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SQUAT THE CRISIS!

By [#kraakdecrisis](#) 22. October 2020,

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October 1st marked the 10th anniversary since squatting was criminalized in the Netherlands. This infamous decision by the Dutch state led to an immense increase of speculation in the housing market, doubling the average cost of housing in just 10 years. 'Coincidentally', over the same period homelessness has also doubled, and social inequalities have skyrocketed. All of this before the effects of a global pandemic have even started to set-in. To commemorate the anniversary the Dutch squatting movement organized a nation-wide protest action, emphasizing squatting as a form of resistance against the multidimensional crisis we are currently facing.

Squatting = the occupation of empty/unused buildings or houses to satisfy housing needs or to develop social activities. Degrowth = a vision of societies that prioritize social and ecological well-being instead of corporate profits, over-production and excess consumption. For some the links between these two anti-capitalist approaches seem self-evident, for others they are less tangible. In this blog post we will first explore how squatting and degrowth are interlinked, followed by a brief history of squatting in the Netherlands in order to contextualize, in the final part, the innovative mass action that took place across the country on the 10-year anniversary of the squatting ban.

Squatting and degrowth

Economically, squatting contributes to a degrowth transformation by allowing collectives to reduce their material and energy use. On the one hand, the 'economy' of squatting collectives is usually marked by limited resource availability – electricity, water, food, heating, clothing, building materials etc. On the other hand, it is also distinguished by the highly innovative use of those resources through sharing and a DIY mentality – off-the-grid renewable energy systems, rainwater collection, dumpster diving, urban gardens, clothing repair and exchange etc. In addition, if we account for the material and energy expenditure of demolishing old buildings and the construction of new ones that squatting directly prevents, we can start to comprehend just how aligned squatting is with degrowth – even from this very materialistic perspective. What is more, squatters usually have much lower monetary needs. By avoiding rents/mortgages, and actively engaging in sharing and cooperation, they can satisfy their needs directly instead of relying on wage labor and the market to do so. Arguably, such processes of decommodification could be our best chance for a degrowth transition.

Politically, as a form of direct action, squatting is an act of reclaiming autonomy and self-determination over our lives. In the active self-management of a squat, in terms of both the space and the collective, a new political consciousness is developed. The experience of setting-up, managing, organic reorganizing, and defending of a collective

space where a different way of being and doing is practiced, can be profoundly transformative for those involved. It is often claimed that we need to decolonize our imaginaries in order to envision a future beyond the imperatives of growth. Squatting provides one avenue for engaging with, and embodying, the process of constructing new imaginaries based on care, solidarity and autonomy. It is a way of actively creating degrowth imaginaries, and of experiencing that another world is really possible. Philosophically, by challenging the notion of 'property', squatting strikes at the root of capital accumulation – at the root of the growth imperative! The need to access the market in order to secure the basic necessities of survival is quite literally what drives the 'grow-or-die' logic embedded into the current politico-economic system. In order to break this spell a solution outside of the market (private property) and the state (public property) must be sought. What a degrowth transformation will need to rely on is what George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici referred to as the anti-capitalist commons, or what others alternatively refer to as the practice of commoning. Squatting is an excellent example of what this looks like in practice. It allows for experimenting with forms of social organization that function outside of the logic of the market and the state – outside of the logic of growth.

A brief history of squatting in the Netherlands

Squatting has a long and rich history in the Netherlands. Significantly, this history can be traced to the aftermath of the Great Depression in the 1930s when unemployment rose drastically and many people were unable to pay rent. As a result, occupying houses became a tool for forcing rental agreements and securing a roof over one's head. Even though the squatting movement in its modern form would take shape only a few decades later, its beginnings are intimately tied to a capitalist system in crisis forcing people to seek alternative ways of satisfying their basic needs. Given that we are currently experiencing the worst economic crisis on record, it is important to remember and validate resistance methods of the past, especially those as effective as squatting has been.

During the 1960's, 70's and 80's squatting in the Netherlands grew into a full-fledged social movement. This time the trigger was an acute housing shortage combined with a rising tendency in speculation that kept many properties unoccupied. During this time squatting started taking on increasingly political overtones, focusing on collective action to oppose negative social trends instead of solving individual basic needs. In other words it became a struggle for wide-ranging social transformation, challenging the notions of what it meant to be a valuable member of society. During the 80's in particular the character of the squatting movement became explicitly anarchistic and the confrontation with the state became so fierce that during some high-profile riots the military was sent in to suppress them. This is also the period of the biggest expansion of the movement and the establishment of some of the most iconic alternative spaces

across the Netherlands, such as ACU, De Blauwe Aanslag, De Grote Broek, OCCII, ORKZ, Poortgebouw and Vrankrijk.

Jumping a bit ahead, on October 1st 2010 a new law came into affect that made squatting illegal, with those convicted of the offense facing criminal charges. It was the result of the all too-familiar neoliberal turn in governments and the trickle-down of the corresponding toxic values throughout the rest of society. Values which place property rights and profits over basic needs of the most marginalized in society, and over the right to alternative forms of social organization. The results were as disastrous as predictable: the number of squats has been decimated and the remaining squats are increasingly pushed out of city centers, homelessness has doubled as have housing prices, the waiting lists for social housing have mushroomed with the average waiting time being nine years. Even before the current pandemic plunged the global capitalist system into its biggest crisis in more than a century, the housing crisis in the Netherlands had become so acute that it was beginning to be referred to as an emergency. We almost do not dare imagine how much worse it will get with COVID-19 wreaking havoc.

Squat the crisis!

With this context in mind, we could say that the anniversary of the first decade of squatting being criminalized in the Netherlands couldn't come at a more needed time. As we are witnessing the perverse logic of placing profits over people collapse in on itself in real time, we need to collectively remember how to resist and rebuild.

The slogan 'Squat the crisis' ('Kraak de crisis') was chosen in order to highlight squatting as an effective strategy for resisting the multidimensional crisis of capitalism that we are currently facing. A crisis that manifests itself not only as a housing emergency, but also as a multitude of other social and ecological catastrophies. Squatting as a strategy has the ability to directly address basic needs, to construct political subjectivities around an entirely different set of values, and to create spaces where alternative forms of social organization can be put into practice. To tackle this crisis we will need to squat the crisis! #kraakdecrisis

This year the anniversary was commemorated differently than in previous years. Whereas before the usual approach was to make high-profile squatting actions, this time the focus was on increasing visibility, "advertising" the sheer magnitude of unused buildings, and inviting others to join the movement. The action was decentralized and took place simultaneously across the whole country (Amsterdam, Groningen, The Hague, Leiden, Nijmegen, Rotterdam, Utrecht etc.) with posters and banners being placed on abandoned buildings. The posters advertised buildings as empty and ready to squat, while the banners held messages reminding the public that "you cannot live on a waiting list," that "squatting is still an option", and that "squatter's rights are housing rights".

At the same time a new website and social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) were launched where squatting is explained in more detail to those that are interested, where positive examples of squatting are showcased, and where practical information about squatting is given to those who wish to join the movement. As the need for squatting is likely to expand in the coming months and years, reclaiming visibility in this way will be needed in order to reach as many people as possible and offer them the tools of their own liberation.

Access to housing should never be illegal, especially so when having an adequate amount of space is the best method of containing the spread of a global pandemic. It is in everyone's interest that the buildings that already exist are used to the largest extent possible. It is in everyone's interest that we squat this crisis!

Squatting as a Spatial Practice

This chapter is part of the publication Architecture of Appropriation. On Squatting as Spatial Practice published by Het Nieuwe Instituut

A ubiquitous phenomenon

Squatting is a phenomenon that has occurred throughout history and still occurs in every place around the world where the need for space coexists with vacancy. Sometimes it is individuals looking to satisfy their most immediate needs, while elsewhere sizeable movements emerge to address these issues together. In 17th century England the 'Diggers' started to occupy land for the construction of their own cottages, while marginalized groups in Cairo continue to squat abandoned social housing projects on the city's outskirts today, often out of pure necessity. In the Netherlands squatting is likely to have taken place throughout its history, although almost no documentation from before World War II has survived. In the second half of the 20th century it became a substantial social movement which, by applying its very own 'spatial practice' has considerably influenced the development of Dutch cities.

After the war an extreme housing shortage in the Netherlands led to incidental squatting in the major cities, yet the actions lacked coordination. Only when, in the course of the 60s, an articulate post-war generation needed places of their own to inhabit, squatting became a more cohesive movement. In Amsterdam's dilapidated Kattenburg neighborhood, a large group of young people started to occupy vacant dwellings and in 1966 the countercultural Provo movement launched their White Houses Plan, calling for white paint to be splashed on the doors of empty properties to notify prospective squatters.

Some haphazard occupations followed which showed a growing need to help people squatting and coordinate actions. Soon, Woningburo de Kraker (Squatter Housing Agency) opened their information center in Amsterdam and the first Kraakhandleiding (Squatting manual) was published. Both initiatives were important in the further development of the movement.

Squatted communities were often still quickly evicted by the authorities until 1971, when a squatting group from the city of Nijmegen started a legal procedure. Their actions confirmed the early 20th century legal ruling which determined that those residing in a property with a bed, table and a chair could not be suddenly deprived of the 'peace of one's home'¹. This marked the beginning of the squatting movement's attempts to find legislative confirmation of their rights, and began the complicated, still ongoing legal balancing act between the right to property and right to housing. It also prompted a rise in squatting which in turn triggered the authorities to draft a preventive law in support of property owners, who at that time had to resort to civil procedures to reclaim their buildings. Yet, it was a critical report from the Dutch Council of Churches that influenced the Christian Democrats to block the procedure in a 1978 parliamentary vote. Seemingly unstoppable and with broad societal support, the squatting movement reached its zenith in the first half of the 80s.

A spatial practice

In this period, squatting in the Netherlands developed from improvised urban interventions to an institutionalized spatial practice that allowed squatters to operate effectively in urban space. A network of autonomous Kraaksprekuren (Squatting Information Centers), inspired by the Squatter Housing Agency, opened in almost all major cities. New squatting manuals were published regularly, including protocols for thorough research on the building and neighborhood level.

At the same time new legal, media and research collectives emerged, while nationwide meetings were organized. Even the choreography of a typical squatting action was protocolized and became a fundamental 'squatting institution'. This ritual can be seen as a collaborative political act organized around its own rules, rhythms and expectations, which structures the way the occupation manifests itself in the urban environment, and even squatters' interaction with the authorities. All these institutions turned squatting into a practice that enables anyone to intervene in the urban environment according to their needs, and transform the city after their hearts' desires.

Over time this new, 'open source' tool allowed many people to appropriate spaces for their inhabitation, and all kinds of other purposes. In some cities the network of squatted spaces started to amount to what could be described as a parallel society, consisting of alternative housing arrangements, subcultural venues, food distribution systems, people's kitchens, legal support, media and medical services.

Besides creating alternatives to market-oriented urban development, the practice of squatting opened up the possibility of defending strategic positions in debates surrounding vacancy, housing shortage, urban development, and heritage preservation. Overall, this new, widely applied spatial practice represented a radical new approach to urban development, especially compared to the then still dominant tenets of modernism. Squatting became a movement experimenting with all kinds of bottom-up, small-scale and incremental urbanism with a collective, diverse, but also antagonistic character, and with new ideas around self-organization, autonomy and 'the commons'.

Legal complications

In the early 80s the rising influence and conflictual nature of the movement soon resulted in multiple confrontations with the authorities, among others, during the coronation of Queen Beatrix and after the eviction of several major squats. As a result the movement lost some of the broad support it had enjoyed earlier. However, the movement's decline from the mid 80s onwards could probably be attributed to other factors as well, including the diminishing housing shortage, the changing zeitgeist, and increasing repression from the authorities. While there was not yet enough societal and parliamentary support to fully criminalize squatting, a new law introduced in the early 90s stipulated that only properties empty for more than one year could be squatted. Despite the gradual decrease in the number of squatters, their practice retained a considerable presence in most Dutch cities and continued to function as a spatial practice, one still handed over from generation to generation.

Coinciding with the wave of conservative politics that emerged in the early 2000s, a renewed campaign against squatting was initiated by right-wing politicians. Even though the mayors of the four largest cities argued against a new law, from 1 October 2010 all forms of squatting became a criminal offense punishable with up to two years and seven months in jail. A turbulent period ensued, characterized by numerous protests and evictions, as well as various legal procedures by the movement against the ban. Following article eight of the European Treaty for Human Rights, which protects, among other things, the right to the privacy of one's home, a higher court concluded that a sudden eviction of a squat constitutes an infraction of this right. The final ruling stated that squatters should be notified about an upcoming eviction and be given the opportunity to challenge the eviction in court. In that case, a judge still has to decide, despite the ban, whether the need of a property owner to use their building outweighs the infraction on the private life of a squatter.

In practice, this meant that the police were not requested to immediately intervene when a new place was squatted and, therefore, that squatters retained the possibility to sustain their occupation. Yet, there is a myriad of reasons why squatters don't immediately get evicted. In some cases squatters made use of the new timeframe to start a negotiation with the owner, aiming for some kind of agreement. In others, owners do not file a police report in order to not draw attention to questionable business arrangements. If a report is filed and an eviction notice handed out, squatters could still argue in court that, in the case that an owner has no plans to do anything with the building, the protection of their new living environment is more important than leaving the property empty. While this new situation means that squatting is not fully eradicated, as the proponents of the ban were hoping for, it is increasingly harder to sustain a squat in the long term. As it became a criminal offense, squatting a building became less attractive for prospective squatters. As a result of the ban the movement has shrunk, maintaining active groups and information centers in only a handful of cities in the Netherlands.

Architecture of appropriation

A successful squatting action, whether in 1979 or 2019, always results in the immediate control and responsibility over a certain property. If the squatters manage to stay, they have the freedom to use and repurpose it according to planned or spontaneous intervention. As the selected buildings are often neglected and in poor shape or constructed for other purposes, this often requires intensive work. Therefore a typical kind of architecture starts to emerge which is the result of a combination of the immediate need and desire to transform the space, the ideology of collaboratively shaping and living in shared spaces, the lack of budget to make actual investments, the ease of adapting to the found typology, and the uncertainty of being evicted. Hence, this specific 'architecture of appropriation' can be seen as the immediate result of the collaborative application of the spatial practice of squatting.

The self-made, often unplanned, low-budget, and spontaneous character of this architecture, often built using recycled materials (found on the street, or taken from other squats), make it easily recognizable and give it many qualities not often found in 'normative architecture', such as a certain authenticity, material diversity, and a raw and immediate expression of creativity. After an eviction the interventions are often quickly demolished, making it a kind of architecture that is ephemeral and precarious, often existing temporarily and quickly disappearing or transforming again. Over half a century of squatting, thousands of squats have been opened and closed, but some have chosen to be legalized, whereby the property is

bought or rented from the owner, or given in loan under certain conditions for a particular time frame. The 'architecture of appropriation' is often kept, altered to respond to official regulations, or completely revamped with structural interventions.

The possibility of legalizing a squat has been dismissed by a large, generally speaking more radical, part of the squatting movement who regard the state of conflict with the owner and the authorities as a preferable end goal. The various legalization options, however, have allowed hundreds of squats across the Netherlands to retain their space for collective aims, even though the buildings are in a legal sense not 'squatted' any more. Generally these places still remain closely connected to the actual squatting movement which continues to focus on opening new squats. Over time, these practices resulted in a constantly changing archipelago of stable, legalized squats, and more precarious, but arguably also more urgent, actually squatted buildings. These communities still have a visible presence in the Dutch urban landscape, and remain an important site for alternative housing arrangements, subculture and radical politics.

The spatial practice of squatting in seven steps

In the Netherlands, squatting a building is a complicated and now criminalized intervention in the built environment, yet one that requires an organized structure of solidarity and support as well as specific knowledge and experience. Successive generations of squatters have pursued their ideals using diverse methods, although most of them have largely adhered to the following protocol, even after the squatting ban.

1) Finding vacant buildings

Carry out a survey of unoccupied buildings in a city or region either by cycling, walking or asking around. Determine whether the resulting list of unoccupied properties corresponds with the intended objectives, such as establishing a living group, making a political statement, or creating subcultural infrastructure. *When does urban transformation lead to high levels of unoccupied buildings? Is there a neighborhood conflict in need of support? What is a suitable place to live in? In what type of space can the group's objectives best be achieved?*

2) Researching vacant buildings

Carry out an investigation into a selection of buildings. Examine their structural condition and legal status, and chart the social context. Put together the 'life story' of the building, and the resulting reasons for a possible squatting action. *Is the*

space in question truly vacant? For how long? Who owns it? Why is the property not being used? Speculation, dilapidation, negligence? Are there plans for its future? What is the structure and condition of the building? Is it safe to occupy?

3) Mobilizing supporters

Squatting is a complex action that requires experience and insight to be carried out effectively. Seek collaboration with a Squatting Information Center, which usually meets once a week in a neighborhood, city, or region. Use the center as a base to discuss and review plans, and establish a network of experienced members. *With whom can the proposed plans best be realized? Are there other parties that have interest in the selected site? What skills are needed to occupy the site and establish the squat? Where are people with those skills found?*

4) Preparing the squatting action

Select an assembly point near the intended squat location. Appoint a breaking crew, indoor crew, and police liaisons. As a group, write and distribute letters for mobilization among collaborators. Prepare a press release and letter addressed to the neighbors. Gather materials and tools for barricades and initial renovation work, and prepare an occupation schedule for the first two weeks. *How many people are needed to set up the squat? Is it possible to go from the assembly point to the selected location without being noticed? Who does what? What communication channels are used during the squatting action? What action is to be taken if the situation with the police, security guards, neighbors, or others escalates?*

5) The squatting action

Gather the selected team at the agreed time and place, normally on a Sunday. In a group of at least 30 squatters, set off for the site on a predetermined route. The breaking crew opens the door while the others shield them. The indoor crew inspects the interior for any unexpected situations. Replace the lock. Await the arrival of the police while informing a lawyer, neighbors and the media. In most cases, the police acknowledge the situation and leave. Create a space where meetings can be held to discuss the next steps, and to coordinate any urgent repairs that are needed and from where urgent repairs can be coordinated. *Is the situation inside as expected? Is the building habitable and safe? How do the police and neighbors react? Which space can be made fit for habitation first? What renovation work must be carried out first?*

6) During the occupation

The continued occupation of a squatted site is the spatial embodiment of both a form of political action and a punishable offense. Make the building suitable for habitation and occupation through rudimentary renovation work. Set up lines of

communication with the owner, police and judicial authorities through a lawyer in order to ensure the continuation of the squat. For the same purpose, seek publicity or conduct a political campaign. *How can a building be made suitable for the intended inhabitation program? Is the position of the squat strong or weak? How can a site be held for as long as possible? How can the solidarity received be acknowledged and compensated?*

7) Beyond squatting: eviction or legalization

Owners often instigate legal proceedings, after which a judge could demand the departure of the squatters. Either depart voluntarily or prepare for the upcoming eviction by riot police. Otherwise, try to come to a user, rental, or sale agreement with the owner, after which the squat would acquire a legal status. In that case, comply with the structural and financial requirements of such an agreement. *What are the owner's plans for the building? Is the owner open to the idea of legalization? Is legalization in line with the ideological framework? What defense is put forward in any legal proceedings? Is opposition to the eviction possible and appropriate?*

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