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Architectural Engineering
Graduation Studio
AR3AE100

# STRUCTURE OF FREE ZONES
## COMMUNITY-ORIENTED VACANT BUILDINGS ADAPTATION

P5 Reflection report

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## 1. Introduction

### Problem Statement

Urban vacancy and the proliferation of underutilized spaces are increasingly urgent challenges, especially in light of the scarcity of affordable and inclusive environments. Mainstream political ideologies - shaped by individualism and property-centric frameworks (Harvey, 2012) - have gradually converted communal property rights into exclusive forms of private ownership. This shift has deepened inequalities in access to both capital and space (Squatting Europe Kollective, 2013). Through commodification of space and processes of gentrification, parts of the city are becoming accessible only to a part of society, making cities exclusive and homogenous.

Self-organized communities have the capacity to respond to these disparities by addressing urgent needs through alternative spatial practices. Squatting emerges as one such response, situated at the intersection of spatial demand and vacant real estate. These communities often create vibrant, non-commercial environments that fulfill needs overlooked by conventional systems (Boer, Verzier, and Truijen, 2019). Despite their social and spatial contributions, squatting and related “commoning” practices remain legally marginalized (Minkjan, 2019), with policies typically prioritizing eviction and profit-driven redevelopment. This legal neglect reinforces social divides and undermines the transformative potential of free zones - collective, self-initiated urban practices, often experimental in nature, that respond dynamically to changing conditions and community needs.

### Design Objective

This project investigates how adaptive reuse strategies can be applied to vacant buildings to support development of inclusive, collective urban spaces. It aims to develop a method for adaptation based on self-organization and self-building - an approach that not only improves affordability but also empowers communities to shape their own environments in incremental manner.

The architectural intervention is situated in Landbouwbelang, Maastricht - a former grain warehouse occupied by a self-organized squatting community for over 25 years and now under threat of eviction. The project offers an alternative to eviction, proposing gradual architectural interventions that align with basic legal spatial standards while preserving the community’s autonomy. These interventions aim to safeguard spatial freedom while introducing essential

improvements. Ultimately, the project explores how vacant buildings can support new forms of spatial agency and how self-organized communities can contribute to urban transformation.

**Thematic Research**

The research explores squatting practices in the Netherlands as socio-spatial systems. These practices cannot be fully understood through their physical aspects alone, so a broad range of sources was analyzed.

**Central question:**
What architectural interventions can support self-organized (squatting) communities in adapting their spatial arrangements and living environments during negotiations for legal recognition?

**Sub-questions:**

- What pathways enable squatting communities to gain legal status?
- How do spatial arrangements evolve after legalization?
- Who are the key stakeholders and contributors in this transformation?

From 30 legalized squatted communities in the Netherlands, six were selected based on the following criteria: the building was used residentially during initial occupation, achieved spatial legal status, and demonstrated adaptive reuse. The case studies - OT301; Tetterode; Plantage Dok (Amsterdam), Het Domijn (Weesp), Poortgebouw (Rotterdam), and Boschgaard (Den Bosch) - reflect diversity in size, location, typology, and function before and after squatting. Accessibility for visits and interviews also guided the selection.

The methodology included analysis of publications, archives, community websites, site visits, event participation, semi-structured interviews, and official meetings. Each case was examined through multiple lenses:

1. **Timeline analysis** of key events to correlate legal status changes, renovations, and spatial transitions within broader social, economic, and political contexts.
2. **Renovation analysis**, detailing building conditions, requirements, spatial aspirations, implementation, supervision, and funding.
3. **Legal adaptation**, focusing on motivations, challenges, organizational structures, and agreements among stakeholders.

The conclusions provide insights into the interplay between legal frameworks and spatial adaptation. These findings inform recommendations for stakeholders, highlighting how the creativity and social commitment of squatting communities can contribute to inclusive urban development.

**2. Reflection on the Process**

The research phase focused on understanding spatial and legal transitions in squatting communities, emphasizing self-organized practices that directly respond to user needs. Given the uniqueness of each case, qualitative methods - especially interviews - were crucial. These conversations revealed both shared challenges and community-specific dynamics.

Instead of producing rigid conclusions, the research identified recurring patterns and experiences, which shaped the foundation for the design phase. This reversed the conventional design process: rather than starting with a program and proposing a solution, the priorities emerged from real-world community insights, allowing flexibility in defining functions, but providing essential elements of each design – circulation, services distribution and methods to provide thermal, acoustic and privacy comfort.

The process strengthened my belief in multi-actor collaboration. Architects today must act more as facilitators than as sole decision-makers. This ethos guided my design, which sought to balance regulatory standards with the openness required for participatory self-building - especially for those without design or construction experience.

On a personal level, this graduation year was a deeply transformative experience. I learned to navigate complexity across scales, manage timelines, and engage deeply with both people and place. The interviews required months of preparation and persistence. Working with a partially inaccessible building meant accepting uncertainty in existing conditions and proposing flexible solutions. Initially

perceived as a limitation, this challenge led to a system that could be adapted to scenarios beyond Landbouwbelang.

In the end, the project reflects the accumulation of research, human connection, architectural experimentation, and a desire to contribute meaningfully to conversations about vacancy, community, and urban futures. It expresses themes that matter to me not only as a designer, but also as a person.

**3. Relation Between Research and Design**

While only a limited number of cases were studied, this reflected the inherent uniqueness of squatting communities, which resist generalization. What mattered more than statistical breadth was the opportunity to explore the spatial impact of self-organization and these precarious spatial practices.

These communities have created support networks for marginalized groups and repurposed buildings otherwise slated for demolition. Despite their relevance, squatting communities are underexplored in architectural discourse. In the Netherlands, they have historically played a major role in social and spatial innovation, reaching a high legal acceptance in the past.

Initially, translating research into design proved difficult. However, as the project evolved, the link between the two became clear. Design decisions around safety, comfort, and infrastructure were directly informed by lessons from the case studies and multiple visits to each of them.

The design mirrored the adaptive sequencing found in real squatting transformations: beginning with essential safety measures (e.g., fire protection, infrastructure), then improving envelope and climate conditions, and finally enabling flexible layouts of shared and private spaces through a modular, incremental system. The approach prioritized basic comfort and shelter, allowing gradual enhancement over time.

Also, part which are often not fully defined and designed, aim to leave certain degree of freedom to the community that creates the space in places, which were unique and dependant on each study case as common shared areas.

**4. Social, Professional, and Scientific Relevance**

This project proposes a strategy that addresses both societal and architectural issues associated with building vacancy. Adaptive reuse is central to sustainable architecture, especially given the untapped potential of the existing building stock.

As cities evolve, many buildings become obsolete. This project explores alternative strategies driven by collective needs rather than market forces. Squatting communities offer a valuable perspective on socially responsive urban transformation, yet their contributions remain largely absent from architectural narratives due to their often temporary or ambiguous legal status.

In an era of gentrification, housing inequality, and commodified space, this topic is increasingly relevant. Industrial buildings - once peripheral but now absorbed into cities - offer opportunities for reinvention. Landbouwbelang is a prime example of this transition.

While the design draws on the site's specific features - its architecture, setting, and community - the proposed system for addressing basic spatial needs (e.g., safety, comfort) is broadly applicable. The modular wooden cube became a key organizing element. Though it sometimes constrained spatial freedom, its simplicity encouraged participation from non-experts in design and construction. While the proposed design at times seemed to limit the potential of the large, obsolete spaces in the adapted building, on the other hand, it has shown a strategy aimed at quick, incremental adaptation, which answered the urgent need for space. Therefore, the implementation of the strategy should be further reflected on the longevity and phasing of such a solution.

This project outlines a possible scenario: a strategy that legitimizes and empowers self-building as an affordable, participatory housing model, offering flexibility and space for experimentation, with future possibility to continue to transform it, as no drastic changes are made to the building's structure.

The design proposed a compromise on many platforms, between functional programme proposed, to the degree of how much is adapted and how much is preserved, and how much is desgined and how much is left undefined, for communities to invent themselves.

## 4. References

Boer, R., Verzier, M.O. & Truijen, K., (2019) *Architecture of Appropriation*: *On Squatting as Spatial Practice.* Rotterdam: Het Nieuwe Instituut.

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