



Housing Futures: An experimental get-together for a rekindled housing movement

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Abstract

In this conversation, organisers Setareh Noorani, Katía Truijen and René Boer critically discuss the Housing Futures weekend they facilitated in April 2022, reflecting on its archival and institutional roots, the newly made connections as well as its potential development in the years to come. They emphasise the curatorial gesture of welcoming and hosting the participants, across various communities engaging with questions around the (ongoing) housing crises, and giving way to shared stewardship as a fundamental, new role of the institution.

Keywords

Housing crises, housing futures, architecture of appropriation, archives, collecting, squatting, strategies, documentation

René Boer: It's November 8th. I'm sitting here with Katía and Setareh on the sixth floor of Het Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam, the Netherlands' national museum for architecture, design and digital culture. Apart from addressing current societal developments, we also are informed by the past as a source for the future; not in the least through taking care of the National Collection for Dutch Architecture and Urban Planning.

We're overlooking the city of Rotterdam, the sun has just set. We're here to reflect on the Housing Futures gathering we organised in April, to maybe draw some conclusions and some takeaways for the future. But before we do that, it will be good to get an idea of

what the Housing Futures get-together was about. Katía, would you like to give an introduction?

Katía Truijen: Yes. So we find ourselves in a time and in a city with serious housing struggles. Questions around housing are not new, but over the last decades, neoliberal urban policies have put the fundamental right to housing further under pressure. At the same time, The Netherlands is still known for its social housing policies and projects, as well as alternative and self-organised forms of living. We felt the need to come together in a moment where the housing movement is growing, and in which a variety of groups demand new housing policies and new housing futures. We invited members of different groups and collectives to discuss spatial strategies for housing alternatives during a weekend gathering that was supposed to happen in November last year. Because of COVID, we weren't able to physically meet and share thoughts, ideas and food as intended, so we postponed it a few times, until we finally organised it in April 2022.

We were interested to discuss the opportunities that arise when the right to housing rather than the right to property takes precedence in urban policy. We organised the weekend at the Independent School for the City in Rotterdam, a place focusing on researching and discussing urban issues including questions around housing, and we were hosted by Mike Emmerik, Michelle Provoost and Simone Rots. Catering was by Keju Kitchen.

René Boer: Let's talk about how the project is rooted in Het Nieuwe Instituut, where we are meeting now and which also hosts the National Collection for Architecture and Urban Planning.

Setareh Noorani: Yes, definitely. In the past years, Het Nieuwe Instituut has been rethinking and reflecting on our different projects shared by the Research and Collections departments: the ways in which we have collected, what we collect, and as such which actors have been left out of the equation. This collection, historically, has gathered mostly singular authors, of which many are white and male. That, for instance, means less regard



Figure 1

Housing Futures 2022. Graphic Design: Kirsten Spruit.

to collectives, how the collective has contributed to architecture culture, and what design languages they operated with.

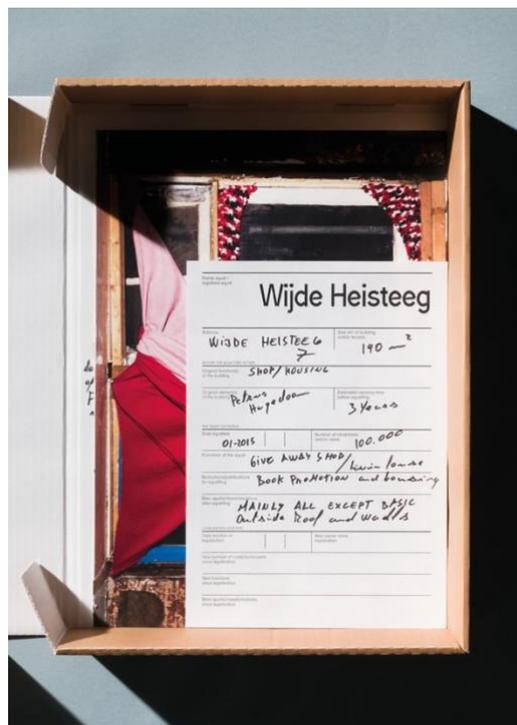
The research project ‘Architecture of Appropriation’, that started six years ago and was led by René Boer, Marina Otero Verzier and Katia Truijen, took the unorthodox step to acknowledge squatting as a spatial practice that deserves to be archived, to be seen as an architecture in itself, and in a wider sense to regard a collectively authored archive as fundamental to architecture culture. Projects like ‘Architecture of Appropriation’, and its follow-up ‘Appropriation as Collective Resistance/Housing Futures’ and ‘Collecting Otherwise’, opened up Het Nieuwe Instituut to these different voices in practice and the collection. It acknowledges ways of practising architecture that are not directly incorporated in Western paradigms, values, and aesthetics. I think projects like ‘Architecture of Appropriation’ also raised questions about the ways in which institutions are able to join in these debates. How are they able to make space for collectives that want to position themselves in the housing debate, acting as a channel for these types of conversations? How can Het Nieuwe Instituut make a lasting impact through its collection?

René Boer: ‘Architecture of Appropriation’ indeed aimed to acknowledge the enormous contribution of the squatting movement to the Dutch urban landscape over the last few decades, but at the same time refrained from historicising this movement. Instead, it focused on how squatting is still functioning and making a contribution today. With ‘Architecture of Appropriation’, we’ve been looking at the different ways of working within the spatial practice of squatting as we collaborated with six different communities across the Netherlands, drawing on the kinds of architectural appropriations that they have created as the departure point for this project. ‘Architecture of Appropriation’

Figure 2

Left:
Wijde Heisteeg.
AOAA3. Collectie
Het Nieuwe
Instituut /
Archief AOAA

Right:
ADM Pizza
Tower. Photo:
Johannes
Schwartz
(reproduction).
AOAA10.
Collectie Het
Nieuwe Instituut
/ Archief AOAA



subsequent iteration - 'Appropriation as Collective Resistance'- is now on display as part of the 'Designing the Social' exhibition that is currently on show in Het Nieuwe Instituut.

Katia Truijen: In addition to squatting communities' tactics of collective resistance, this new iteration also focused on other groups fighting in their own way for affordable and non-normative forms of housing. Again, this is not just about architecture, but also about other kinds of political activity in public space, such as the use of free radio and digital networks, graphic design and forms of action.

Setareh Noorani: We invited a wide array of actors, not only from our own networks, but also from 'networks of networks', such as personal connections and voices we admired but hadn't worked with before. For instance, through the projects 'Architecture of Appropriation' and 'Appropriation as Collective Resistance', we were already in contact with various legalised squats, the communities around those, and squatting communities that still are active nowadays. We approached them alongside some relatively new conversation partners to this iteration, which included groups advocating for non-normative housing. The latter, for us, includes housing projects operating within the set boundaries of a 'housing market', but actively seeking dialogue with actors like the municipality and housing corporations, seeking to take a seat at the table. Through negotiating, they respond as brokers of some sorts for housing spaces, or rather living spaces in the city. One key example in Rotterdam is the ongoing initiative Stad in de Maak.

René Boer: We also wanted to involve the people who have been active in the housing protests over the past year. Because it's quite rare in the Netherlands to have large housing protests, the latest one dating back from long ago. In the past two years or so, this new housing justice movement erupted with large demonstrations in the larger cities like Rotterdam and Amsterdam. We had quite a few people from these movements on board as well. What we thought was quite interesting is that we brought people from squatting communities, other non-normative housing forms and these movements together around one table, all the while trying to build a lot of new connections.

Setareh Noorani: And, we brought together different generations. The younger generation, currently active, are seeking examples from the past. So in that sense, it was very interesting to have people present at Housing Futures who were (and are) active advocates of labour struggles, for instance through the FNV (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging). I think it was a weekend that earmarked solidarity across these different generations and across different struggles that are inherent to living in a city like Rotterdam or Amsterdam. The Housing Futures weekend made it possible for Het Nieuwe Instituut to rethink, as I tried to say before, its engagement with these different movements, communities and audiences. Of course, we are able to create space within research projects. But then, how to make sure that these spaces are nurtured, that the people we engage with are not forgotten, that the discussions are still alive? And moreover, is any kind of implementation or long-term thinking also considered in the plans? Or else, these projects will just remain a blip on the radar. In the face of a long-term housing struggle it is important to keep considering how relevant you are as an institution to that exact (housing) struggle.

Figure 3

Plantage Dok. From:
Architecture of
Appropriation 2019.
Photo: Johannes
Schwartz.



René Boer: Yes, I think that's a question that needs to be discussed over and over again. But at the same time, I think there's still this difficulty of Het Nieuwe Instituut being a national institution. Indeed, an institution funded by the same state, that introduced neoliberal housing policies and criminalised squatting. This connection should not be forgotten.

Setareh Noorani: Yes, and something that was also repeatedly discussed during the weekend was the dichotomy between centralisation and decentralisation. If we're thinking about tools or knowledge, or even bringing together these different types of communities and actors that organise themselves around a particular theme, then how can a single actor like HNI position itself in that conversation? Can it even? How can we even think of this collection, or a single archive, as the place where everything needs to go? How can we even think of a 'single' toolkit as the sole thing that comes out of this process, out of all these discussed notions, out of the possible outcomes discussed? Organisations and grassroots communities want to archive for themselves, but they also would like to receive help from institutions.

Katía Truijen: That's why we invited examples of both autonomous and institutional archives, as that was something we already encountered. Previously, during the Architecture of Appropriation project, we noticed that different nodes in different networks sometimes overlap. For instance, here in the National Collection, we also refer to other autonomous archives and the other way around as well. It is important to establish these connections, but also to ask what is valuable to document and to archive for future generations to learn about this particular housing movement.

René Boer: It is interesting how this project originally emerged as an urgency coming from a National Collection that asked itself how to open up its collection and include more voices into the archives. But over time, we also transformed the project into something receptive to resonate with urgencies present in society, such as people's struggle to house themselves and the way in which people can use archives in these struggles.

Setareh Noorani: Also, the archives that emerge in these squatting and non-normative housing groups are also filled with urgency as a lot of these spaces are temporary. Where does the archive go? There are urgencies around the archive, but also the archive is urgent. The question is how to prolong these conversations around those particular archives. That's almost an existential question that you can ask to institutions: how can they be porous enough for these exchanges to continue and at the same time to remain a stable factor? In some ways this stability comes from the fact that, as a publicly funded institution, you just have more access to particular resources.

René Boer: That is also the danger of these movements that suddenly erupt, become really big, but also seem to die down suddenly. For example, this summer some of these movements announced that they would organise a lot of actions in the following autumn, but not much materialised. We can raise the question: what is the sustainability of these movements, and how can more stable institutions play a role in enlarging this sustainability? These and many other questions were discussed during the Housing Futures weekend itself, starting with a workshop on the importance of archiving housing struggles.

Katía Truijen: For this workshop, we invited various voices. For instance, we had Eef Vermeij from the International Institute for Social History, which hosts the largest squatting archive of the Netherlands with a particular documentation of squatted properties - a lot of posters and books. Even though we were putting more emphasis on documenting the spatial practice of the squatting movement, we also had Tashina Blom as one of our guests, who was involved with the Maagdenhuis occupation and its subsequent archive. Her PhD research is focused on what ways new generations can learn from protest tactics of previous generations through archival practices. Following talks on documentation and dissemination, Federico Poni, one of the people involved in Habitat, Italy - a self organised space and communal living project - shared more about their interesting digital wiki as a way of archiving their own practice. We discussed the need to have your own server, and use open source technology, as opposed to being dependent on Big Tech or institutional software.

Setareh Noorani: Federico Poni mentioned that everything that they do at Habitat results in documents for their archive and wiki. These documents and archives perform as an assemblage of different activities and ways of living. You can almost do an ethnographic study of an entire living community through these documents. It should be questioned whether everything should always be archived. And where does such an archive go?

Katía Truijen: We discussed something similar with Philippa Driest and Louwrens Botha about the archive of the Pension Almonde housing project, which had to be vacated a little bit before the Housing Futures weekend took place. The moment of coming together and thinking about the archive collectively became sort of a reenactment of the collective spirit and its community again. As an example of archiving as practice, I think this is very interesting.

René Boer: It brought together a lot of different groups who were keeping up the squatting struggle in different parts of the Netherlands, in different ways. There were different generations, from students based in Amsterdam to groups who have been active for a couple decades, for instance at Landbouwbelang in Maastricht. It was mostly an exchange of different tactics. For context it's maybe good to mention here that squatting used to be legal in the Netherlands and has been criminalised in 2010, which makes it very difficult nowadays. Repression has been stepped up in many ways. It's currently almost impossible to squat, even though in the past it was a normalised way of housing. Today squatting means fighting for every inch and trying to keep it up every single day. This makes squatting tough for people as a form of regular housing. Still, people are doing it. This session was interesting as a way of sharing some strategies, but also to come to the understanding that people are not going at it individually. There's all kinds of groups who are still using the traditional squatting methods as a specific way of intervening in the urban environment and working together to take over the space and shape it for their own needs.

Katía Truijen: Then we had a session on new models for alternative housing, in which we were looking at different experiments and proven models based on self-organisation. The discussion revolved around the possibilities and impossibilities or difficulties to normalise such housing models in the Netherlands. Nienke Terpsma spoke about coops and their history in Switzerland. We had someone from Bajesdorp, which used to be a squatting community in Amsterdam and which has now developed a very interesting cooperative housing model to maintain themselves in the long term. We also showed the movie 'Mile Wide Inch Deep' by Aska Welford and Fran Edergerly.

Setareh Noorani: It was a beautiful movie about housing co-ops. They also visited queer spaces, community gardens, and local planning initiatives around Europe. I still very much admire their commitment to actually seek out hopeful housing futures. They focused on experimental ways in which people live together, and how communities are trying to figure it out for themselves at this point, with a specific interest of how queer communities are doing that. With both of them having a background as architects, they were also interested in the specific architectural structures.

René Boer: I really liked seeing a movie. I thought it was a great addition to the weekend, together with the other movie on Landbouwbelang, a very large squat in Maastricht which has existed for 20 years and is now under threat. I think these films and other forms of art that show some of the depth and richness and beauty of life in these non-normative housing communities are really important to show; especially when we keep talking about the politics of archives and specific models on how to create housing coops. Sometimes we get a bit stuck into the specificities of these models and then it really helps to show what we are actually aspiring towards. It's a different way of living and sometimes you need such a movie to be reminded of that.

Setareh Noorani: Definitely. It is important to reflect on this question of what it means to think of a housing future. For me, it really is to be able to cut yourself loose from the current political imaginary, which is suffocating, almost allowing for no future because

there is no alternative. And then to be able to dream and to find your refusal in this dreaming; collectively thinking “okay, but then how do we want to live” and “how do we want to live, not only for this generation, but for the coming seven generations?” - as the municipality of Rotterdam has been talking about during the City Makers’ Congress recently. They were stating that the timespan we ought to think in/for is seven generations. It was such a triggering question for me. What do we know about life seven generations from now? We don't even know whether people have any private possessions by then. Is there any monetary system, and what communities are out there? Do we still have a concrete building housing the National Collection? Do we have a need for these types of institutions? Will Rotterdam still be there at all?

Katía Truijen: To bring it back again to the present moment it is important to realise all these interesting alternatives and imaginaries can still be found, for instance, in the legalised squats in the Netherlands. This topic is something we discussed as well: how many of these started as free spaces that have been legalised over time and still maintain affordable space for living and working in the city. Their future remains a question mark however. So, how do we ensure that also such places continue to exist, but also stay relevant for new generations? This discussion was also given more context by Michele Provoost’s lecture, who has a lot of knowledge and experience on creating spaces for communities, but also has an extensive body of research on the history of social housing in the Netherlands.

René Boer: Indeed, over the last few decades social housing has been sold off on a very large scale as part of neoliberal housing strategies, which continues to push more and more people into precarious housing conditions today. I think we're witnessing the first general acknowledgement that this is creating a lot of problems. I wouldn't say we're witnessing a turnaround, but the acknowledgement of these problems is maybe the first thing.

Katía Truijen: In that light it's also interesting to discuss the last session on the housing struggles in relation to the movements and communities.

Setareh Noorani: Yes indeed. As said, the broad network that we brought together also is invested in political activism or for other forms of political organising. Given the current state of the housing struggle and its acceleration over the last two years there is a need to keep on discussing these political demands in different organisations. It's also important that these different groups find each other. It thus was very good to be in the same space with each other to find and rekindle forms of solidarity with each other's struggles. A key question in this session focused on how to connect the recent protests with the squatting groups, the existing communal living projects, and new experiments in the fields of cooperative housing? How can these groups reinforce each other? Some speakers were representatives of the recent Havenstraat squat in Rotterdam. That, again, was a squatting action that brought together many different people, not in the least people who were very familiar with labour organising. The FNV, as one of the co-organisers at Havenstraat, thought it was important for them to remind us of community organising as a traditional familiar practice in the Netherlands. Workplace organisation, organisation in the face of

René Boer: I really would hope that Housing Futures could grow to become this independent institution, serving as a point of connection in the housing movement. As we're already trying to bring important movements from different cities together, and we come together in assemblies, the focus should be on curated, thoughtful, empathic ways of organising these groups in solidarity with each other. I think this can be very powerful. But it needs indeed, resources and time, while we're all living in precarious housing ourselves.

Setareh Noorani: Another thing that I brought up as a point of conversation here at Het Nieuwe Instituut, but also with both of you, is that the conversations that we're having are also quite relevant for politicians, or others embodying different stakes in the housing market. How are we still able to find our ways in these types of conversations? I think your and Marina's intervention 'Letters To The Mayor' was very inspiring. In this project, 66 architects and urbanists wrote 46 letters to the Mayor of Rotterdam, as a result of a year-long collaboration on the theme of 'City Forces' between Het Nieuwe Instituut and Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York. It could be fruitful to again work towards a similar intervention.

Katía Truijen: Parallel to sensing the need for these more public moments, I also really enjoyed seeing people making friends during the Housing Futures weekend and exchanging all types of knowledge; from legal knowledge to practical, technical skills. How would you set up your wiki? Or: What kinds of legal housing models are to be considered? I think it's good to realise that these movements don't only exist when there's a demonstration or a weekend like this; they operate under the radar and in the midst of all these housing possibilities. These friendships and connections are important to foster.

Setareh Noorani: Building trust and solidarity.

René Boer: Thanks for this wonderful conversation, to be continued!

About the participants

Setareh Noorani is an architect and researcher. She uses various media in her projects and artistic contributions to explore ways of publicising and embodying, questioning processes of trauma and time; always moving in the grey space between academic research and art. As a researcher at Het Nieuwe Instituut, she focuses on the qualitative, paradigm-shifting notions of decoloniality, feminisms, queer ecologies, non-institutional representations, and the implications of the collective, more-than-human body in architecture, its heritage and ambiguous future scenarios. Contact: s.noorani@hetnieuweinstituut.nl

Katía Truijen works as a media researcher, curator and musician, is based in Rotterdam and often takes the train. Her research focuses on modes of attuning collectively to changing socio-political and ecological realities through sonic and spatial production. She develops public formats - from conversations, listening sessions, performances and parties to publications - always situated and fostering collaboration. Katía is part of Loom, co-founder

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René Boer works as a critic, curator and organiser in and beyond the fields of architecture, art, design and heritage. He is based between Amsterdam and Cairo, founding partner at Loom and is a driving force behind the Failed Architecture platform. In recent years he developed a wide array of exhibitions, public programmes and research projects, often with a focus on spatial justice, urban imaginations and queer tactics. Contact: rene@loom.ooo