

Poortgebouw

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 organised an association: the “Vereniging Poortgebouw”.

The recent history of the Poortgebouw (1980-2007) is a unique illustration of a social housing project under self-management in the Netherlands. The following document does not describe the (recent) realisation of a co-operative housing project. However the themes and strategies described have distinct parallels with the “self-building” projects of international co-operatives and initiatives presented at the “Autorecupero Autocostruzione” conference in Rome, April 5, 2007.

Central themes addressed in this article include:

- squatting and self-renovation in the 1980s
- self-management and group living
- the transition from public to private ownership
- the struggle against (real-estate) market logic
- survival strategies for self-management projects

At the time of publication, the Vereniging Poortgebouw is confronted with an uncertain future. It currently remains to be seen if the efforts to sustain the Poortgebouw project under self-management and (relative) autonomy can succeed against dominant practices in the Dutch housing market.

History

The Poortgebouw was designed to house the head administrative office for “Rotterdam Trade Group” (Rotterdamsche Handelsvereniging). The building was completed in 1879 when the founder, [Lodewijk Pincoffs](#), went bankrupt and fled the country to the United States. In the following 120 years, the building would be adapted to fit the needs of the various users and the everchanging surroundings. These users –amongst others– were the Holland America Lijn (a renown passenger ship company), a meteorologic station, and for the longest time the Rotterdam Port Authority. After their relocation in 1978, the abandoned house 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 affordable youth housing shortage. The Poortgebouw’s origin as a living space is part of the renown Dutch squatting tradition. The owner was the City of Rotterdam. The squat

was tolerated however the City was planning redevelopment of the Poortgebouw into student housing. This plan would have resulted in an unaffordable rent for the squatters group. Therefore, with the support from different organisations in the city, an alternative plan was made meeting the goals of the group. This plan was accepted by the City of Rotterdam and realized with the participation of the inhabitants in the rebuilding process – an integral factor in the plan to keep the end rent affordable. Shared infrastructure like kitchens and bathrooms further lowered the rebuilding costs.

The Vereniging was set up in 1982 as a formal organisation of the inhabitants and the plan was realized in 1984 when the official rent contract was signed. Unique in the contract is that the owner is responsible for the maintenance of the structure and exterior and the living group for the internal maintenance. This contract exists to this day and the Vereniging has always paid the rent.

The 2007 Inhabitants

The Vereniging Poortgebouw is a living group of 30 unrelated individuals between 6 months and 60 years old. The current average period of residency is 3 years where 1/3 have lived here between 4 and 17 years and 1/3 are new residents in the last 3 years.

On average, 50% of the inhabitants are Dutch and the other residents are primarily from diverse EU states but also from countries such as Australia, Canada, Russia, Macedonia and Mozambique. The inhabitants consist of artists, musicians and cultural workers, students and teachers, social and construction workers, squatters, activists and more.

The Vereniging is also a renters association which formally pay one rent to the owner. The 30 inhabitants each have an individual rent contract with the Vereniging. This allows the living group to choose their own parameters regarding rent collection as opposed to the common real estate's demands for proof of residency and monthly income. Currently, the Vereniging pays a monthly rent of 2,800 Euros. Including the additional costs of energy and utilities, this works out to a monthly rent of 250 Euros per person.

While the individual rooms are relatively small (on average 30m²) and have mostly a personal function and character (for sleeping, studying, etc.), the equipment of the public spaces (ie. household appliances, furniture, kitchen, technical equipment etc.) belong to an should be maintained by everybody.

The Vereniging Poortgebouw understands itself as a living group but also as a self-organized cultural center with a regular program of socio-cultural and political activities. This programming is to this day based on the different interests, knowledge and networks of the inhabitants themselves living in the place at a given time. The inhabitants organize activities such as concerts, discussion forums, theater and cafés for friends and the neighbourhood. The Poortgebouw also offers practice space for musicians, theater and dance groups and even single-father boxers! Networking and collaborations with other organisations on activities and projects in Rotterdam and beyond has established the Poortgebouw as renown center for cultural activity.

Privatisation and Housing Corporations

In the early 1990's, the City of Rotterdam privatized their property to housing corporations. These corporations took over the responsibility of providing social housing but also had to generate profit. The Vereniging then paid rent to the "Rotterdam Housing Corporation" (WBR).

Unique in Dutch Housing –compared to other EU member countries– is the role of Housing Corporations. Housing Corporations have a long tradition in the Netherlands going back to the middle 19th century. As independent non-governmental organisations, they could receive subsidies from the State to build and manage social housing but also had to follow the housing policy stated by the government.

The 1990's brought a radical shift in Dutch housing policy. The Housing Corporations were privatised and no longer could receive the traditional housing subsidies from the government. The corporations, which manage both private and social housing stocks, now had to become self-sufficient and more market-oriented. Also the municipal governments, like the City of Rotterdam, gave their housing stock over to newly established Housing Corporations to manage these properties. This also included the Poortgebouw.

Today, all social housing is managed by the Housing Corporations. The City Governments now play the role of manager, creating the guidelines and policy which the housing corporations must follow and supervising their performance. At 34.6% of the total available housing, the Netherlands have EU wide the greatest stock of social housing. However, there are once again today large protests against the shortage of affordable housing.

Since the middle 1990's, Housing Corporations have become some of the most profitable and richest businesses in Holland with assets estimated at 34 billion Euros. There are strong suspicions to how well the Housing Corporations are fulfilling their social housing responsibilities and how well the municipal government are supervising their performance. The agreements on their exact tasks and the differentiation between profit and non-profit activities are vague. There have already been questions by an EU Commission.

2001: The Crisis for the Poortgebouw

This privatisation 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", 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.

Meanwhile, the surrounding landscape of abandoned harbour terrain was rapidly

transforming. The City had made a masterplan for the area to become a new city center on the south bank of the river. These developments are similar to the harbour redevelopments in Hamburg, London or Barcelona into lofts and expensive housing or office districts. The Poortgebouw, a national monument since 1986, became a far more interesting property in this plan.

In June 2001, the inhabitants read in a newspaper that the Poortgebouw had been sold to a private developer. For 400,000 Euros, the price of a single family home, the housing corporation sold the house to an owner who operated only by free market-logic and thereby NOT under the supervision or control of the municipal government. It was a crisis situation for the inhabitants.

The shifting of the ownership of the Poortgebouw has to be highlighted a bit further: the present crisis of the house has a lot to do with the very possibility that municipal property can shift into the private market. This also means that our defense strategy can be less based on municipal political responsibility and democratic rights. Therefore, politicians can easily leave the case to the mechanisms of the free market.

The ‘social paragraph’ in the sale document stated that for the next 3 years the owner could not take any action to evict. In this time, meetings were held between the inhabitants and the new owner. They stated their business interest in developing 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 sky-rocket. Also the manner of inhabiting the Poortgebouw was “outdated” and can not exist in such a prestigious new urban area. To finance such as renovation, the Poortgebouw would have to become luxurious office space. The right-wing municipal government (2002-2006) supported the developers image of the inhabitants and their vision.

3 years later, in summer 2004, the inhabitants received the official cancellation of the rent. They rejected this and short thereafter they received the subpoena to Rotterdam municipal court. The private owners declared “urgent own need for renovation”: this is a common legal strategy in Holland for owners to evict the inhabitants based on their right as owners to urgently renovate.

The court case itself refers mostly to general rights for renters, as opposed to political responsibility of Housing Corporations. Now, the ‘need’ of an owner for economic profit is an eligible argument in this case.

In defense, the Vereniging Poortgebouw dispute the private owner’s “urgent” need for renovation with the fact that the new owner have not invested anything in the maintenance since buying the house in 2001. The inhabitants also counter the owner’s arguments with the fact that the financial feasibility of their renovation plan comes forth from their desire to generate profit from the property. The inhabitants have provided evidence that a “feasible” renovation can find place under other circumstances.

The Vereniging Poortgebouw lost the case in Rotterdam Municipal Court in February 2006. The verdict was however non-executable if the case went into appeal (an uncommon verdict). As of June 2007, the case is in the Higher Appeal Court in Den Haag.

A Vision for a New Poortgebouw

Parallel to the court case, it was decided to take an active role in proposing a concrete vision for the Poortgebouw in the future. If the owner sees no possibility to work with the inhabitants, then other partners would need to be attracted. In workshops in 2005, a project group “Future Poortgebouw” was formed of dedicated residents along with professional external advisors in real-estate, city planning, architecture and politics to achieve this goal.

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), 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 with the inhabitants on the plan 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.

To negotiate with such financially powerful corporations, it was necessary to formally describe the inhabitant’s alternative vision. In 2006, the project group worked out a “vision document” describing the basic guidelines for a successful partnership.

The 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 plan emphasizes the fact that the Poortgebouw’s contribution to the Rotterdam cultural climate is made possible by the affordable space for (creative) people to live and work together. Four central and overlapping ideas define this plan:

1. - Group Living
2. - Cultural Breeding Ground
3. - Affordability
4. - Self-Management

Important in this vision is also proposing an organisational model which clearly communicates the desired relationship as renters with the future owner. There would be 2 separate groups: one of those living and one of 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 m² 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 15 living units with an average 35m² 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 include artist studios, small offices and shops, rehearsal space and a café which are located primarily on the ground floors.

The vision is seen as both a compromise and an evolution. On one hand, the current group of 30 inhabitants would decrease to between 15 to 20. There is the risk that the 2 parties have serious conflicts of interest leading to disputes over the rent. There also would be more control over the activities (ie. governmental). On the other hand, it would be an opportunity to rethink outdated organisational problems, both spatially and in the group/communication structure. Work invested in the house by individuals above defined “norms” could possibly be compensated and not depend on self-exploitation.

Summary of Current Issues

At the time of publication, the inhabitants’ vision for the future of the Poortgebouw is still a work-in-progress. Various survival strategies must continue to be invented and explored. Although there is no final decision about the future of the house, some central role-playing factors in this often chaotic process are evident.

With the “Vision Document”, partners have been attracted to work with the inhabitants. This Housing Corporation is attracted by the role of self-management in our plan. By taking over administration and maintenance tasks in the building ourselves, the owner has less costs. However, one must be realistic about the internal dedication to self-management from the future inhabitants. Currently the obligation that one must ‘go to work or school’ is an eligible argument to reduce the available time to contribute to self-management. Indeed, the understanding and practice of self-organization within today's societal conditions must be addressed.

The private owner has not yet agreed to sell or at which amount. Official real-estate assessments suggest a property value of 1 million Euros. The Vereniging Poortgebouw’s partners have twice made offers based on these figures which were rejected by the “De Groene Groep”, although they initially only paid half of this sum. Attempts to acquire the property through lobbying alone have not been successful to this date. The owner is only willing to sell the Poortgebouw for an additional profit greatly exceeding the assessment or their investments. Otherwise, it would seem that the owner is confident that the Appeal Court will favor their juridical arguments and their rights as a private developer to exploit their properties for profit.

The owner potentially can be “pressured” to sell at the request of the City Council. In 2006, the traditional “Worker’s Party” came back into power. The inhabitants have support of various politicians in the council primarily for the social and cultural functions that Poortgebouw has played in the past. However the (private) investment in real-estate development is a clear priority. The City Council must decisively speak out their support for a socio-cultural function over office space. In the past, the City Council was unwilling to take a position or responsibility, dismissing it as a case of private ownership and development. At the same time, they ironically try hard to market Rotterdam as a “Creative City”. Rotterdam has furthermore an excessive amount of empty office space, a statistic which could also work in the favor of the inhabitants’ vision.

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 privatisation 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.

For latest information: www.poortgebouw.nl

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