

**1999**

**'NEWS FROM NOW-HERE'**

**cooperative housing and working within 'De Nieuwe Blauwen'**

On the threshold of the 21st century we have come to realize that social and cultural pluralism are necessary in order to revitalize contemporary urban life. The demand to choose our own friends, neighbours and colleagues - once denounced as transgression, sectarianism or ghettoism - proves to be a powerful remedy for isolation, loneliness and boredom. The rise of collective identities (gabbers, senior citizens, queers, Friesians, vegetarians, dope heads, etcetera) should be judged as an important social tendency. This tendency is recognized by local city planners and housing corporation officials who have expressed a willingness to inject a greater amount of diversity into their new building projects. Armed with a sense of history, one might consider this development to be a victory of utopianism or collectivism. However, most contemporary publications on this subject appear to be hostile to the discourse of the sixties and seventies, in which significant notions like collectivism, utopianism and counterculture played a major role. Today, this discourse no longer focuses on ideological themes. In her book *Woon-werkprojecten in zelfbeheer* (Rotterdam 1991) - dealing with the possibilities and experiences of cooperative housing and working projects, author Els de Jong summarizes the advantages of communal practices:

- collective property offers a payable alternative since it combines the advantages of both ownership and rent;
- active participation in the process of renovation proves to be financially attractive - especially in terms of loans and rent;
- self-management stimulates social cohesion amongst participants and has a potency to revitalize the social structure of a neighbourhood;
- self-renovation enables people to select the building materials they want to use more carefully and forces them to formulate own standards of quality;
- cooperative housing projects are more 'customer-friendly' than formal housing corporations;
- cooperative housing and working projects stimulate new social and economic activities.

Perhaps the most important aspect of her investigation is the conclusion that cooperative housing and working projects are voluntary enterprises. As the activities require a lot of time and energy, De Jong remarks, self-management should never be imposed on people - people have to make demands for cooperation themselves.

In a society that values the rights and duties of individual citizens above anything else, cooperative ways of living and working are always social experiments. People have to learn to be cooperative. In this sense, cooperative housing and working projects are social laboratories. It is exactly this experimental aspect that is too often absent in literature on cooperative housing and working. Any single project consists of different people, different attitudes, different social, cultural and economic backgrounds, different goals and ideals, different contexts and geographic locations. As social laboratories, all projects provide their own popular narratives. In this article, I would like to stress the importance of these popular narratives.

For more than ten years I am involved in a Rotterdam cooperative housing and working project, called De Nieuwe Blauwen [The New Blues] - a co-op consisting of

approximately 45 people, 18 apartments, 10 studio's, 6 workshops, a vegetarian restaurant, an artists society, a soccer team, a small youth centre and a zine (*De Blauwe Botervlieg - The Blue Butterfly*). First, I want to unveil the specific geographical nature of De Nieuwe Blauwen in order to explain our ways of dealing with the praxis of cooperation and with the identity of our project. After this introduction, I will try to elucidate some problems - or social practices if you please - that have risen from this specific context.

### **urban war zones**

Right from the start, De Nieuwe Blauwen has always been situated within an urban war zone. The city of Rotterdam is famous for its policy on renovation, the so-called 'stadsvernieuwing'. Thousands of old houses have been torn down and thousands of new houses have emerged. In the old neighbourhoods like Het Oude Noorden, Crooswijk and Kralingen, many people were constantly drifting from one house to another. The many empty buildings not only provided excellent opportunities for squatters, but also for idealist social workers who envisioned alternative uses of old buildings. In the eighties, a group of these drifters, squatters and idealists had set up an informal network, initiated by a small independent union and the Woongroepenwinkel. This group criticized the local government for tearing down too many remarkable buildings and prepared plans to maintain some of them. For various reasons we focussed on the Vlinderbuurt in Kralingen: most of us lived close to this part of town and the local community centre showed sympathy for our plans and expressed a willingness to cooperate. More important, this specific quarter offered a great variety of different types of buildings. After a period of protest and negotiations we finally reached an agreement with the owner of a building at the Vredenoordlaan, consisting of 18 apartments. Five of them were already squatted and we encouraged friends to squat this place - a process which made negotiating a little more easy. Finally, the owner, a local housing corporation, sold us the building which was in a bad state. In return we had to renovate the building in accordance with contemporary demands. For that matter, squatters and new participants founded a society: De Nieuwe Blauwen, which became the new owner of the building.

In the beginning of this section I made a reference to a war zone. Large scale projects like the 'stadsvernieuwing' do not deal with individual citizens at all. They occupy a part of a city for several years and subject it to constructors, fences and police control. The idea of a war zone especially makes sense in the Vlinderbuurt. After the houses were torn down in this quarter, constructors discovered that the old nineteenth century gas factory had polluted the soil so terribly that cleansing was necessary. As a result, the city of Rotterdam initiated one of the biggest soil cleansing programs in the history of the Netherlands. For us however, this 'bodemsanering' project strengthened our feeling that De Nieuwe Blauwen is an island in a depressing war zone. Surrounded by huge iron fences, barbed wire, rent-a-cops, loud machines, trucks, clouds of dust and sand, one might get the idea that the end of civilized Rotterdam is near. I stress these circumstantial facts, as they still dominate our internal and external policies and - as a result - contribute to our collective identity and narratives.

The main thing the participants of De Nieuwe Blauwen shared with each other, was their existential dependency on this specific building. De Nieuwe Blauwen is not the result of an ideology or a close group of friends. It is the building itself that produces a collective and it is self-management that gives form to the collective. Most of us were too poor to invest private capital, so mutual cooperation seemed to be the only effective alternative. Stuck between 'stadsvernieuwing' and 'bodemsanering' and suddenly

trapped in a building that had become our property, we faced the birth of a small community of people. Within this group, three factions were visible: first the squatters. Then there was a couple of devoted anarchists, using city renewal as a forum to express demands of social and cultural pluralism. Finally, there were the drifters - forced to drift from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, trying to escape the 'stadsvernieuwing' in order to live more cheaply. As everyone knows, the rents of old houses are much lower.

### **ad hoc policies**

Different people, different motives to live in Kralingen, different attitudes and backgrounds... where do we go from here? During the first meetings in the late eighties it became obvious that we should concentrate on the existential zone - that is, the newly seized building. We agreed to invest eight hours in the project every week and included this agreement in mutual contracts we all had to sign. Maintaining and improving the building and the investment of hours in the project have become the central activity of our collective. The group of people involved was so heterogeneous that it was impossible to reach agreements on social, political and ecological themes. However, focussing on the praxis of the project, turned out to be an excellent theme: demolishing, painting, bricklaying, plastering and gardening are not only enjoyable social practices, they stimulate sociability, self-respect and pride as well.

As a result, we perforce accepted ad hoc-policies: as soon as we were faced with a problem, we organized a meeting. We have been doing this for ten years now and it still works, however, this process has its dark side. Every project thrives on devoted individuals who put a lot of blood, sweat and tears in it. Sometimes they come up with brilliant plans and ideas, suitable to strengthen the cohesion of the group or to improve the praxis of the co-op. Within De Nieuwe Blauwen, however, these vanguardists were usually faced with distrust. Plans are usually expensive and they might infect the height of the rents. Secondly, plans require a lot of work and not everyone wants to invest the same amount of time and energy in a project. As a consequence, the meetings often showed a hostility towards these leaders. Within a period of two years, we fired the coordinator, the constructor and the architect, we got into conflict with the community centre and local politicians, and we criticized some of our own vanguardists so heavily that they were forced to withdraw themselves from the project.

In a negative sense, one might call this attitude paranoia. In a more positive sense, one could judge this unwillingness to follow our own entrepreneur's as an attempt to get a grip on highly complex developments and investments. In other words, we had to slow down. As an organized community, De Nieuwe Blauwen invested more than two million guilders - borrowed from a bank - in order to adapt the building to our wishes and demands. Suddenly, a bunch of poor weirdo's were running a business which provided bad dreams about bankruptcy, tax police and possible internal corruption: Can we trust this constructor in his Mercedes Benz? Can we trust our own book keeper? Do we trust our own guys and girls who negotiate with banks and construction companies? And if we fail, do we end up in a psychological Death Row, faced with dept claims which will hunt us until we die? In other words, we had enough problems to justify our feelings of paranoia.

After a euphoric start, we exactly showed how a revolution eats its own children and breeds a tongue-wagging community. As a result, we isolated ourselves from the outside world. However, it is here, in this warfare, that a collective identity - De Nieuwe Blauwen - was actually born. De Nieuwe Blauwen came to adopt a negative identity. To survive the shitty conditions of 'stadsvernieuwing' and 'bodemsanering', and to

confront ourselves with the killing rules of the market economy, we stood up, had to rely on each other, and really became a collective. Paranoia changed into pride, and fear was transformed into self-confidence. This transformation is illustrated by our first 'anthem': Ice T & Body Count's song *There Goes the Neighborhood* - without doubt the most popular song during the hardships of the renovating process:

There goes the neighborhood.  
We're here,  
We ain't goin' nowhere,  
We're movin' right next door to you.  
And those of you who don't like it,  
Can suck my motherfuckin' dick.  
There goes the neighborhood.

Our former weakness - the inability to provide a mutual ideology - became our strength. Even today, we still do not have regular meetings, but we meet when necessary - most decisions are still taken ad hoc.

### **chaosmosis**

How do these chaotic tendencies effect a group of people? First, there is no real division of labour within De Nieuwe Blauwen: everything can be done by everyone and everyone has the right to speak up and say what he/she thinks or wants. If you can find members who support you, you are free to initiate new projects. This could be a garden on the roof, or a sewer system that makes use of rain water, but it could also be the wish to organize a soccer tournament or to participate in squatter's meetings or artistic initiatives. If these plans do not cost any money, you do not even need the approval of De Nieuwe Blauwen as a whole - let us define our policy as 'chaosmosis'.

Secondly, it effects the self-confidence of individuals - if you ask me, the most important argument to get involved in the kind of communal practices we all discuss here. Unintentionally, De Nieuwe Blauwen produces home-boys and home-girls, proud to live in a self-renovated building in Kralingen and usually strong enough to stand up for their own ideas and convictions. Contemporary urban life with its ideology of the Individual Citizen, is often dominated by feelings of anonymity, isolation and loneliness. Unemployment, drug addiction, a shortage of social skills, psychological problems - problems De Nieuwe Blauwen have to face too - often result in a low self opinion. I am still amazed to see how our project unintentionally improved the self-confidence of some members. Most of us walk with our backs straight these days, knowing that there is always back up. Loners and weirdo's are not harrassed by conservative neighbours or aggressive kids, for they know 'it's one of Them'. If, due to personal conditions, you are not able to pay your rent, there is always a possibility to make a deal with the collective.

Since we focus on practical activities, more people have the opportunity to become an honourable member of De Nieuwe Blauwen. Not only the administrative elite is appraised, but also the soccer players, the gardeners, the cooks, the musicians, the artists and the plasterers. In this sense, De Nieuwe Blauwen is an affinity machine, a concept that promotes affinity groups - anyone can use the concept of De Nieuwe Blauwen according to their own lifestyles and demands. De Nieuwe Blauwen as a concept also provides a sense of authority for the powerless: you can always pretend you are the president of an institution, the secretary of a housing corporation, a social worker or an artist or whatever. Everyone is free to use our official structures for their own personal lives. We do not intervene as long as things work out right - if not, it is

time for another meeting. A practical concept like De Nieuwe Blauwen provides a virtual authority which can be used in a playful way: it is not only funny to pretend you are an important person, in a society characterized by poor and powerless people, it might be wise to act as if you were an influential person - call it 'communist-egoism' or whatever you like.

Thirdly, home-boys and home-girls stimulate feelings of safety in the neighbourhood. When we caught two burglars who tried to steal our sink and lead, a neighbourhood committee granted us with flowers and gifts. Four years ago a few members of De Nieuwe Blauwen started a youth club for street kids which is still a success. They play soccer with them, teach them everything about graffiti and painting, and take them out to the Kralingse Bos or to the soccer stadium of Sparta. Of course, all these activities are small scale activities, but I am convinced they effect the social environment of De Vlinderbuurt deeply.

To summarize the above: De Nieuwe Blauwen provides social and cultural narratives - bound together by a building that was seized more or less coincidentally. Not based on political ideas or idealist pre-occupations, De Nieuwe Blauwen gives expression to common urban people, trying to overcome survival, isolation and boredom by bringing a small piece of the city, that is necessary for their own existence, under control. A lot of us were unemployed or working in the arts, so we had a lot of time to invest in the project. Cooperative housing and working projects fight a permanent war against the colonisation of space and time: you will have to find an autonomous zone where you can live and work cooperatively, whether it is a farm, an empty factory building or a newly built studio complex. Further, you will have to invest a lot of time in such projects. Therefore it is almost impossible to work for a boss for forty hours a week, for you will definitely lose your week-ends and holidays.

Judged from these perspectives, I am very suspicious about the idea that cooperative housing and working projects could be imposed on people as new, attractive forms of privatising - as some socialist politicians in Rotterdam have suggested. Cooperative housing and working projects deal differently with space and time - with living and working if you please, and it is hardly impossible to combine this intensive life with the merits of modern life: wage slavery and landlordism. A plea for co-operative housing and working, should always imply pleas against compulsory labour and the illusion of The Individual Citizen. The right to chose the kind of work you really would like to do and granting a basis income for every individual - issues raised already by the unemployment movement and green-left parties - could be a good start. Co-operation and mutual aid are very dear to us, but we usually lack the time or space to really bring them into play.

Finally, to end this short impression of personal experiences in this field, cooperative housing and working projects tend to forms of tribalism, to collective identities based on the affinity group principle, and seems as such a threat to the idea of The Individual Citizen, the autonomous subject. But how do we deal with groups - whether they be travellers, gabbers, gays, vegetarians, Moroccans or dope heads - in a society that legally and morally recognizes and values only individuals? For the utopians gathered here: we will have to envision new social and cultural practices in order to formulate creative answers to the problems of work, housing and anonymity. In this sense, co-operative housing and working projects like De Nieuwe Blauwen, provide countless experiences and data. If Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are right in pointing out that utopia is not only a 'no-where' but a 'now-here' as well, than cooperative housing and working projects are utopian narratives pre-eminently. As the same authors remark: "To create is to resist".