Rotterdam: Do-It-Yourself Assemblages in Urban Regeneration

Beitske Boonstra & Willemijn Lofvers

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Rotterdam is a city in transition. Once a strongly government-led and top-down planned city, the municipality and other major planning institutions such as developers and housing corporations are now looking for different ways to achieve their ambitions in urban development. More cooperation with civic society and step-by-step development through non-governmental initiatives are seen as the way forward, and various experiments are set out to explore this new approach. As a specific example, this article discusses the Klushuizen: Do-It-Yourself Renovation Houses. The first Klushuizen experiment started in the derelict neighbourhood of Spangen in Rotterdam at the end of 2004. Future residents could purchase a part of a municipal-obtained building for free, but with the obligation to renovate the apartment themselves. When this DIY approach proved to be successful, this experiment was awarded a sequel under the title “169 Klushuizen”. As such, the initial experiment was transformed into an instrument for urban regeneration – in Rotterdam and in many other Dutch cities. Meanwhile in Spangen, the initial experiment continued to generate positive spin-off. Many young, resourceful and creative families moved into the area, willing to invest in their homes and in the neighbourhood. As a by-product, several civic initiatives were started, aiming to improve pub-
lic space. Thus the Klushuizen approach can be seen as a good example of an innovative assemblage for urban transformation. However, it remains to be seen to what extent and how the role of the planning authorities and the municipality did actually change due to the Klushuizen experiment and approach.

1 The first Klushuizen in Spangen (Do-It-Yourself Renovation Houses)

At the start of the 2000s, several neighbourhoods in the city of Rotterdam were suffering from severe socio-economic problems. Seriously deprived, these neighbourhoods dealt with criminality, drug-related problems, illegal occupancy and similar (Municipality of Rotterdam 2005). When in 2002 a new City Council was installed – dominated for the first time by populist right-wing parties following decennial dominance of the socialist party – one of their first measures was to establish a radical safety and zero tolerance policy in these neighbourhoods. Specialized teams were installed to tackle safety issues together with local residents, and the city planning authorities developed spatial and housing policies that would attract more resourceful people to these neighbourhoods (ibid.).

Spangen was one of these neighbourhoods. Originally famous for its monumental urban design, architectural ensembles and heritage from the early twentieth century (Steenhuis 2009), Spangen had become one of the most deprived areas of Rotterdam. Many monumental buildings had been either turned into social housing during the period of urban renewal, or were badly maintained and still owned by slum-lords. The Wallisblok was one of those privately-owned and dilapidated buildings, but still with characteristic features. According to the planning department of the municipality1, “We either had the choice to demolish the Wallisblok, or renovate it. Initially we planned to demolish it and build a new apartment block. However, we were only able to purchase 60% of it. The delay made us reconsider our plans and policies. We started to wonder whether we really had to demolish the building, or that we could renovate it ourselves. Then the idea was born that perhaps the future residents could renovate the building themselves. This approach to the Wallisblok was actually a bit of an emergency measure.”

This is when the term Klushuizen (Do-It-Yourself Renovation Houses) was introduced. In order to attract enough people to participate in the experiment, the municipality decided to give the houses away for free. When the national media picked up on “Houses for free in Spangen Rotterdam” (Sour 2009) many people showed interest. About 400 households from all over the Netherlands enlisted; the first public meeting even had to take place in the local soccer stadium. Apparently, people were not only...
attracted by the idea of the free houses, but also by the large degree of architectural freedom the experiment offered. However, the requirements of participating in the Klushuizen were severe: a collaborative design and development process, communal ownership and personal investments regarding both time and money. When these requirements were made public, many people withdrew. Eventually, a core group of 36 households remained to kick-start the project in November 2005 (ibid.).

The remaining group of future owners established an owners’ association to become a formal actor in the development process. The association now collectively owns and maintains the building structure and its foundation, but at the time of redevelopment it also had to negotiate a collective mortgage, and had to decide on the design and planning of the renovation process. However, the municipality remained the main initiator of the renovation project, while financial backup was organised by a local housing corporation. An architectural firm and consultancy firm were appointed by the municipality to take responsibility for the co-design with the association, to oversee building procedures.
and to prepare the collective and individual building permit applications.

Under the guidance of both firms, the group of future owners divided the building into houses and apartments, according to personal wishes and financial resources. This resulted in a diversity of housing plans: some apartments occupied one floor while others occupied several; some were horizontally and others vertically organised, the original size of $45 \text{ m}^2$ doubled and quadrupled to $160 \text{ m}^2$. Whereas the future residents could work on their interiors themselves, the actual renovation and construction work of the overall building structures including the exterior was outsourced to a communal contractor. Moreover, “The demolition activities we did together; the garden was cleared together. When these collective activities were finished, the work on the individual apartments started. This took us about one and a half years to finalise, and in September 2007 a party was thrown in the company of the mayor of Rotterdam Mr. Opstelten to celebrate the completion of the project.”

#### 2 Formalisation and growth of the Klushuizen approach

Within two years’ time, the Wallisblok was successfully renovated with decisive involvement of the new residents. Both the municipality of Rotterdam and the Dutch Ministry of Spatial Planning and Housing recognised the potential of this approach for other derelict buildings in deprived urban neighbourhoods. The Ministry and municipality thus decided to formalise and extend the Klushuizen approach to other neighbourhoods in Rotterdam. A subsidy was provided by the Ministry, with which the municipality calculated it could “do” an additional 169 Klushuizen. Meanwhile, in 2007, the municipality launched its new policy for urban renewal, focussing explicitly on attracting more resourceful and young people, including families, to the more deprived areas in the city. The Klushuizen approach fitted seamlessly into this policy.

The Klushuizen approach was now formalised into a municipal programme and a dedicated team was established within the municipality.
municipal organisation, with an independent project leader under the direct management of the municipal directors and the city council. This team continuously searched for potential building redevelopments. According to the possibilities a specific building could offer, the team would put the building on the market and organise information events in order to form a collective of future buyers. Together with an architect and a consultancy firm, a (collective) renovation plan would then be decided upon and implemented.

Over time, changes to the original Klushuizen approach in the Spangen experiment were deemed necessary. The first aspect of the original experiment that was abandoned was the idea of “houses for free”. Instead, the municipality would organise and carry out the initial and major renovations of the building structures and foundations, before selling the individual houses as empty hulls for low – and still very affordable – prices. The future owners would then still have to invest in the floor plans, kitchen, bathroom, decoration and the like. This was considered to be more effective and less time consuming compared to a collectively executed process by often un-experienced residents. Besides, this new approach would still allow people to buy cheap residential space to be renovated according to one’s own wishes and therefore attract resourceful people to deprived neighbourhoods. Another abandoned aspect of the original experiment was the collective approach of the Klushuizen. This approach only remained intact in the transformation of former so-called “socially bound properties” into residential functions: the renovation and transformation of former schools, churches and com-
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Community centres into residential apartments. But in most nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century neighbourhoods it was predominantly individual houses that were renovated following the Klushuizen approach.

Many interesting, and even award-winning renovation projects were established in this way. For instance, De Zwarte Parel (The Black Pearl), which was entirely stripped from its former internal building structure and replaced by an open floor plan. The 100-year-old façade was painted in black oil with new windows, distinguishing the building from the adjacent properties. It won the Rotterdam Prize for Architecture in 2010. Following the Klushuizen approach, more than 400 dwellings were eventually renovated, together with future homeowners.

Over the following years, the Klushuizen approach translated itself progressively into regular policy. Today, when houses are in need of serious renovation, the planning department of the municipality of Rotterdam first considers a Klushuizen approach before turning to demolition or classical renovation. However, the spatial planning department has shifted its attention to other issues and the dedicated team within the municipality has been abolished due to lack of financial resources and properties. Other stakeholders have been taking over the Klushuizen approach. Private investors became interested and developed a new business model for the “Do-It-Yourself approach” in different projects, e.g. EénBlokStad. And so did several housing corporations: in projects like Sint Mariastraat and Bloklandstraat they took a leading role in the major renovation and construction activities, before selling the properties. The housing corporations also invented “Do-It-Yourself
Rent”: the housing corporation remains the legal owner of the apartment, but tenants invest DIY time in exchange for rent reduction – and the possibility to adjust the dwelling according to personal tastes and styles. Whether this works is still a question: tenants tend to be more interested in minor works, while redoing the foundations or facades and other major renovations are more in the interest of the legal owner, the housing corporation itself.

When looking at the various schemes in which the Klushuizen approach has manifested itself over the years (see table 1), a shift becomes visible. At first, large-scale private rental apartment blocks were purchased by the municipality and sold as individual properties but in a form of collective home-ownership. The collective features only remained in the first experiment in the Wallisblok and the transformation of “socially bound properties”. Soon, this collective approach was replaced by an approach focused on individual households instead of building groups, as working with individual households was considered to be less costly in terms of time and money. Another shift took place when the housing corporations started to sell their social housing stock to individuals according to the Klushuizen approach: public ownership shifted to individual home ownership and co-ownership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project name</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eénblokstad</td>
<td>Collective</td>
<td>Public &gt; private</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>2007 -today</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Social &gt; private</td>
<td>Housing corporation</td>
<td>2007-2011</td>
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<td>and developer</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Mariastraat</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Social &gt; private</td>
<td>Housing corporation</td>
<td>2014 -today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloklandstraat</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIY rental homes</td>
<td>Housing corporation and individual</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Housing corporation</td>
<td>2015 -today</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 1: Overview of the various forms of Klushuizen in Rotterdam.
(Source: SEV 2012; Urbanerdam 2010)

Fig. 7: Map of Klushuizen projects in Rotterdam.
(Source: Willemijn Lofvers, based on data received from the municipality of Rotterdam)
In general, the Klushuizen approach received many positive reviews and attention, locally and nationwide. National media and professional literature paid attention to the experimental programme, and field trips to Klushuizen projects were frequently organised. Many city officials and professionals working for planning agencies in other Dutch cities became interested in the approach as well. After all, the Klushuizen approach fitted seamlessly into the new reality of the financial crisis, and the increasing popularity of organic, small-scale and DIY urban development in which civic actors play a major role (cf. Piek 2011; PBL and Urbahn Urban Design 2012; Buitelaar et al. 2013). As the Klushuizen approach spread across the Netherlands, it received new dimensions once again. For example, in the post-war neighbourhood of Bijlmer in Amsterdam, the Klushuizen approach was applied to a Modernist high-rise apartment building, which was no longer considered a favourable residential place due to its large scale and unappealing architecture. However, the Klushuizen approach offered a new opportunity for its redevelopment, and the project became immensely popular (Parool 2011). In the city of Utrecht, former office buildings were renovated and transformed into student housing and apartments according to the Klushuizen approach. Other cities that started to apply the approach in different set-ups were The Hague, Arnhem, Den Bosch and Haarlem.

3 Spin-off for Spangen

In Spangen, the Wallisblok did not remain the only DIY urban renewal project either. Several other apartment blocks were renovated according to the Klushuizen approach, with the housing corporation as the main initiator, and houses were sold individually without any collective building arrangements. In addition to this approach, several new buildings were realised, as well as more traditional building renovation in the neighbourhood.

Over time, the results for Spangen were indeed that many more resourceful people – highly educated with corresponding salaries and young and creative attitudes – started to live in the neighbourhood, diversifying the population in socio-economic terms. Criminality and disturbances were significantly reduced (Municipality of Rotterdam Safety Index). The historic, monumental character of the neighbourhood was preserved and overall spatial quality started to improve. This was, of course, not only due to the initial Klushuizen experiment, but the Wallisblok did give the area a an initial and much needed positive impulse towards area improvement.

However, both the municipality and the housing corporation focused predominantly on the building stock. Instead, it was the local residents who started to undertake small investments in the neighbourhood’s public spaces. When the renovation activities at the Wallisblok were finished, including the landscaping of the collective inner courtyard, the residents turned their attention outwards, to the neighbourhood itself. To begin with, they took the maintenance of the public garden in front of their building into their own hands. Next, together with other neighbouring residents, even more urban greening initiatives were started: a community garden project at one of the central squares, an urban garden on the dike surrounding the neighbourhood, and inviting the “Urban Shepherd” with his flock of sheep to keep the grass short in the public green spaces. In order to make these initiatives actually happen, a serious effort had to be made by the residents to find and convince the right stakeholders within the municipality, the neighbourhood council and the housing corporation. With financial support from the housing corporation, the initiators finally established Natuurlijk Spangen (Natural Spangen), bringing the various greening activities in the neighbourhood together in one overarching association. Also political engagement emerged from these initiatives, as several members of Natuurlijk Spangen took a seat as representatives in the local neighbourhood council (2013). In that way, durable relations between initiatives and local government emerged.

As new neighbourhood associations were started, the existing ones received new impulses as well. However, a division between “old residents” and “new residents” remained in Spangen. The old residents had been very active in addressing drug-related disturbances during the 1990s and early 2000s, and from their perspective, new investments to Spangen only came after the new residents moved in. The old residents are a socially close-knit group with their own activities, and are not so willing to integrate with the activities of the new residents.

Another issue concerning the division between the old and new residents is that many of the new residents still send their children to elite schools outside of Spangen”. So, in order to reach full integration of both communities, policies for urban renewal, housing policies for local
schools and general education policy have to be much better attuned, and more time is probably needed before the two communities truly start to merge. The overall goal of the regeneration policies in general and the initial Klushuizen experiment in Spangen, being the gentrification of the neighbourhood, could be seen as successful in its own goals, but not necessarily inclusive for all groups of residents.

4 Changing planning cultures in Rotterdam

Over the past decades, urban renewal in Rotterdam has had many faces, always following the prevailing socio-political timeframes. Dutch post-war society was known for its strong tradition in spatial planning and urban design, a systematic approach with a clear and formal cast of players, large-scale projects and a leading role for national and local governments. In Rotterdam, this approach materialised in the large-scale reconstruction of the devastated city centre and a continuous investment in suburbs and satellite towns. During the 1970s, however, civil protest against such ‘city formation’ emerged at the expense of the pre-war inner-city neighbourhoods, which were in desperate need of home improvements. In Rotterdam, local politicians were able to bend these protests towards productive forms of cooperation, with a participative and community-oriented planning approach. However, a top-down approach still prevailed: governed by national policies, executed by local authorities and housing corporations. On a large scale, private landlords were bought out, their properties drastically renovated or demolished, to be replaced by social housing, leading to radical transformations of the existing urban fabric.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the main stakeholders behind the urban renewal practices in Rotterdam started to
reach the limits of their approach. Only the most complex cases remained, and it became increasingly difficult to acquire dilapidated buildings, or to get in touch with the – often malicious – private landlords. Meanwhile, financial resources for this active top-down renewal approach became scarce. Moreover, the approach of demolition and new construction became criticised for its uniformity and unappealing architecture. This forced the municipality to orientate according to a differentiated and more place-specific approach that would fit an increasingly diversified set of stakeholders and interests. This was an important condition for the search towards new, innovative – and more situational – assemblages for urban transformations, and to set up experiments that opened up possibilities for such new assemblages. The Klushuizen can be understood as an experimental part of this search.

However, the question remains to what extent the Klushuizen approach actually changed the planning style of the municipality of Rotterdam. Indeed, the municipality did not make a plan for neighbourhood change, but aimed to trigger local developments by purchasing larger-scale private rental properties and redeveloping them into small-scale owner-occupied homes, either individually or collectively. They built consortia with active entrepreneurs (consultancy and architecture firms) and local housing corporations in order to guide civil buyers through a development process, as a means to achieve their policy goals. The dedicated team within the municipality, however, experienced challenges connecting to the regular departments within the municipal organisation and in dealing with institutional arrangements such as conveyance tax, fire-safety regulations etc. But eventually they were able to translate the original experiment into common policy, now accepted by both private developers and housing corporations. The experience with the Klushuizen, however, shows that a lot still needs to be learned as a consequence of such a new assemblage for innovative planning. This becomes apparent when discussing some of the inconveniences the municipality experiences while dealing with the hybrid actor-constellations of the Klushuizen approach and the related urban regeneration schemes.

1. The first inconvenience for the municipality concerns ad-hoc development processes. In Spangen, different urban renewal processes and political goals were interlinked, which resulted in an ad-hoc local development process involving many different parties: national and local governments, housing corporations, existing and new residents’ associations, with all of them having different agendas. The municipality feels the responsibility to accommodate and adjust all such initiatives but feels uncomfortable with the opportunistic way of dealing and worries about a lack of coherent policy. For instance, concerning public space in Spangen, which is worn and behind on public investment schedules, whereas the inhabitants are now taking all kinds of initiatives for self-management of these public spaces.

2. The second inconvenience for the municipality relates to the question of who takes the lead in urban renewal. To a large extent the municipality has been the main initiator of most urban redevelopments. It has also been the main initiator of the Klushuizen experiment and approach. However, the challenge to co-lead developments, in which no single actor is in full control of the process, is still considered as uncomfortable by the municipality. The municipality took the initiative in the redevelopment of the Wallishbok Spangen, whilst in subsequent DIY projects their role was to facilitate the process and assist with the procedural aspects of urban re-developments. But when civic initiatives emerge through involvement in the Klushuizen project, the municipality still has a hard time acknowledging and enhancing such initiatives.

3. The third inconvenience for the municipality relates to their new role in such processes of co-leading developments, and the consequential competences necessary within that role. The municipal role in an approach like the Klushuizen is multiple: they are initiator, facilitator and inspector. Therefore, the municipality cannot be seen as one actor, and people working on behalf of the municipality have to be able to differentiate in their roles. This requires a general understanding of how urban development takes place, to draw and think of plans for future developments, but also the ability to forge alliances, to maintain connections with different local actors, boosting developments, and to put items on the various agendas. Moreover, as a municipal actor, one has to understand the personal motivations or drivers behind these developments, such as money, personal or collective interests. One has to be empathic and able to understand the other actors’ argumentations too. This is a competence that is not yet part of the regular education received by spatial planners, and is, according to the municipal planning department, sometimes lacking within municipal organisation too.
5 Reflection and conditions for innovation

This article has followed the process of the Klushuizen experiment and approach as an example of an innovative assemblage for urban regeneration. The intention was not to conduct research on conditions that foster such innovation, yet some insights can be generated from this specific example nonetheless.

The Klushuizen approach was mainly an answer to the shift of position of actors and the quest for resources, and a response to criticism of previous large-scale renewal approaches. Moreover, the approach suited the municipal policy to attract more resourceful people to deprived neighbourhoods, to work towards a more socio-economically diverse demography and to stimulate homeowner occupancy within the city. The example of the Klushuizen thus shows how innovation follows from the necessity of one stakeholder (in this case the municipality) to adjust its approach due to a changed socio-political timeframe, and forces this stakeholder into new schemes and partnerships.

With strong, pro-active intervention, the municipality introduced a new approach that transferred the responsibility for urban regeneration to others and which is to be shared with multiple actors, including future residents. Although the municipality was the main initiator of the Klushuizen experiment and approach, making the first and most enabling basic investment, the Klushuizen was not a project of one single actor. It was a joint effort and a responsibility of all actors involved. The future homeowners had a crucial role, but also the housing corporations, as well as private developers, in the later developments. It took years, however, before these other actors actually did “take over”.

In the neighbourhood of Spangen, the main goal was to get the socio-economic and demographic data ‘right’ according to municipal aims. And indeed, more resourceful people were attracted to the neighbourhood through the first Klushuizen experiment of the Wallisblok and the following renovation projects. Moreover, the residents of the different Klushuizen projects developed multiple civic initiatives to improve their living environment, generating even more added value to the neighbourhood.

This added (public) value is also to be found in other parts of the city of Rotterdam, especially in the neighbourhoods west of the city centre, where most of the collective Klushuizen approaches were situated, including those projects where entire streets were collectively renovated at once but by individual households.

In the southern and northern neighbourhoods of Rotterdam a more individual approach was applied, and only the most dilapidated houses were renovated – individually. Here, the result is rather an equation of quality of the housing stock, but hardly no additional value or visible adjustments have been added through civic initiatives in these areas. Of course, it was not the purpose of the Klushuizen approach as such to stimulate civic initiatives, and their emergence can be seen as both a logical continuation or an unintentional spin-off, leading to new challenges and opportunities for the municipality and its planning department. We do wonder, however, whether the choice for a more individual approach for Klushuizen does not actually undermine the added value that could arise from this type of innovative assemblage for urban regeneration in the long term.

Today, the municipality has to operate in a system of ad-hoc developments, in which no one fully takes the lead. In such a system, empathetic skills could enable municipal actors to work on small-scale projects, and with direct residential involvement, perhaps these skills are more important than the ability to design, draw and calculate plans for future developments. Following the example of the Klushuizen and the spin-off generated in the neighbourhood of Spangen, we thus conclude that, in our opinion, innovative assemblages for urban regeneration do not only originate from specific conditions, but are first and foremost an attitude of mind.

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Beitske Boonstra and Willemijn Lofvers are both inhabitants of Rotterdam and researchers in the field of self-organisation and civic initiatives in urban development.
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VROM, Dutch Ministry of Spatial Planning and Housing (1997): 'Nota Stedelijke Vernieuwing.'

Notes

1 Personal interview, Head of Urban Planning of the Municipality of Rotterdam, 2016.

2 Financial investments started with the calculation of EUR 70 000 per single, original dwelling (Agricola 2006).

3 Personal interview with a resident of the Wallisblok, 2014.

4 The 169 Klushuizen project is an experiment within the framework of the policy Innovatieprogramma Stedelijke Vernieuwing.

5 The municipality had selected four architectural teams to deal with DIY renovations.

6 List of award-winning DIY projects in Rotterdam; ÉcoBlokStad won the prize in 2013.

7 Personal interview, Head of Urban Planning of the Municipality of Rotterdam, 2016. De keuze vrijheid van onderwijs is in NL grondwettelijk vastgelegd.

8 Derived from a personal interview, Head of Urban Planning of the Municipality of Rotterdam, 2016.

Willemijn Lofvers is an architect and holds a Master’s degree in Architecture from the Rotterdam Academy of Arts and a degree in art from Willem de Kooning Academy. She is a lecturer and researcher in urban transitions. Since 2003 she has been part of the Research Centre for Sustainable Port Cities at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences and the research group Future Urban Regions. Lofvers teaches on the MA programme of the Academies of Architecture in both Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In 2013 she started her PhD research on the changing role of spatial professionals within contemporary urban developments and actively questions the meaning of these changes for planning and design curricula.

Contacts:

Dr. ir. Beitske Boonstra
Roderrijsselaan 28a
3037 XE Rotterdam
The Netherlands

Willemijn Lofvers
Bureau Lofvers
Zomerhofstraat 90
3033 CM Rotterdam
The Netherlands