Urban Europe

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25. **Cultural Incubators: The squats of the 21st century?**

*Jaap Draaisma*

In 2015, ‘50 Years of the Provo Movement’ was one of the highlights that city-marketing organisation I Amsterdam came up with. The international campaign was a proud look back at the activism of fifty years ago, including the squatting that took place back then, under the so-called White House Plan: ‘Come to Amsterdam, the international birthplace of free-thought and creativity.’ Meanwhile, on 25 March 2015, the Snake House (De Slang) was cleared. The house on Spuistraat, right behind the Royal Palace of Amsterdam, had been a squatting location for 32 years. And not only this property, but the entire block – twelve properties in all – were cleared by the police, marking the disappearance of the last substantial surviving example of ‘alternative Amsterdam’ from the capital’s cityscape.

**Squatters save the city**

The Provo movement’s White House Plan, dating from 1966, is considered to have marked the beginning of the squatting movement in Amsterdam. Following a court ruling in the early 1970s, the squatting of properties that had remained unoccupied for more than a year was no longer considered to be illegal. Around 1980, with the city’s population in decline and the world in the throes of an economic crisis, the Amsterdam squatting scene grew into a mass movement with significant political, economic and cultural influence. It was partly due to pressure from the squatting movement that the City of Amsterdam was able to secure billions in funding from central government in order to renovate the old districts in the course of the 1980s. The legalisation of thousands
of squats, along with the preservation of the social and cultural infrastructure that had been established by the squatters, formed part of this. This infrastructure ranged from childcare centres to concert venues, from neighbourhood theatres to local cafes. Jan Schaefer, the left-wing politician who was the driving force behind the urban regeneration that took place during this period, made no secret of the fact that it was the squatting activity that enabled him to get his way to such an extent with central government. Not all squats were legalised: many were evicted as well, which often involved riots and clashes between squatters and the authorities. One part of the squatting movement strived for legalisation, while the radical squatters were actively seeking confrontation with the government. In the mid-1980s, these differences of opinion led to a veritable reign of terror by the radical wing, which significantly weakened the movement.

Amsterdam, booming city

From 1985 onwards, Amsterdam’s population began to grow again – due initially to the large-scale expansion of social housing; but from the mid-1990s, the emphasis shifted toward owner-occupied homes and attracting wealthy residents. Amsterdam is one of the first cities in the world where the Urban Renaissance began to take shape – aided by a classical European city layout which had remained intact (partly thanks to the squatting activists), an international atmosphere with, since the 1960s, a large American and British population, and a lively counterculture with lots of room for experimentation and a large network of low-threshold spaces.

Cultural incubators as the answer to the evacuations of the 1990s

The explosion in property prices and commercial project development in the 1990s led to a wave of evictions of squats, in
particular squatted properties along the banks of the IJ, in the former port area, and warehouses that were suddenly called ‘iconic’, after the fact that they were being squatted had saved them from demolition in the first place.

In 1998, the evacuation of another large property on the IJ led to a manifesto, with a huge number of signatures, being presented to the city council: ‘Amsterdam is losing its DNA as a city of experimentation, subcultures and free spaces; already, many people are moving to other cities, and Amsterdam is at risk of losing its international appeal.’ Much to the surprise of the squatters, the city council took these words to heart, and a motion was passed stipulating that the City of Amsterdam must develop a policy to preserve affordable spaces for subcultures and experimentation. The local authorities decided that Amsterdam's success should not become its downfall. This realisation gave rise to an active government policy – running counter to market trends – of creating affordable living and working spaces for culture and counterculture. In 2000, the so-called ‘creative-incubator policy’ (broedplaatsenbeleid) was launched.

The Amsterdam ‘cultural incubators’ are similar to squats in a lot of ways: they are low-rent spaces with their own distinct character, connections with the surrounding neighbourhood and independent collectives, with cultural activities making up a significant part of their role (at least 40%), aside from the freedom to fill it in as they see fit. The municipal label of ‘incubator’ makes it possible to receive a seed grant as well as legal and other support. In principle, anyone can apply, but in reality it is primarily artist collectives and non-profit organisations that are developing and running the cultural incubators.

No culture without subculture

Although cultural incubators are an answer to the eviction of squats, of course they are not squats. Squats tend to be part of a movement exploring the idea of a different type of society; they are more prominently about social and cultural values,
and sidestep the process of seeking formal permission from the property owner and the authorities.

During the first few years following the launch of the creative-incubator policy, a number of squats were legalised, and the City of Amsterdam took the lead in developing a number of properties. The redevelopment of the massive NDSM shipyard into a cultural hotspot became part of the policy. Mayor Schelto Patijn made the slogan of the creative-incubator policy – ‘no culture without subculture’ – the title of his New Year’s speech in 2000.

In 2004, Richard Florida, the self-proclaimed guru of creative urban policy, visited Amsterdam, and the creative-incubator policy was incorporated into the Amsterdam Creative City Arts Plan (Amsterdam Creatieve Stad, Kunstenplan 2005-2008). One of the principles was that those characteristics of the cultural incubators that were particular to Amsterdam would be retained.

The economic significance of cultural incubators for the creation of jobs in the new global creative economy, of which art and culture make up a key component, was widely recognised. It turned out that the squatting movement, with its subculture, alternative entrepreneurship and the closely-linked hacker movement, was at the cradle of the new economy. It led to the establishment of the first internet service providers in Amsterdam back in the early 1990s, and ten years later it was here that the first successful apps were created as part of the Appsterdam initiative. Cultural incubators became Amsterdam’s international calling card, with half the world visiting to see the phenomenon with their own eyes, and talented people from all over the world flocking to the Dutch capital en masse. After fifteen years, in 2014 the new city council once again ratified and extended the creative-incubator policy for another four-year term.

Cultural incubators versus start-ups

A lot of start-ups and artists start out in cultural incubators. Twenty- and thirty-somethings are seizing the opportunity to
establish their own businesses here, amid young companies who are turning to cultural incubators for affordable workspaces and the chance of being immersed in a creative environment. All this new activity is not solely focused on the economic benefit, but also has a cultural, artisan, social, ecological, culinary or some other dimension. Cultural incubators create a broad foundation, a substratum of the sort of affordable, lively cultural spaces which underpin a successful city and are the wellspring of a lot of talent. In spite of all the rules and regulations that they are subject to – unlike squats – incubators serve as cultural free spaces and facilitate experimentation – a process of trial and error. They fulfil a real ‘testing ground’ role within the city.

This makes them fundamentally different from the incubators and accelerators that have strong commercial backing and that help start-ups to scale-up and market their product or service as quickly as possible. At the entrance of B.Amsterdam, one of the successful projects for creative start-ups, you will find the slogan ‘Connect creativity with the corporate world’. This is about quick financial gains, conquering markets and finding investors. The idea has to be successful in no time at all, or the game is over. Participating in the corporate world is the goal. Nowadays, these types of incubators and accelerators can be found in all cities – often established by project developers, local authorities or venture capitalists, sometimes in conjunction with universities or IT companies. The Amsterdam incubators are fundamentally different, being far more focused on cultural, subcultural and social values – even though they also welcome economic success.

Both incubators and start-up spaces tend to be based in special properties that have been repurposed, such as former factories (Moscow, London, Rotterdam), slaughterhouses (Madrid, Casablanca), army barracks, hospitals and other iconic buildings. A lot of creative hubs – creative factories – in the Netherlands are a mixture of a relaxed ‘creative environment’, in which cultural and social values play a role as well, with the characteristics of more demanding, economically oriented start-up environments.
Examples of this are the Witte Dame (‘White Lady’) complex in Eindhoven and the Maassilo building in Rotterdam.

**Cultural incubators as a driving force in gentrification**

Cultural incubators also play a role in the process of urban development. The incubator established in the derelict NDSM shipyard put this site back on the map. In spite of its remote location, MTV, Hema, publishing company VNU and others established offices there, and property prices shot up. Incubators can serve as quartermasters, preparing the ground for the upper middle classes to discover neighbourhoods like De Baarsjes, Bos en Lommer or the Van der Pek district. An incubator that starts out in an empty school building does not drive anyone out, but its presence – like that of the coffee bar and the trendy restaurant – tends to make the neighbourhood more attractive to higher-income urbanites. These venues do not appeal to low-income residents, who find themselves culturally displaced from their own neighbourhood. The sale and demolition of social housing does the rest. This is how the inner city ends up spreading to also encompass the surrounding neighbourhoods, which then in turn also become unaffordable for artists and the lower middle classes, who are once again forced to venture still further afield as this next round of gentrification takes its course.

Some incubators are trying to play a different role in this process. They want to play an important role for local residents with low incomes and serve as social centres, with community services, community initiatives and art for the neighbourhood.

**More of Amsterdam up for sale?**

There are about sixty cultural incubators in Amsterdam, most of which have been established, with the City of Amsterdam’s support, by artists and ‘creative entrepreneurs’ such as Urban
Resort in order to retain culture, subculture, artists and cultural and creative start-ups in Amsterdam. The creative-incubator policy made it possible for new projects such as the NDSM Wharf, the Volkskrant building (the former building of the newspaper), OT301, Pakhuis de Zwijger and A Lab (to be established). In addition to the new iconic cultural buildings that have sprouted up in every self-respecting city over the past fifteen years – such as the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, the concert hall Muzeikgebouw aan ’t IJ (‘Music Building on the IJ’) and the DeLaMar theatre in Amsterdam – in that same period a wholly new infrastructure of affordable, low-threshold buildings for cultural production came into being. Will this enable Amsterdam to hold on to some of its reputation for creativity after all?

After the lull caused by the 2008-2014 crisis, Amsterdam is once again booming. The city's popularity among highly educated young professionals from all over the world continues unabated. Following twenty years of slow gentrification, property prices are once again going through the roof. Seemingly overnight, the character of entire neighbourhoods has changed completely, and this is sure to happen to many more neighbourhoods in the years to come. In addition to the sale of social housing, the new city council, which took office in 2014, has also announced the planned sale of the majority of the properties and land in its possession.

Amsterdam's cityscape is rapidly transforming into a uniform vista of international chain stores, cute little vintage boutiques, pedestrianised squares and streets, expensive coffee shops for trendy MacBook users and exclusive flagship stores representing big-name brands. Entire neighbourhoods are sanitised and romantically refashioned into the mini-cities that Jane Jacobs predicted, where the only ‘mixed use’ is that of expensive housing existing alongside expensive amenities. The clichéd image of the historical European city so beloved by the United States is a reality here. However, Amsterdam’s dual nature as a city that is both chic and shabby is fast disappearing.
Amsterdam, Magic City: fact or faked?

In the 1960s, the Provos dubbed Amsterdam the ‘Magic City’. The Provos, the squatters and the alternative movement developed an attractive city which was embraced – much to their dismay – by the new middle classes: cycling instead of using the car, childcare facilities in the city, city squares as public spaces in which to meet, warehouses saved from demolition, a strong cultural infrastructure.

Amsterdam still has the ‘bohemian quality’ that Florida considers to be so important. The network of ‘alternative’ properties, projects, businesses and initiatives is to a large extent still in place and, in spite of all the squats that have been cleared, has even built in strength over the past decade, thanks both to incubators and to cultural entrepreneurs, with places such as the Westergasfabriek cultural venue and Amsterdam nightclub Trouw.

Somehow, straddling the conflict inherent between gentrification on the one hand and affordable workspaces on the other – of corporate culture and subculture – the Amsterdam creative-incubator policy has enabled a wide range of cultural and social initiatives to come about. It is vital to the city’s well-being in the future that this trend continues.

In 2015, a wide range of activities were organised to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the Provo movement, but contemporary activism, resistance and counterculture did not form part of the programme. They can be found in a host of different ‘free spaces’ and incubators – and, above all, on the street, like in Spuistraat on March 2015.

The author

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Further reading

Broedplaatsenkaart van de gemeente Amsterdam: https://www.amsterdam.nl/kunstencultuur/werkplekken/broedplaatsen/broedplaatsenkaart/
Website of Urban Resort: http://www.urbanresort.nl/home
Video *Creatief hergebruik van leegstaande gebouwen* van Stichting Urban Resort: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NHHAkbNkVM&feature=youtu.be