

Kraken - The Netherlands

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Kraken is living in – or using otherwise – a dwelling without the consent of the owner.

Krakers take buildings with the intention of relatively long-term use. *Kraken* is organized or at least supported and/or inspired by a social movement.

The common English translation is "squatting". This translation is somewhat problematic, because the term squatting also covers a short-term use of buildings, for example as crash pads. The notion of relatively long term use, that is part of the concept of *kraken*, implies that *krakers* make necessary repairs and invest in basic amenities.

From 1963, the practice of *kraken* became more and more established. It was fuelled by an increasing supply of empty houses as an effect of planned large scale urban transformation.

The terms *kraken* and *krakers* came in use in 1969, when an Amsterdam-based group that identified itself as "*Woningbureau* (Housing Bureau) *de Kraker*", published a *kraakhandleiding* (squatting manual). The verb *kraken* means to crack. "*Krakers*" originally referred to criminals who specialize in cracking vaults. The manual emphasized the respectability aspect of *kraken*: "Furnish your home as quickly as possible. Invite your neighbours to come over for coffee [...]. Clean your windows, paint window frames and exterior doors, enter into a dialogue with the neighbours." While remaining a highly controversial issue, *kraken* came to enjoy some legitimacy and support. Polls show that a

large minority of the Dutch population supported *kraken*, while a majority of Amsterdam's population was in favour of it (Pruijt 2013). Compared to squatting in other countries, the level of acceptance of *kraken* - as at least a reasonable if not beneficial and exciting way to make use of unused space - and concomitantly a willingness on the part of the *krakers* to talk to the authorities, may be a special feature. The custom developed that once the *krakers* had a bed, table and chair in the house, and had replaced the front door lock, the police were supposed not to intervene.

For the casual observer, the generally relaxed nature the practice can easily be obscured by the spectacular eviction-related violent confrontations with the police that also occurred, especially during the early 1980s. However, compared to the hundreds of buildings that were either voluntarily given up or legalized (around 200 buildings in Amsterdam were legalized), the confrontations were exceptions.

Around 1970, *kraken*, promoted by the anarchist/hippie *Kabouters* (gnome) movement, spread across the country, and into all possible types of real estate. Support groups appeared that operated advisory services ("kraakspreekuren"). Social centers and *kraakcafe's* (squatters' bars) served as meeting points in a nationwide network. There were newsletters, special radio stations and regular meetings on the neighbourhood, city and national levels.

According to a study, done by mobilizing the network of local *krakers* for the data collection, Amsterdam housed around 9,000 squatters (Van der Raad 1981). And Duivenvoorden (2000) estimated that in the Netherlands as a whole, between 1965 and 1999, 50,000 people lived as *krakers* at one time or another. After the 1980s, numbers declined because changes in the law made it easier for owners to obtain an eviction, and above all because of the increased use of "anti-kraak" occupants. *Anti-kraak* occupants are basically tenants who are denied tenant's rights, and serve as security guards.

Practices similar to *kraken* exist in all Western nations. To some extent these practices are interconnected as result of international mobility and the sharing of information and ideas. The logo of the international squatter's movement, a circle crossed by a lightning-shaped arrow, originated in the Netherlands. The first version of the logo appeared in 1979, in *Kraakkrant* (Squatter's paper) #28.

A large part of the action - in Amsterdam more than half of it (Van der Raad 1981: 37) took place in working class neighbourhoods located around the city centres. This involved buildings that had become empty because of the planned construction of new social housing. With very few exceptions, *krakers* in these areas left voluntarily without protest in time for the scheduled demolition and construction work to start. This is because they approved this specific type of urban renewal dubbed "building for the neighbourhood".

In many other cases, *krakers* wanted control over building or land use, for example in Amsterdam's Nieuwmarkt neighbourhood in the early 1970 where activists attempted to block subway and urban highway construction. Often, *krakers* obstructed the plans of property speculators. This led to highly contested evictions, but also to legalization of occupations. This had a long-term effect: because of this, there are more low or moderate income people living individually or communally on expensive locations. Various projects that combine housing, artists' workspaces and venues for alternative culture, such as the Poortgebouw in Rotterdam, owe their existence to the movement (Breek and de Graad 2001; Kaulingfreks et al. 2009).

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