that is compatible to the hype of the creative city. There are no indications that recent legalizations have an effect that is different from earlier legalizations. Flexibility and diversity may well be characteristics that enabled the squatters' movement to survive under increasingly adverse conditions.

And legalized artistic squats, far from being monuments for cultural co-optation, are still low-revenue generating functions on expensive land i.e. potential focal points for future conflicts. A precursor of this is the conflict recently won by the anarchist volunteer-run bookshop "Fort van Sjakoo" in Amsterdam, established in a squat in 1977, legalized in the 1980s and almost strangled by a 900% rent increase in 2003.

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