

Guest Article:

The Fight for Lieden's Freespace



Squatting is an excellent example of direct action in the community context, tackling the problems of lack of affordable housing/homelessness, and creating autonomous social spaces. The Netherlands has been a hot-bed of squatting activity over the last several decades – with its peak in the mid-80s, when activists were able to win some ‘rights’ for squatters – despite brutal government reaction and repression. Leiden, a beautiful city to the west of the Netherlands (featuring a giant windmill, of course), has been the location of dozens of squats. Places like Multipleks 1 & 2 (named after the plywood building material and housed in a 9 storey office block!), Sub071, as well as the plethora of different activities housed along Vrijplaats Koppenhinksteeg for the last forty years, have provided housing for dozens and a social space for the entire community of Leiden, the Netherlands, and beyond.

Of course, squatting by its very nature frequently comes into conflict with the authorities who seek to defend the sacrosanct right to private property so viciously reified by the pervasive liberal ideology. In recent cases the trend has been that squats are ‘cracked’ (hence the European term ‘kraak’) in dilapidated areas of the suburbs or inner city. These squats become well established social centres and loci of anarchist activity, which brings them into conflict with local government and councils, the police, and other forms of ‘authority’. Then, these areas become the trendy ‘bohemian’ parts of town, rents go up, demand for swish flats increases. This gentrification means that the land the squats are located on becomes very valuable to property developers and speculators. Now the squats are overtly in conflict with bourgeois business and capitalism. There are also the new neighbours. The

communities for which social centres provided free space are replaced by aspirational, status-symbol wielding yuppies. It seems most yuppies would rather not have a squat-shaped eyesore spoiling their view. These three areas of pressure – state, capital, and class, which are of course inextricably linked, means a great deal of effort is brought to bear to evict squats. This usually involves backhanded dirty tricks of behalf of officials and governments – with the support of the new up-and-coming yuppies and their speculator buddies, police brutality in the case of evictions, and attempted criminalisation of squatters – ably assisted by the mainstream media.

The latest focus of this conflict has been Vrijplaats (‘free place’) Koppenhinksteeg. This street, near to some postcard picturesque canals, is home to several groups and activities. These include De Fabel van de Illegaal, who help immigrants in a variety of ways, as well as combating racism; Bar En Boos, a great wee gig venue with a vibrant DIY atmosphere; a Chinese martial arts group; a free shop; a café; and the Eurodusnie and Plan B collectives. This range of activities helps Vrijplaats attract 1,500-2,000 visitors a week! I spoke to Marco, on a recent visit to Belfast, about Koppenhinksteeg (where he has been involved for twenty years) and the recent developments there.

First of all Marco was keen to point out that Vrijplaats is ‘not a ghetto where people just hide from the outside world. As a centre, it’s really in the middle of Leiden society, it chooses to be in the middle, and chooses to be visible, and chooses to be open.’ Vrijplaats provides services and space for grassroots initiatives, but this has meant hostility from the local council. ‘They have an ideological problem with us. We’re self-organised, we don’t take any money from the State, we don’t have

any formal connections with any political parties. We’re very keen on expressing to the outside world the importance of acting yourself, acting outside of the parliamentary structures and because we think... the instruments of parliamentary democracy are not there to give people power, but to take power away from people’ he continued ‘having a social centre means having space to start talking about these issues and also to organise yourself, and space to organise your debates, to plan your actions. It’s incredibly important.’

When I visited Vrijplaats in January 2008, they were in the final stages of a process of legalisation. This was argued to be necessary because half of the 1,300 sq. metre listed building was (and is) in serious disrepair. Marcos admits that legalisation is a ‘compromise’ but ‘a compromise I have already found peace with’. ‘We’re quite pragmatic because we want to stay there. We’ve invested a lot of time and it’s a very valuable place, and there’s a lot of energy in it and it’s worth fighting for.’ The, then, ‘so-called left-wing’ local government agreed a contract which would mean the repairs could be carried out. Since then however, a right-wing government has taken power in the council and reversed this decision, with some very flimsy justifications. In the days before our interview, Marcos had been informed that Vrijplaats Koppenhinksteeg had been sold by the government for just €150,000. ‘That’s almost giving it away. And we suspect that the city council really actually haven’t got any money for it. We’re almost sure they’re gonna provide the new owner... [with] all sorts of subsidies, for sure.’ With elections coming up in 6 months or so, Vrijplaats has become a political football. ‘The right-wing wants to use us, closing us down as one of their stunts for their election campaign.’ Marcos also feels that the ‘so-called left-wing’ government (the Green Left and the Social Democrats) have already betrayed them, and knows those opposition parties who do support them are merely out to gain cynical political capital.

Vrijplaats Koppenhinksteeg is currently engaged in eight different legal battles against the local council. Marcos, however, is optimistic. ‘I’ve seen several times that the situation was very bleak. [The council] tried all the dirty tricks that they could think of, they lied about everything – but we haven’t been closed for one day. And that’s thanks to huge popular support. I think most of us see it as part of a wider struggle which also includes occupations and you can fight in a lot of different ways against the system of oppression. And this is just one of them.’

Marcos could ‘hardly imagine’ that Belfast did not have a similar social space. When pressed, however, he was keen to avoid any prescription. ‘I’ve been in a lot of different countries... but in every country they have a different format. I think there’s just one general thing which comes back in all these different countries, and that’s that you have to be very persistent. You have to know what you want, be a bit pragmatic because otherwise you won’t get anywhere. And just go for it! I do think it’s necessary to have these spaces and actually all of Belfast should be one big free place.’

The longevity, resilience, and determination of Vrijplaats is inspiring to say the least – and Marcos’ confidence of success for the future is positively contagious. The Warzone Collective in Belfast are currently trying to resurrect a social centre for Belfast (following the closure of Giros in 2003). Anyone who wants to get involved in developing an autonomous centre in Belfast is warmly encouraged to participate. More details on Vrijplaats Koppenhinksteeg, the Eurodusnie Collective, and the Warzone Collective can be found at the internet addresses below:

www.koppenhinksteeg.nl
www.eurodusnie.nl
www.warzonecollective.wetpaint.com
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