

# **The Poortgebouw Inhabitants Collective**

## **Rotterdam, The Netherlands**

### **Introduction**

The “Poortgebouw” is the name of an extraordinary 19th century building, a national monument located on the south bank of the river Maas in Rotterdam. The name is equally connected to the collective of 30 inhabitants organized as an association: the “Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association” (Vereniging Poortgebouw).

The recent history of the Poortgebouw (1980-2008) is a unique illustration of a social housing project under self-management in the Netherlands. This article examines how an abandoned harbor building became a freespace for experiments with different models of working and living, both within and as autonomous as possible from the societal status quo. Contradictions and problems with the collective’s internal organization emerge in the various attempts to deal with societal changes and external pressures from powerful economic and political forces. The Poortgebouw’s endurance in the shift from public to private ownership, battles against the real-estate market logic and self-build planning processes can inform survival strategies for other inhabitants collectives.

At the time of this publication, the Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association is confronted with an uncertain future. It currently remains to be seen if the efforts to sustain the Poortgebouw as a project under self-management can succeed against dominant practices in the Dutch housing market.

### **History and Squatting Origin**

The Poortgebouw was originally designed to house the head administrative office of the “Rotterdam Trade Group” (Rotterdamsche Handelsvereniging). The building was just completed in 1879 when the founder, Lodewijk Pincoffs<sup>1</sup>, went bankrupt and fled the country to the United States. In the following 100 years, the Poortgebouw would be adapted to fit the needs of the various users. These users –amongst others– were the Holland America Lijn (a renown passenger ship company), the National Meteorological Institute, and for the longest time the Rotterdam Port Authority. After their relocation in 1978, the abandoned building almost become an “Eros Center”, if Rotterdammers had not protested emphatically against this municipal plan.

The Poortgebouw was squatted on Oct 3, 1980 during a national protest against the shortage of affordable youth housing<sup>2</sup>. In a press release, the squatters stated that they wanted to reappropriate the abandoned harbor building for collective housing and a cultural center. The owner was the City of Rotterdam. The squat was tolerated, however the municipality was working on a plan to redevelop the Poortgebouw into student housing. This plan would have resulted in an unaffordable rent for the squatters group. With the support from different organizations in the city, the squatters developed an alternative plan that would meet their particular needs and goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Lodewijk Pincoffs: <http://www.poortgebouw.nl/overPG/pincoffs.html>

<sup>2</sup> 1980 - The Poortgebouw Squat History: <http://www.poortgebouw.nl/overPG/kraak.html>

The Poortgebouw squatters' plan for a collective living group with shared infrastructure – such as the kitchens and bathrooms – was eligible to be subsidized under a new national policy called the HVAT regulation<sup>3</sup>. The plan was accepted by the City of Rotterdam and realized with the participation of the inhabitants.

The “Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association” (Vereniging Poortgebouw) was set up in 1982 as a legal body to collectively represent the inhabitants. The renovation was realized in the following years and upon completion in 1984, the first official rent contract was signed. Unique in the contract is that one collective rent sum is paid to the owner. The owner is responsible for the maintenance of the structure and exterior of the building while the living group is responsible for the internal maintenance. This contract exists to this day and the Vereniging has always paid the rent.

### **Harbor Re-development and the Privatization of Housing**

The surrounding landscape of former harbor terrain underwent a process of transformation. The City of Rotterdam developed a master plan for this area to become a new urban center on the south bank of the river: the Kop van Zuid. These ambitious plans can be compared to the harbor redevelopments in Hamburg, London or Barcelona into lofts and expensive housing or office districts.

The Poortgebouw instantly became a very interesting location within these plans. Declared a national monument in 1986, the house was one of the few characteristic buildings left standing after the demolition of the dockyards and railroads to make way for the master plan. As a symbol of the "old glory" of the Rotterdam harbor history, the Poortgebouw ('gate building' in Dutch) was seen anew by city planners and architects as the monumental portal to a young and dynamic “Manhattan on the Maas”.

In the 1990's, there was also a radical shift in Dutch housing policy. The housing associations, who traditionally managed the housing sector as semi-public non-profit institutions, were privatized and no longer could receive the government subsidies that they relied on<sup>4</sup>. This included the “Rotterdam Municipal Housing Association”, the owner of the Poortgebouw at that time. They now had to function as self-sufficient and more market-oriented corporations.

This privatization process, and having a housing corporation as owner, did not pose an immediate threat to the Poortgebouw. In 1995, the rent was simply transferred to a new address, that of the “Rotterdam Housing Corporation” (Woningbedrijf Rotterdam), and the existing rent contract was respected. However, under their ownership, the contractual maintenance of the Poortgebouw was neglected and the house increasingly fell under disrepair.

Over the years, expensive housing blocks and office towers by famous name brand architects began to arise in the area. All of a sudden, the Poortgebouw inhabitants had neighbors. The coming of the Erasmus Bridge, a new symbol of Rotterdam, created a major traffic artery connecting the former port to the city center. A rigid

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<sup>3</sup> In this publication: Tummers 2.1 “A new housing typology: the HVAT-regeling”

<sup>4</sup> In this publication: Tummers 4.1 “Privatization of Housing Corporations”

order of pavement stones slowly crept up to the walls of the house, also consuming the inhabitants' wild garden, their treasured outdoor space for years. The planners of the Kop van Zuid eventually knocked on the door wanting to discuss the possibility of commercial functions on the ground floor of the Poortgebouw. This proposal was not an option for the collective. However, it became clear to the inhabitants that the Poortgebouw had become a center of attention for powerful economic and political interest groups.

## **The Inhabitants Collective**

The Poortgebouw inhabitants collective consists of 30 individuals with diverse social, cultural and professional backgrounds. The common denominator is a need for affordable housing. There are no members of the original squatters group still living in the Poortgebouw. Over the past 28 years, the collective has been in constant change. Hundreds of individuals spread across the world have been part of the collective at different times and for varying periods of time. The internal exchange of knowledge and experience between individuals is essential to sustain the collective and adapt to the ever-changing external surroundings and context.

The current inhabitants are a diverse and international mix of artists and musicians, social and cultural workers, students and teachers, squatters and activists, architects and construction workers. Like the population of Rotterdam, about 50% of the current collective are “migrants” – in the sense of being non-Dutch – where the majority are from the EU or “Western” countries. The common languages are Dutch and English.

Collective living projects with diverse and changing populations require clear organization models. In the case of the Poortgebouw, it is on one hand a “living group” (social organization) and on the other, an “inhabitants association” (legal organization). A common understanding of the difference and balance of the two is often problematic.

In the early years of the Poortgebouw, the squatters' social organization could be compared to that of an “anarchist commune” where the “outside” establishment was rejected and any formal organization was seen as archaic. An oasis with as few rules as possible. However, at the same time a legal organizational form soon became necessary to realize the 1982-84 renovation of the building in cooperation with the municipal government. A closer look at the relationship between the living group and the inhabitants association in the Poortgebouw reveals certain benefits and contradictions.

## **The Living Group**

A living group provides a community structure where the interaction between inhabitants happens on a more regular and immediate scale. In Holland, there is a long tradition of collective living groups. Housing officials and planners are again experimenting with new forms of collective living for students, pensioners, migrants and for those interested in an alternative to the social segregation of the common single family house. Collective living groups would seem to have a special place and

tradition in an economically strong society where the value of ownership and a strong separation of the public and private realm play a dominant role.

Each of the 30 individuals has their own personal story why they want to become a member of the Poortgebouw living group. The diversity within this group reflects that there are more reasons than just an affordable rent why one is attracted to life in a community. Whether it's the desire to cook together to share costs and energy or simply the preference not to live on one's own. Some are interested in the meaning and value of a collective 'freespace' in a city as such and want to contribute to the sustenance of 'something bigger' than one's own personal space. The sacrifice of certain aspects of the traditional private realm creates a shared social space where individuals can mutually benefit from the talents, experience and support of their neighbors.

In the Poortgebouw living group, the boundary between public and private is blurry. Architecture plays a major role. Each inhabitant has his or her own private quarters. The individual rooms are on average 30m<sup>2</sup> and have mostly a personal function and character (for sleeping, studying, etc.). Trust and common courtesy are the replacement for locks on the doors. The kitchens, bathrooms, living rooms and other communal spaces are shared property. The equipment of the public spaces (i.e. household appliances, furniture, kitchen, technical equipment etc.) belongs to and should be maintained by everybody.

The shared responsibility for the common spaces can however be a source of conflict within the group. For example, since individuals have varying standards of cleanliness, there is not an acceptable 'normal' state of the kitchen or bathroom for each person. Agreements between smaller groups of users are made –such as cleaning schedules– but they are difficult to sustain. As it is the 'responsibility of the group', the incentive is often unequally distributed, which can lead to the stress or even resignation of certain individuals.

An ideal in the Poortgebouw is the horizontal or heterarchical organization of the individual members of the living group. There are no leaders per se and each member has equal say in matters relating to the group. There are regular house meetings where decisions are made either through a majority vote or consensus model. But with such a large group with regular change in membership, this ideal is a challenge to maintain as not every member has the same knowledge or experience. The grass roots democratic nature of the group decision-making process can result in unnecessarily lengthy meetings where previous discussions are repeated and decisions questioned anew. This experience of continuously 'reinventing the wheel' can be very disillusioning for some individuals. On the other hand, it is crucial that 'fresh' ideas and innovation have space to blossom. Therefore, the balance of providing sufficient space both to learn and invent as well as building up on experiences and knowledge already present is of vital importance.

Within a living group, problems can – or must – be solved on a more direct level without relying on external authority or services. For example, tensions between individuals are dealt with in a house meeting as opposed to immediately calling the police. Or when a member is financially unable to pay the rent, the situation can be discussed with the group as opposed to automatic eviction. The group is also a

much-needed alternative to disappearing governmental social services, which can attend to individuals with social, psychological or physical disabilities.

### **The Inhabitants Association**

The Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association is the official organization representing the inhabitants. The association formally has board members but in practice, they have no more say than any other individual. All members of the living group are also members of the association.

As a housing project under self-management, the association assumes many important organizational functions that are normally the responsibility of the owner. Since 1984, the association office collects the individual rents from the 30 inhabitants and pays one single rent sum to the owner. Each inhabitant has a rent contract with the association. This important construction enables the inhabitants to internally design financial models to arrive at this one sum. Currently, the association pays a monthly rent of approximately 2,800 Euros. Including the additional costs of energy and utilities, this works out to a monthly rent of 250 Euros per person. Currently, there are set rates for a single and a double room, however models such a percentual rent based on income have been used.

This 'one rent' system is an exceptional model where collectives can compensate for other individuals in the group with financial problems or irregular income. But this 'solidarity principle' can have problematic side effects when the organization and communication is weak or unclear. Individuals can accumulate immense rent debts within this flexible and tolerant system where explanation and promises to peers (and in cases, no communication whatsoever) seems sufficient. Without a warning system, this problem can go on relatively unnoticed for months. Furthermore, a financial problem can easily be confused with being a social problem, where a person in rent debt might be accused on a personal and emotional level.

The association is also responsible for finding new renters when a member leaves the group. The collective organizes meetings where candidates are invited to meet with the current members. Through a voting procedure, the association members select candidates who meet various criteria such as urgency, engagement or experience. This also allows the collective to choose new members who, for example, may not fully comply with demands typically asked in the housing market, such as an official minimum monthly income or specific residency and work permissions.

As stated in the rent contract with the owner, the inhabitants association is responsible for the maintenance of the inside of the building and the owner for the structure and outside of the building. Through a budget provided by the owner from a percentage set in the rent contract, the inhabitants have a direct influence on the design, function and atmosphere of their living environment. This collective responsibility forms another realm where the individuals work together. Each individual is contractually responsible to contribute 8 hours per month to internal maintenance.

## **Inhabitants as Cultural Producers**

Spaces are also present for the inhabitants to collectively organize activities. The Poortgebouw understands itself not only as a living group but also as a self-organized cultural center with a regular public program of social, cultural and political activities. The programming is to this day determined by the different interests, knowledge and networks of the inhabitants living in the place at a given time. The inhabitants organize activities such as concerts, discussion forums, theater and cafés for friends and the neighborhood. Networking and collaborations with other organizations on activities and projects in Rotterdam and beyond has established the Poortgebouw as renowned center for cultural activity<sup>5</sup>.

It is an informal place for people to exchange their diverse interests and knowledge. These activities are powered by a Do-It-Yourself attitude and are non-profit. Financial win is invested back into the group and future activities.

## **Participation and Responsibility**

The 28-year existence of the Poortgebouw is evidence that collective housing projects under self-management can be sustainable. However, the dynamic and strength of both the inhabitants association and the living group depend on the participation of the individual members. Every individual has his or her own talent and unique way they could contribute to the Poortgebouw. Participation is expected in the Poortgebouw, ideally as an understood shared commitment to the welfare of the collective housing project. A certain degree of dedication and time investment is also contractually required. Members are expected to be present at monthly house meetings and to contribute to the internal maintenance of the house.

Energy is often readily available for those tasks and responsibilities that are short-term and offer clear recognition or reward. For example, investing time in cooking together or a nice evening of music results in an immediate form of appreciation from other individuals, and perhaps also a financial benefit for the organization. But volunteer energy is also needed for more 'abstract' jobs to sustain the collective, and at unpredictable times. The 'success' of this work –such as in the administration or establishing and maintaining a supportive network– is harder to 'prove'. It would seem that fewer individuals within the collective are willing to invest in those longer-term, less tangible and visible tasks. Often small groups of individuals within the collective must assume the vital responsibilities that the collective as a whole cannot –or does not– address.

The understanding of voluntary participation must continuously be re-evaluated in relation to external societal developments. For example, inhabitants of the Poortgebouw in the 1980s had more 'spare time' and financial security to voluntarily contribute as the social system provisions and conditions were more readily accessible for unemployed youth and students. Participation in the Poortgebouw was an integral part of one's social and professional development. Today, many inhabitants must (or choose to) devote more energy to the outside demands of their professional career, education or precarious side jobs. It has become increasingly

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<sup>5</sup> Poortgebouw's "Poortfolio" of activities: [http://www.poortgebouw.nl/toekomstvisie/poortfolio\\_EN.pdf](http://www.poortgebouw.nl/toekomstvisie/poortfolio_EN.pdf)

more difficult for individuals to combine these priorities of the 'private life' with the tasks developed and needed within the collective. The (taught) change of priorities in a neo-liberal and individualist society and the eroded social net of the state have had a negative effect on participation in the Poortgebouw, which still needs to be compensated.

When a collective is confronted with a crisis situation –which has often been the case for the Poortgebouw– there are a lot of additional tasks and decisions beyond the daily management of the self-organization and participation in the group. Tasks such as formulating arguments in a legal procedure, lobbying for political and public support and communicating with the press, searching for partners and advisors must also be fulfilled with the volunteer energy of the collective. The specific and often unique expertise needed for such housing projects is not readily available from existing services and has to be generated or updated. Beyond an existential struggle against seemingly insurmountable forces, it should also be seen as an opportunity for individuals to gain new forms of knowledge, experience and –in particular– civil self-empowerment. Many Poortgebouw inhabitants have become 'accidental' specialists in fields of law, politics, PR, real estate, architecture and city planning.

### **2001: A Crisis for the Poortgebouw**

In June 2001, the inhabitants read in a newspaper that the Poortgebouw had been sold to the private developer "De Groene Groep"<sup>6</sup>. For 450,000 Euros, the price of a single family home, the "Rotterdam Housing Corporation" sold the house to a company driven by a free market logic of profit maximization. The Poortgebouw became a monumental illustration of the detriments of the privatization of the housing corporations in the 1990s, but just another symptom of the many former municipal properties in Rotterdam that had shifted into the private market. The previous 'security' of the municipal government's supervision and control disappeared. Any legal defense strategies could no longer be reliant on municipal political responsibility and the previous agreements the collective fought so hard for. The collective's right to housing would have to stand up against the right to private property.

In Holland, the law states that within the 3 years after the purchase of an inhabited property, the owner cannot take any action to evict. In this time, meetings were held between the Poortgebouw inhabitants and the new owner. They stated their business interest in redeveloping monuments. However, in their opinion, a feasible renovation and exploitation of the house could not be achieved with the continued inhabitation by the group. The rent would skyrocket. Also the manner of inhabiting the Poortgebouw was "outdated" and "can not exist" in such a prestigious new urban area. To finance such a renovation, the Poortgebouw would have to become luxurious office space. The right-wing municipal government (2002-2006) supported the developers' negative image of the inhabitants and their vision.

3 years later, in summer 2004, the inhabitants received the official cancellation of the rent. They officially rejected this and short thereafter received the subpoena to Rotterdam municipal court. De Groene Groep declared their "urgent own need" for the property: this is a common legal strategy in Holland for owners to evict the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.degroenegroep.nl/>

inhabitants given their right as owners. In this legal case, the 'need' of the owner to redevelop the Poortgebouw into office space for the primary goal of economic profit is an eligible argument.

In defense, the Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association disputed the private owner's "urgent" need with the fact that De Groene Groep had not invested anything into the maintenance since buying the house in 2001. The inhabitants also countered the owner's arguments with the fact that the financial feasibility of their renovation plan comes forth solely from their desire to generate profit from the property as luxury offices. But the indisputably urgent reparation of the neglected maintenance in itself would result in a completely different calculation.

During the court case, the owner produced a number of documents that stated the bad conditions of the building and declared it unfit for living. The inhabitants and their lawyer sought the assistance of an architect to demystify the falsely interpreted technical information, clarify planning procedures and in general explain how renovation could take place together with the inhabitants<sup>7</sup>.

The Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association lost the court case in Rotterdam Municipal Court in February 2006. The verdict was however non-executable if the case went into appeal (an uncommon verdict).

In June 2006, the case was brought to the Higher Appeal Court in Den Haag. In the summer of 2007, the judges eventually also gave De Groene Groep right, but with a remarkable condition: the developers must prove that there is a comparable space available in Rotterdam for a 30 member living group and their collective activities. Juridically, this means that the collective, the Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association, and its mission to house 30 inhabitants as stated in the statutes, is recognized. With this unusual decision, the Higher Court abandoned the common practice of only offering replacement housing to each single individual. To this date, the owner has been unable to respond to this request, which again indicates how scarce the necessary space for housing such collective living projects in Rotterdam is.

### **An Alternative Plan with Inhabitant Participation**

Parallel to the court case, the inhabitants decided to take an active role in proposing a concrete vision for the Poortgebouw in the future. If the owner saw no possibility to work with the inhabitants, then other partners would need to be attracted.

In 2005, a project group "Future Poortgebouw" (Werkgroep Toekomst Poortgebouw) was formed. Still active today, it consists of dedicated inhabitants and valuable professional external advisors in real estate, city planning, architecture and politics. The project group organized a series of workshops (designateliers) where all residents were invited to participate in a process of brainstorming, selecting, deciding, elaborating and presenting. The chosen method was developed in similar planning situations, where the aim was to ensure the participation of the inhabitants

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<sup>7</sup> In this publication: Tummers 5.2 "Planning Culture"

and establish forms of collaboration between inhabitants, professionals and public servants<sup>8</sup>.

Using different working forms including fantasy, games, role-playing and different visualization techniques, the participants are first drawn out of the fixed positions, hidden agendas, and preset expectations and images. Everyone is given the opportunity to express their ambitions with the plan in such a way that others are inspired and fascinated instead of bored, defensive or patronizing. This opens the way for dialogue about possibilities enhanced by the presence of advisors who could respond instantly to knowledge gaps or other questions (i.e. expertise offered on demand, not steering the process). Gradually, a general profile of priorities for the plan became apparent. During the subsequent sessions, explorative sketches and models were created, from which the architect could draw up a draft proposal illustrating the inhabitants' vision.

Given estimates of the combined costs of buying the Poortgebouw from the owner (circa 1 million Euros) and the additional renovation sum (circa 2,5 million Euros), the project group decided that it was not a feasible alternative for the inhabitants to buy the house themselves. The strategy was to attract a more socially responsible housing corporation willing to work together on the inhabitants' vision and 'encourage' the private developer to sell. Within the profit-oriented housing market, the need is for an owner who is also politically accountable to the government and accepts their social tasks. In 2006, the project group developed a formal "vision document" describing the basic guidelines for a successful partnership.

## **The Inhabitant's Vision for a New Poortgebouw**

The inhabitants' vision is of a multi-functional Poortgebouw with both space for the living group and for more professionalized and publicly accessible socio-cultural activities. The direct involvement and collectivity of the inhabitants remains the departure point in the alternative plan. The combination of working and living is sustained however with clearer spatial and legal separation. In this manner, the quality of living space is strengthened and the activities can be more open to the public than is the current case. In the future, the Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association wants to assume a more prominent place in Rotterdam as a "creative city"<sup>9</sup> and broaden its local and international network of collaborators.

Four essential and overlapping ideals of the inhabitants are expressed in this plan:

### **1. Collective Living:**

Inhabitant collectives are a lively contemporary model with mutual benefits for the individuals and the group. In the future, the Poortgebouw will offer living space for 15 to 20 people of diverse professional and cultural backgrounds. The collective element of the living space is emphasized in shared kitchens, bathrooms and the living and recreational rooms.

### **2. Breeding Ground:**

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<sup>8</sup> The chosen planning method is described in "'Journey into unfamiliar space', utopia in practice: interview with Lidewij Tummers" in "Journal of Romance Studies" Volume 7 Number 1 2007 ISSN 1473-3536

<sup>9</sup> In this publication: Tummers 5.3 "Creative City Policies"

This term refers to the provision of space for creative and innovative professionals who do not yet have sufficient economic basis. In the past 28 years, the Poortgebouw has illustrated the necessity of such spaces. In the future, the inhabitants want to offer rooms for rental to small start-up collectives, organizations and businesses. To individuals and groups for whom affordability is an important factor so that they have the economic space to develop and experiment. There will be artist studios, workspaces, offices and a recording studio.

### 3. Affordability:

The provision of (youth) housing remains one of the departure points in the plan and it must remain affordable. This is possible for example when the inhabitants and users are responsible for the maintenance and financial management within the building and through the efficient usage of space, the sharing of facilities and energy reduction models.

### 4. Self-Management:

Self-management is characterized by collective decision-making and problem-solving, transparency and the division of tasks, shared responsibility and reward. Inherent to self-management and cooperation is the sharing of knowledge and experience whereby each individual has the opportunity to apply their own talents. A democratic way of working is central. The contribution from the individual inhabitants or users to self-management is required as part of the rent contract and thereby a central element of the living collective and breeding ground.

It is the intention for the Poortgebouw to be an attractive place for diverse target groups. The prime manifestation of this ambition in the plan is the new riverside café, which includes a podium, a water terrace and a public garden with a playground for children.

Important in this vision is also proposing an organizational model that clearly communicates the desired relationship of the renters with the future owner. There would be 2 separate groups: one for those living and one for those working in the Poortgebouw. They would be organized into two separate associations (Vereniging). Each association would be responsible for collecting a single rent sum to be paid to an 'umbrella' administrative association (Stichting). This sustains a central aspect of self-management at a more personal level where individual members can decide various models of rent payment. The administrative association would then be the partner responsible for direct communication with the owner.

On an architectural level, the 1800 m<sup>2</sup> usable space of the Poortgebouw can be divided into socio-cultural and living functions with a clear division between private and public space. For the future inhabitants, there would be individual living units with an average 35m<sup>2</sup> located primarily in the upper floors of the building. Communal kitchens, bathrooms and other shared spaces are not only important places of social interaction for the living group but contribute to possible energy saving measures. The socio-cultural functions, including artist studios, small offices and shops, rehearsal space and a café, are located primarily on the ground floors.

A number of Rotterdam housing corporations were informed of this "Vision Document" and the inhabitants gave invited representatives a professional and convincing tour of the status quo, and of their vision of the future. The corporations

confirmed their interest as partners and their willingness to collaborate on the inhabitants' vision for the Poortgebouw. Financial reservation of the estimated budget to purchase the property has been made and an appropriate offer has been presented to the owner.

## **2008: Conclusions and Summary of the Current Situation**

At the time of this publication, the court case with the current owner continues without a final verdict and the inhabitants' vision for the future of the Poortgebouw remains a work-in-progress. Survival strategies must continue to be invented and explored in the Poortgebouw. A conclusive final paragraph to this article must be omitted, but in its place, some key role-playing factors in this often-chaotic process can be made evident.

### **Ownership:**

The private owner has not yet agreed to sell nor at which amount. Official real-estate assessments suggest a property value of 1 million Euros. The Poortgebouw's partners have twice made offers based on these figures, which have been rejected by the De Groene Groep. Although they initially only paid half of this sum, have invested nothing in the external maintenance and have collected rent from the association for the past 7 years, the owner is only willing to sell the Poortgebouw for an additional profit greatly exceeding this assessment or their investments. In the meantime, de Groene Groep has presumably spent more on their planning process and the court case (hotshot lawyers) than on the building itself.

### **Legal:**

The court case remains the decisive factor. The owner de Groene Groep can only terminate the rent contract if and when they can make a credible proposal to the Appeal Court judges that there is an alternative space for the 30 member collective and their activities. To date, there have been no indications that such a space has been found. The official court deadline is in February 2009. In the case of an eventual but unsuitable proposal, the inhabitants association, with its advisors and legal advise are confidently prepared with counter arguments. If the judges accept the inhabitants association's arguments over the proposal of the owner, the rent contract cannot be terminated. In this case, there is likelihood that they would reconsider the offer to sell the Poortgebouw to a partner of the association at an acceptable price.

### **Politics:**

In 2006, the traditional "Worker's Party" (Partij van de Arbeid) returned to power. The Poortgebouw has the support of various politicians in the council, primarily for the social and cultural functions. Attempts have been made to "pressure" the owner to sell at the request of the City Council alderman for housing and city development. However, the council tends to support private investment in real-estate development. At the same time, the City of Rotterdam ironically tries hard to market Rotterdam as a "Creative City". The City Council should take the opportunity to decisively speak out their support for a unique self-organized cultural platform as opposed to another plan for office space.

### **The Inhabitant's Vision for the future:**

The vision, now two years old, is both a compromise and an evolution. On one hand, the current group of 30 inhabitants would decrease to between 15 to 20 and the Poortgebouw would be 'shared' with user-groups who do not live there. It is possible that there could be conflicts in interest between the two associations in the future. Also, there will be more official (governmental) insight and regulation of the currently self-organized activities. On the other hand, the realization of this vision is a much-needed opportunity to rethink outdated organizational problems, both spatially and in the group communication structure. The notion of working for the Poortgebouw collective can be better taken into consideration and consciously adapted to the individualist neo-liberal context. The Poortgebouw must strive to once again be a place where individual professional development and work for the collective (be it voluntary or paid) go hand in hand.

#### Do-It-Yourself Attitude:

For the last years, the inhabitants have been between the continuous threat of eviction and the imaginations of a concrete way to sustain the inherent values of the Poortgebouw. In spite of the uncertainties, they have chosen to already actively implement ideas within the vision document now: spaces in the house (and organization) have been delegated for artist-in-residence studios to test the expanded cultural functions of the project. Likewise, the collectives' traditional self-organized social and cultural programming continues to flourish, keeping the Poortgebouw a vital heart within Rotterdam and international creative networks.

#### The Collective Organization:

The establishment of the Poortgebouw Inhabitants Association following the initial squatted period defined pillars of the organization, which –however adapted over the years– have made it possible for the collective to exist for 28 years through various phases of external threat. The Poortgebouw's self-organization and collectivity, which is officially expressed in the collective rent contract and the association's statutes, form the bastions upon which economically powerful opponents could be held off and at the same time, new generations of Poortgebouwers could have the opportunity to discover the mutual benefits of participating in a collective.

Presently, a national monument stands decaying in the center of Rotterdam due to the contractual neglect and greed of the owners. The conflict around the Poortgebouw is a case study in Holland for the consequences of careless privatization of public housing. It still remains to be seen if the Poortgebouw will continue to be an example of the benefits of self-management and provide a vital resource any culturally dynamic city depends on.

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