

Keep Mokum Weird: Squatting as Creative Resistance

The successful branding of a city may require
the expulsion or eradication of everyone
or everything else that does not fit the brand.

— David Harvey

I have lived almost 20 years in Amsterdam; a city best known for its subversive culture and liberal stance towards drugs, sex work, and LGBTQI+ rights. 22 million tourists visit Amsterdam each year, most of who don't know that its nickname is *Mokum*; from the Yiddish word *מקום* (*makom*), meaning “place” or “safe haven.” But Mokum isn't the safe haven it once was. In the last two decades housing prices have tripled, making the city unaffordable except for the wealthy few. Those with less money are forced out, and homelessness has doubled. A story on how the city sold itself, and how squatting has re-emerged as a form of creative resistance.

When I began to work in Amsterdam as a graphic designer in the early 2000s it was a very different city. The traces of the rebellious 1980s were still everywhere. Housing was affordable, culture was thriving, but your bike did get stolen often. It was around that time that city branding was in fashion. Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) was on the nightstand of every city marketer, and branding guru Wally Olins travelled the world selling location marketing. He simply told cities: “if somebody is promotes themselves more heavily than you then they will get the investments and they will become richer and you'll stay poor!”

Soon the city of Amsterdam started the city marketing campaign *I Amsterdam* to attract more tourists and investors. Designed in 2004 by the Amsterdam-based advertising studio KesselsKramer, the *I Amsterdam* logo was placed on every poster, flyer, billboard, and website promoting the city. Most notably a 25-meter logo was placed in the city center where tourists could photograph themselves inside the logo. The *I Amsterdam* brand manual said: “Now, more than ever, there is fierce competition for cities to be top-of-mind as destinations for tourism, business, and culture. Cities have become brands that market their assets and propositions to a wide variety of target groups. Ultimately, the overall growth and prosperity of a particular city are at stake.”



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KesselsKramer presented it as a campaign that “celebrated Amsterdam’s citizens in all their diversity.” But cities don’t need branding, they are cultural powerhouses. The unique culture of Amsterdam has indeed been created over centuries by the shipyard workers, the queer communities, the artists, migrant workers, activists, the sex workers, the freetowns of ADM and *Ruigoord*, the market sellers and folk singers, Surinamese festivals and Ghanese churches, the squat scene, and the hip-hop and house music scenes. City branding simply packaged those cultures into a bite-size, family friendly product.

Wake Up and Smell the Real Estate

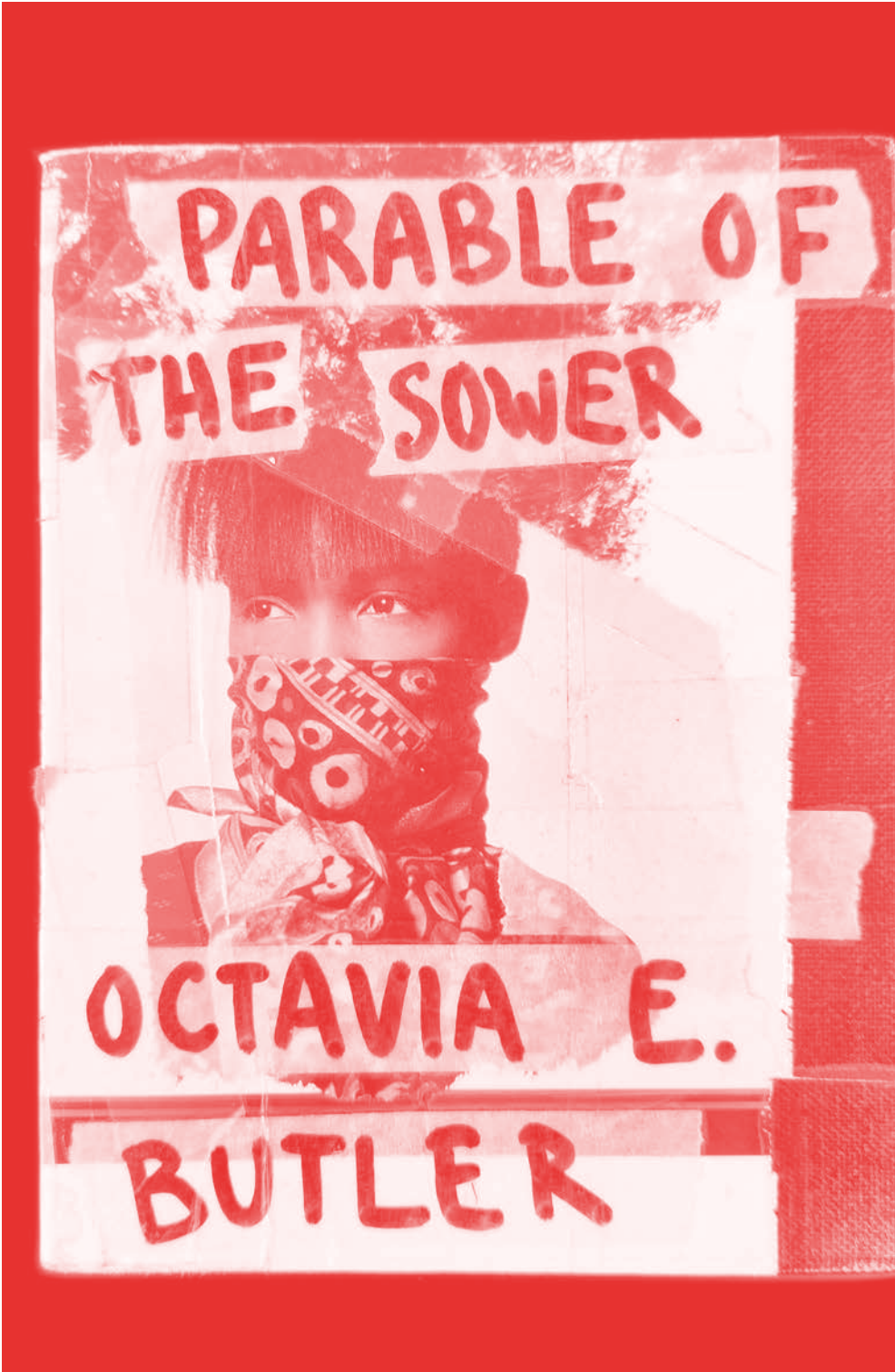
Amsterdam began to promote tourism and offer its real estate abroad. The *I Amsterdam* website boasted that foreign real estate investors: “who have been sleeping for some years now, are waking up to the opportunities’. So they did. In two decades tourism had more than doubled, and the price of a one-family apartment went from € 230,000.– to € 954,153.–. Rents skyrocketed and both small businesses and creative spaces made way for Nutella shops, hotels, and Airbnb’s.



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By 2012 the city was making money and had been successful, but for whom? In 2017 I interviewed a young Amsterdammer of Surinamese descent who lived in a social housing project in the city center. He would soon turn 18 and he would have to leave his parents house as a result of the strict Dutch income rules. Since he was be unable to afford anything in Amsterdam he was forced to move to a city 35km away, leaving the neighborhood behind he had lived all his life.

I witnessed the effects of gentrification in my own working class neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. First, the only community center was demolished and replaced with a private gym. Most of the social housing projects were torn down and replaced with expensive apartments with walled-in gardens for residents only. The influx of young well-to-do young professionals and students with short stays clashed with families and older residents who had lived there for decades. Gentrification hadn't made my neighborhood better, but more expensive, busier, noisier, and had alienated residents from each other.



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Save a Building, Squat a Building

With the intention of improving the city, Amsterdam ended up destroying much of the social and cultural fabric that made it unique in the first place. But the people of Mokum don't give up easily. There are still small pockets of resistance where you can find the free spirit of Amsterdam alive and well, with squatting as one example. Squatting is the illegal occupation of empty buildings for the purposes of housing and resisting real estate speculation. During the 1970 and 1980s this was tolerated in Amsterdam and had led to a flourishing cultural scene that created much of the cultural infrastructure for which Amsterdam is known today. Many cafes, music venues, galleries, and art movements sprung from the squatting movement. Under pressure of neoliberal policies and a right-wing government, squatting was made illegal in 2010 and almost disappeared.

Around 2017, groups of young students, artists, and activists that were in dire need of housing started squatting empty buildings again in the city. This is no small feat; under the new law, police may evict quickly, violently and some squatting actions are ended within days. Squatters risk a criminal record and have to be able to move on short notice. Within that time pressure, squatters have to make impoverished buildings livable by cleaning up, installing makeshift showers, fixing electricity, and heating. Squatters have to be resourceful, fast, and efficient with little or no funds.

The utility of squatting becomes apparent in the numbers; at the moment 19,000 houses in Amsterdam stand vacant, while more than 7,000 people are homeless and many more are looking for apartments. Groups like *Mokum Kraakt* (Mokum squats) and the *Anarcha Feminist Group Amsterdam* turn empty buildings into socially useful spaces and organize cinema screenings, concerts, assemblies, and exhibitions for the public. They talk to the neighbors, set up give away shops and organize activities for children. Buildings that were lifeless at first are now buzzing with social activity.

Squatting as Design

If you would have asked me twenty years ago, I wouldn't have considered squatting a form of design. But my experience has made me think differently. Squatters have to come up with solutions for practical problems with little or no resources available. Constructions, materials, and aesthetics come from scarcity rather than abundance. Inside squats you will encounter some of the most interesting and unexpected forms of fashion, product design, and spatial design. Take the squat cinema in Rotterdam that takes place on a secret location in the open air. They only need a wall, a projector, and a nearby lamppost as a power source to realize a cinema.

Squatters wouldn't call their activities design, although many have creative backgrounds. When asked, many squatters don't distinguish between their art/design practice, politics, and living. Compared to professional design, squatting is non-commercial, non-hierarchical, and responds to meet basic needs. Groups create new communities that experiment with cohabitation, art, architecture, music, and social relations. That doesn't mean they are inward-looking; one FLINTA only squat group (an acronym for women, lesbian, intersex, nonbinary, trans- and agender persons) fundraises for trans healthcare, installs dispensaries with free (stolen) female hygiene products, organizes queer self-defence classes, and queer-feminist skill sharing open to the public.

What distinguishes the new squatting scene from its predecessors is their media use and keen sense of publicity. Squatters in the 1990s often operated in secrecy, but the recent groups use social media accounts to be visible. By showing their hard work and promoting public events they manage to mobilize support and funding. Squatting is also more strategic. By squatting buildings owned by hedge funds or Russian oligarchs they show how buildings merely serve as investments in the current housing crisis. Occupied buildings are rapidly transformed into cultural centers using banners, murals, stickers, and posters, so they are visible to the public. Squatter graphic design is a mishmash styles, hand painted banners and more professional looking work. Whoever has time to do it and whatever works.



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Squatting is a creative and socially useful act of resistance, but it doesn't offer solutions to the lack of housing. As a form of design it does inspire creative experimentation in making, living and working based on mutual-ity instead of profit. Faced with the current climate crisis, this is valuable. Designers too will have to learn to use less resources, do more repairing and mending, and work with what resources are available. Gentrification has taken shared spaces of creative experimentation and political discourse away from cities, reducing creativity to commercial activities. Reclaiming those spaces through occupation and resistance is a way to make creativity open and accessible again for everyone in the city.

1 Olins, Wally, *Brand New: The Shape of Brands to Come*, Thames & Hudson 2014

2 Edenspiekerman and Amsterdam Marketing, *Brand Manuel I Amsterdam*, 2009–2012

3 kesselskramer.com/project/i-amsterdam, accessed December 22nd ,2022.

4 iamsterdam.com/en/business/investment-opportunities, accessed October 13th, 2019.