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## DEATH AND LIFE OF AMSTERDAM'S FREE CULTURAL PLACES

In 1961, Jane Jacobs wrote her bestselling book about city planning: "The Death and Life of Great American Cities". Her plea for the importance of diversity and dynamics in cities, together with Richard Florida's theory of the creative class, is nowadays adopted by Amsterdam urban planning and has inspired many other town planners around the globe. However, whereas quality of life, sustainability, densification, creativity and above all, economic growth, are dominant narratives in Amsterdam planning, recent mapping shows free cultural places are declining, putting Amsterdam's diversity under pressure.

### Urban decline and growth

In the 1960's and 70's, Amsterdam faced a rapid population decline, stimulated by a national policy of controlled suburbanization. The planning department proposed a modernist approach with plans for the Bijlmer district, a metro line and the massive demolition of old houses and districts. In this urban crisis, the squatting movement played an important role in the turnover towards a more adaptive approach, called "Bouwen voor de Buurt". Nowadays, Amsterdam's population is growing at a fast pace to 820.000 at the end of 2014. Housing prices are mounting and the pressure on urban land is high. This trend is accompanied by gentrification, the socio-economic upward movement of city districts, steered by the influx of higher educated and upper-middle income households. In Amsterdam's planning and housing policies, gentrification is facilitated by the selling of social housing and investments in the spatial dynamics of the 'roll-out of the inner city'. Amsterdam's Structural Vision 2040 is called "Economically strong and sustainable". As a recent study of Nicole Kirchberger from the Weimar University and the Amsterdam Planning Department shows, the dominant narrative in this planning doctrine is economic growth. The sharp edges of a purely economy driven planning are then mitigated by sustainability and social policies.

### Free cultural places and cultural breeding places

The trend of re-urbanization was already taking shape and the end of the 1980's. Numerous squats and free cultural places disappeared since then, while some of them have been legalized. In the early 2000's, protest against the disappearance of these places mounted. Amsterdam, inspired by the new theories of creative cities, installed the so-called policy of 'cultural breeding places'. In this way, some living and workplaces for artists could be saved from the pressure of mounting ground prices and urban developments. A lot of studies have been done on the differences between free cultural spaces and cultural breeding places. The main differences lie in the spontaneous development of free places versus breeding places and the extent of self-organization. Whereas cultural breeding places are subject to governmental and market ground policies, free cultural places have their origin in the spontaneous use of urban land and real estate by self-organization. Therefore, cultural breeding places can replace some of the functions of free cultural places, but can never be as spontaneous and independent from urban policies. In 2001, the study of De Vrije Ruimte: "Laat 1000 Vrijplaatsen bloeien", defined and mapped Amsterdam's free cultural places in the 1980's and 2001. According to this study, free cultural places are defined by 1) A mix of societal, creative, work, living and cultural and public functions; 2) Self-organization; 3) Collectivity; 4) Societal engagement.

### Mapping Amsterdam's free cultural places

The study of De Vrije Ruimte mapped about 125 free cultural places in Amsterdam around 1985. In 2001, about 68 of them were left. Those left, were located more outside the city center. Also the study showed, that the public functions of these places were diminishing as they were more isolated and further away from the city center. After the policy of cultural breeding places began at the same time, about 60 cultural breeding places have been started, some of which were free cultural places before. Most of the new ones are located outside the city center. Since 2001, there have been several discussions about mapping the free cultural spaces again. In 2014, De Vrije Ruimte made another attempt together with the Amsterdam Planning Department. The study was made by Renee Vroom for her master thesis at the University of Groningen, during an internship at the Amsterdam Planning Department. The same criteria for free cultural spaces were used as in 2001 and non-spontaneously originated and non-self-organized cultural breeding places were initially not mapped. Because the definition of free cultural places is not defined in a hard, clear-cut way and the listed places are probably not complete, this study must be seen as an attempt to initiate further studies and mapping of Amsterdam's free cultural places nowadays. According to this study, about 27 free cultural places have been left in 2014, from which at least three have known to be evicted since then (De Valreep, Antarctica, De Slang). Most places still origin from the 1980's and places that have originated since and still exist, are almost all located outside the city center.

### The need for free space and ownership

Main findings of the study in 2014 are the ongoing trend of the decline of the number of free cultural places in Amsterdam and the spatial pattern of outward movement of the city center. Recent evictions have strengthened the

views that Amsterdam is losing diversity and free cultural places. More places are in a precarious situation and establishing new sustainable places has become increasingly difficult under mounting ground prices and a national law prohibiting squatting since a few years. Although some of the functions are replaced by official cultural breeding places, these remain dependent on urban policies and cannot provide for free spontaneous and self-organized initiatives in urban development. A broad discussion about how much free space can be left, especially in the city center, for these initiatives is needed in times of urban policies, that are mainly driven by economic growth. In the end, lack of spontaneous developments, diversity and dynamics will have their repercussions on the resilience of the city. For new and existing free cultural places, a strong and healthy organization and financial basis is needed after the first experimental phase. A form of establishment becomes inevitable in time and keeping the necessary aspects of a free cultural place in a formalized way has proven to be possible. The only guarantee for survival however, is full ownership of the place, when the degree of cultural freedom is determined by the ownership itself. In all other forms, dependence on political and market developments stay eminent. The decline of free cultural places is a trend that seems manifest in a lot of attractive cities around the globe. More international attention, comparisons and cooperation can provide a stronger basis for a broad discussion about this trend, as is the initiative for a magazine like Amsterdam Alternative. •