

# The danger game / caution on vacancy

by Aetzel Griffioen

CAUTION 01. Working with vacancy means balancing on a precipice between the social domain and the economic. Every professional practice surrounding vacancy is directly linked to the tax benefits for home owners and for owners of empty buildings, the new right to buy policies and the latest attacks on social housing that minister Donner has started last Friday.

RENT 02. In Europe, the Dutch social housing is valued as one of the best of its kind. But the current Cabinet has decided that far fewer people should use it than is the case. As we speak, Government is taking on measures that will on average increase the costs of living from 1/3 to 1/2 of a household's income.

SLANTED 03. For a few years now, the housing debate has been framed in terms of 'scheefwonen' or 'slanted living', meaning that too rich people live in too cheap housing. These misers supposedly stagnate throughput, preventing less fortunate people from entering cheap housing.

LEVELLED 04. Now recent studies show the 'scheefwonen' problem to be a phantasm, but that won't change a thing for these policies. After all, the genius solution to the 'slanted living' problem that both government and certain housing corporations propose is this: demolish the social housing and build more expensive habitats, or renovate it and sell it off.

BONANZA 05. So the buildings that are supposedly occupied by miserly rich folks will not be used for new, poorer inhabitants. They will be removed from the social housing stock, and with the money new, more expensive houses will be built. And in the meantime, still more offices are built when we already have 6,7 million m<sup>2</sup> or 14% vacant.

VACANT 06. A stagnant economy, big renovation and demolishing areas for housing projects, way too much office space and a tax benefit if you can't rent out your space. Vacancy simply must be here to stay.

ILL 07. Once, vacancy was regarded as a social ill. Hence the permissive laws on squatting that reigned until last year. But now, the opinions surrounding vacancy are slanting. The law against vacancy is a farce and the extremely anti-social practice of anti-squat is actively promoting by government.

SICK 08. Anti-squat is the only really existing part of the supposed 'housing career'. The anti-squatter is enlisted by the company as a security enforcer, but in order to do his job, he has to pay the company he works for. Living as a job without benefits. Some career that is! Vacancy is now an economical good.

GOODS 09. Can we turn it into a social good? According to me, that is the leading question that every professional working with vacancy has to ask. Time and time again: if vacancy is mostly seen as a business opportunity, and less as an opportunity for social change, where do we want to take it?

1 OKT 2010 10. Squatting is now forbidden, but that was the case before it was permitted as well. Of course, squatting is still going on – and how else could it, when there simply aren't enough houses? This poses a question for all who want to work with vacancy. With whom are they going to align themselves?

POSITION 11. Especially in renovation areas, renters and squatters often already have established a resistance of sorts against specific plans of governments and corporations. Not that they are against any and every idea, but if planners keep understanding 'participation' as a box to be checked rather than the most important process, inhabitants will remain sure to act up.

CHIC 12. Ever since the idea of using vacancy has risen to the ranks of the more fashionable managers in office real estate, the housing sector and in government, they ask help from outside consultants. From us. Often, such consultants base themselves in a vacant building. Equally often, such consultants use the iconographic language of the *spray can* to show how relevant and daring their practice is.

INCLUSION 13. But just as anti-squat is only adventurous for the guards-who-pay-to-work, not for the anti-squat companies, so working with vacancy only becomes something laudable if you don't promise more than you deliver. Designing social processes through the re-use of vacant space – definitely. But only with a detailed idea of the social processes already in place.

THE POINT 14. Working with vacancy requires a critical mindset. If you are given an assignment, the trick is not completing it to the delight of just your current employer but in delighting all other parties involved too. And that may mean that you will have to change the assignment. Because a vacant space is never empty. It is always a space of conflict.

MAP OUT 15. In using vacant spaces to redesign the social structures of a place, therefore the first thing to do is to map out the social structures. Working with vacancy needs good *research*. In my view, the knowledge gained in the process of redesigning the social structures should be made public and it should be as open to participation from the parties involved as possible.

AXIS 16. The reason is simple. I believe that whoever gains knowledge, gains means to act. Since work with vacancy often happens in our 'prachtwijken' or problem areas, it is clear who should benefit. Vacancy for empowerment.

PIVOT 17. Or is it? After all, where government is concerned, vacancy is a relatively risk-free market niche. And now that most artists and cultural organisations are facing the axe in much the same way as the social housing sector, this is becoming all the more true. Time for a last parallel and a positive end note.

SEVER 18. Not five years ago, artists were deployed on quite a large scale to improve social relations in problem areas. In conjunction with designers and architects, they will fulfil this role even more after the severity of the cuts will have become completely apparent.

AUDIENCE 19. But since government money for such projects is coming to an end, and we – me too – have to get assignments from market parties now, the danger is that we become the

professionals and the people in whose name we supposedly work, will become our consumer audience.

DO 20. The real task will be to employ vacancy against the currently fashionable notion that art and culture are matters to be consumed in our spare time only. If anything, vacancy presents us with a gigantic opportunity to bring back the possibility to co-create our social relationships based on common instead of private needs. Therefore, invest your time in your project's area. Involve the parties still left out of the process. Show what you don't know. Ask around and only *then* design like a squatter: unafraid to lose. Create the common. Unlock the abundance that vacancy is. Enact real 'bewonersparticipatie'.

"The danger game / caution – on vacancy" Pecha Kucha lecture by Aetzel Griffioen (MA Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam / Skillcity: [www.vakmanstad.nl](http://www.vakmanstad.nl). Contact: [aetzel@gmail.com](mailto:aetzel@gmail.com)) delivered 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011 for Pecha Kucha Nederland at the 'Pecha Kucha night Rotterdam: Space in the interim'

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