

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW WITH MIKKIE ROOS AND MICHIEL DE ROO AT THE ACU. LOCATION: UTRECHT. DATE: FEBRUARY 7, 2006.

*Can you tell me about the history of ACU?*

MDR (Michiel De Roo): The building is located in the centre of Utrecht, and was first squatted 30 years ago. I have worked here since 1998. Back then people were living here, and later they had a film house. What is now the ACU is only a small part of the larger squat that used to be here. The whole area behind this building was also squatted where a lot of people lived in caravans. Around 1984 the ACU became what it is now: a bar, a place for bands, parties, benefits, political discussions etc. At a certain point the squat was no longer possible to maintain, but we were able to buy a small part of it. A group of people got a loan to buy the building and to start the hostel, Strowis. If this had not happened there would be no ACU here today, it would have been a parking space.

MR: (Mikkie Roos): At the time the owner of the building didn't want to do anything with it. He was an old, stubborn man. He didn't want to sell to the city council, which is why it was squatted for 21 years! To throw out the squatters the city council would have had to collaborate with the owner.

*I just heard about anti-squatting, what is that?*

MR: Property owners learnt a few tricks from squatters, so in the '90s companies came up with the concept of anti-squat.

MDR: The good thing about anti-squat is that people can live in empty buildings, but in practise they have huge buildings with only two people living in them. If it were a squat, 30 or 40 people would live there. As a squatter you actually have more rights than an anti-squatter, so it makes no sense to go anti-squatting.

When you are anti-squatting you can't get a permission to have a bar or social place. Actually, most anti-squat contracts state that you cannot invite more than two people at a time into the building, so you can't even give a party. They use the anti-squatters as someone to look after the buildings. It is just a legal construction to prevent people from squatting; it doesn't really solve any housing problems.

*How were you able to finance the buy? How could you get the loan?*

MR: We call it a 'Flappenplan'. One could buy shares to support the project, for example, you can get a kind of certificate for a 100 Euro. So that's how we got the security to cover the loan. The money to buy it came from everywhere. It was similar to how the left wing bookstore, The Fort van Sjakoo, in Amsterdam, bought their building with money that came from family and from people from all over the country. The city council also liked the idea with having a hostel for tourists, so they backed the loan for ACU and Strowis.

*What happened to the rest of the building?*

MDR: Well next to us here is a supermarket, a big flat and some companies, which all used to be squatted before 1996.

*What is ACU's program now?*

MDR: The program differs by day. On Mondays we have info evenings, discussions or political café; Tuesday we have the vegan restaurant and sometimes we show films in the evenings; Wednesday there is a cooperative shop which sells biological and vegan food (it is going on right now); Thursday we also have the vegan restaurant and an open do night; Friday there are bands, followed by the ACU's regular DJs; Saturday differs, it could be queer or reggae nights, or African parties.

There must be a lot of people connected to the organization of this?

MDR: Different groups contribute; over 100 people work here, and there are about 50 people in the ACU collective.

*How do you become a member?*

MDR: It is not so strict. For example, if you want to do the bar you put yourself on the list.

MR: Yeah, but we expect people to feel responsible, to feel that it is our place. That is the meaning of it, which everyone should feel. In that sense it is well organized.

MDR: Yeah, you have to trust people.

MR: It works very well. I'm surprised, as everyone is voluntary. In the '80s there were a lot of organizations that were based on voluntary work, but today organisations can't find volunteers because people don't have so much time anymore. Here people take the time to volunteer.

*What is your role? Are you also working as volunteers? You seem to have a lot of responsibility?*

MDR: We are all volunteers, except for the kitchen staff; otherwise we would only be able to serve food once a week. We are lucky with them as they make good vegan food. We don't want to be a cheap bar or restaurant, we provide good food for 6 Euro.

*How can you pay off the loans?*

MDR: The bar is our main source of income. It makes 6000 Euros per month! That is also why we have to be open every day. We can't afford to be closed.

*How do you manage to self-finance it? It seems like you are working here a lot?*

MDR: I work here around 10 hours a week. I have my own company so I can more or less schedule my work time. Most of the people work here about 8 hours a week.

MR: During the summer I always do catering work, which enables me to spend more time here during the rest of the year, however, this fall I must look for another job.

*Who are using the place except for the collective?*

MDR: It differs every night, but mostly open-minded people who are looking for a night out, and activists.

MR: For some it is like a second living room. It is nice that we have the kitchen as since then the visitors have become more diverse, which was also a result of the legalization.

*And what would you say your program is? What should it communicate?*

MDR: The most important thing is that the people who arrange here do not profit. They do whatever they do for a cause they believe in. It can be cultural or political.

MR: But it is not a place for political parties, we want to be independent. That is also why we don't apply for subsidies. Unlike most of the cultural centres in Holland, the government does not fund us.

*What's in it for you?*

MDR: Not everything in this world is about money. People do things for each other. Here it is non-hierarchical. If someone tries to lead, other people will push him or her back. For me it is a really nice culture, which works. You get to know a lot of people; you get to see a lot of bands, which might not come to Utrecht if the ACU was not here.

*What are your thoughts on economic structures in relation to your project?*

MDR: We try to keep a distance to the normal, or profit-based economy. But now we have a bank loan, we are not that independent.

MR: On a smaller scale, we only sell coffee from the Zapatistas, we try to be environmentally sustainable, i.e. the toilets are flushed with rainwater, and we sell biological products as much as possible.

*The question that Endie wanted you to answer was: How has the ACU changed since it became legal?*

MR: Now we have the pressure to be open everyday.

MDR: Our prices have gone up to make more money. We received a lot of criticism for that from people who thought that we had become just an ordinary bar.

MR: Yeah, but that is not what bothers me. I mean we have this place now.

MDR: Me neither. I'm not working here as a volunteer to have cheap beer, that is not part of my ideology.

MR: I think the big differences are that we lost large parts ACU's former buildings, and we have to follow the law much more closely than when we were squatting.

*Didn't you lose some of the former ideology by becoming legal?*

MR: No, I don't think so. It was a difficult choice to make, but we decided to buy the building because otherwise we would have lost it. We have had a lot of discussions on how to keep the same spirit, and it took us some time, but now we are back to having a really political program.

*Finally I would like to ask you who else you think we should interview?*

MR: I would suggest The Solidair. It is a kind of alternative economy. You can ask them for help if you would like to buy a place like this.

MDR: They helped us to negotiate with the bank when we bought the building. They have a lot of specialist knowledge.

*Is there something in particular that we should ask them?*

MDR: How do they support new initiatives and keep up with the changes in the current economical climate?

MR: Yes, because things have changed a lot in the last 10 years.