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Dedicated to all squatters

GROENE VOLTAGE



The Groene Voltage

A Temporary Autonomous Zone in Rotterdam

GROENE VOLTAGE



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GROENE VOLTAGE



PREFACE

This pamphlet is based on an article originally published on Indymedia Netherlands in 2008. It has been revised somewhat and is being republished since the themes it deals with are considered relevant to other (squatted) social centres. In some ways we achieved a lot, in others we got caught in the traps common to all projects.

Note - it can only be read as one person's viewpoint. It is likely that other people from the collective would see things differently.



INTRODUCTION

The Groene Voltage was a squatted social centre in Rotterdam. It was situated five minutes from Central Station in a residential area, beside a busy road which leads to the ringroad and then to motorways in the direction of Den Haag and Utrecht (apparently it's one of the most polluted roads in the Netherlands). It stood on the corner of a large cityblock and the four floors above it were also squatted separately as residential space for six people.

It lasted for almost exactly one year, from October 2006 to October 2007. The eviction was not contested, but rather the keys were handed back to the owners (a housing corporation called PWS - Patrimoniums Woningstichting) because they had announced their intention to renovate the entire building. We had on the whole a good relationship with PWS and thus when they showed us the building schedule and plans we left. It was then stripped in 2008 before being converted into flats. A deal was struck with PWS so that we gained two flats in Crooswijk which were rented at 80 euros per month (much lower than the normal rate, which would begin at 250 euros). All the other residents moved to other squatted projects.



WHAT WE DID

The space was an old shop. As you can see from the photographs, we had at our disposal a front room with two plate glass windows looking onto a small paved area beside the busy road, with another window at the side. There was also a back room, a storage room and a small kitchen. There was also a cellar the size of the whole ground floor, but unfortunately it was flooded by ground water and thus not really functional. We did try to get it operational but had to pump it out twice before we realised that the water would always come back. We did find a safe down there though and before the eviction we had a 'crack the safe' party (there was nothing in it).

The place was in pretty poor condition, it had been empty for years. However, it did have a lot of mirrors in the front room. It had been a shop called Excellent! selling jacuzzis and suchlike. There was also a shop across the street selling jacuzzis and I never got to the bottom of the issue of whether they had been competitors or whether they had actually moved across the road to bigger premises. The shop appeared to be run by an East European family who didn't want to talk to us and never had any customers. It could have been a mafia front but I'm not sure how it worked. I don't think they were growing weed there since they did have a lot of bath equipment. But it never got sold. I thought Whirlpools would have been a great name for us, but the Groene Voltage ('Green Voltage') was chosen in the spirit of eco-friendly rabble-rousing. I must say we weren't that eco-friendly in reality, although we did cook vegan and use organic stuff as much as possible. A lot of the food for the cafe was dumpsterdived and our electricity supply was from renewable sources. Perhaps our most successful event concerned community gardens. It got a lot of people interested in that issue networking together and some projects actually began that night. What we planned to do was to use the front room for events which other people were welcome to organise and from within our collective to organise a cafe, a film night, an infoshop, a free shop and a free internet space.

De Groene Voltage

is het op Vrijdag 13 Oktober door Woonstrijd! en KrakendRotterdam gekraakte pandje dat nu als sociaal centrum in gebruik genomen is, verschillende avonden in de week zullen er activiteiten zijn.

Dinsdags - Gratis film avond! Aanvang 19.00

Donderdags - Volkskeuken 'BraakSmaak'

Aanvang 19.00 ++++++++ Activiteit 21.00:

9.11 - presentatie over vrijplaats plakken

16.11 - sticker en collage workshop!

23.11 - T-shirts maken

30.11 - 'how to reduce your ecological footprint' a talk by mischa from earthship brighton

Dinsdags & Woensdags 13.00 - 18.00

Infowinkel 'Doe Nix' + Weggeefwinkel:

schieweg 61, rotterdam, 3038AG

All of these activities were planned as political, nonprofit activities. The squat was itself a Woonstrijd ('housing struggle') action by a bunch of squatters who were doing a tour of Dutch cities, helping each other squat buildings in cities where they lived as a way to bring awareness of squatting to the public. The actions were also tied to the contestation of the kraakverbod ('squatting ban') which later came into force - squatting is now illegal (although in Rotterdam so far this hasn't changed the situation much). There are and were plenty of squatters in Rotterdam but back in 2006 there was no real feeling of a squat scene and we wanted to create or recreate or foster that feeling by doing a social centre. We also wanted to make links with the local community, which was ethnically diverse and generally quite poor. We were aware that there wasn't much going on in the immediate neighbourhood and hoped to get people involved, although also we were aware that despite some of us having lived in Noord already for years it is difficult to get over the impression of activists parachuting in to 'save' an area from itself. I was perhaps even more on the edge as the only non-Dutch person in the crew...

We also wanted to provide a space for our small scene to meet and socialise. We already did a nomadic voku (people's kitchen) which had been meeting every time at different squats and aimed to get squatters talking. This project would give the cafe a home. So much was discussed. I also think our unspoken intentions were to see if we could build something we needed in Rotterdam ourselves and to see if we could work together as a group. All of us must have seen the potential of the project and have been interested to see where it would go.

After trying a few variations, we ended up with the free shop (weggeefwinkel) in the backroom and in the front room we had a bar, a computer corner with free internet, the infoshop and zinelibrary and some sofas and tables. On a typical week we were open two or three nights a week and one afternoon. We had a crew of maybe six active people, so as you can imagine this was something which kept us pretty busy.

Having people who lived above the project helped since they were around more to keep the place tidy, let in people needing to cook etc etc. It was useful that the person living immediately above was almost never home, so we didn't have problems about noise levels (we tended to close about midnight anyway).

DE GROENE

maart

VOLTAGE

Do. 1 - Braaksmak Volkskeuken - Collages maken

Zo. 4 - Gratis film avond

Ma. 5 - Music appreciation society avond - Venetian Snares!

Wo. 7 - Infowinkel Doe Nix + Weggeefwinkel 13.00-18.00

Do. 8 - Braaksmak Volkskeuken - Veganistische taarten bakken

Zo. 11 - Gratis film avond

Wo. 14 - Infowinkel Doe Nix + Weggeefwinkel 13.00-18.00

Do. 15 - Braaksmak Volkskeuken - Fort Pannerden - Infoavond

Zo. 18 - Gratis film avond

Ma. 19 - Spelletjes avond

Wo. 21 - Infowinkel Doe Nix + Weggeefwinkel 13.00-18.00

Do. 22 - Braaksmak Volkskeuken - Crooswijk bewoners tegen Woning
Bedrijf Rotterdam (NIET VAST!)

Zo. 25 - Gratis film avond

Wo. 28 - Infowinkel Doe Nix + Weggeefwinkel 13.00-18.00

Do. 29- Braaksmak Volkskeuken - GroenFront! - Infoavond

All activities are free and start at 19.00 unless otherwise stated

SCHIEWEG 61, ROTTERDAM TRAM 5 VIAGGMANNSTRAAT

[HTTP://CENTRUM.MUJINGA.NET/WIKI](http://centrum.mujinga.net/wiki)

WE SUPPORT UNGDOMHUSET. WE SUPPORT ALL SOCIAL CENTRES.

WHAT WE ACHIEVED

Not counting a summer pause when we stopped activities for a month or so, every week we had a cafe on Thursdays serving cheap vegan food. It was called Braaksmaak and as I mentioned already for six months before had been running nomadically, cooking at a different squat every two weeks. Most times the food was at 7 and at 9 there was a political theme. This took many forms including a talk on sustainability, a G8 Dissent Network infoavond ('information evening') and presentations from various activist groups. It seems now pretty insane that we did a cafe every week COMBINED with some sort of political event, but we were so enmeshed in doing it that it seemed normal. Numbers varied from ten to eighty, depending on various factors. At one point, I realised some squatters would carefully aim to come after the political bit had finished, just when the drinking would begin.



GROENE VOLTAGE

Any profit from the cafe normally went to support the theme of that night, so we gave (some) money to a group campaigning against deportations, a countryside squat, an Indymedia film and many other projects. The cafe did not always make profit. I'm still not really sure how that happened. Probably there was money stolen once or twice and also (too many) drinks were given away for free - which was pretty stupid when we sold them so cheap anyways. We used to go to the nearby supermarkets and get crates of beer, which we'd sell on at a small markup (we paid a deposit for the bottles which were then collected and returned - this would seem obvious to Dutch readers but unfortunately lots of places do not do this). It was considered important that people who wanted to drink would not have to pay too much - of course, sometimes that meant that people who wanted to drink got really really drunk, but most of the time we didn't have problems. After a while we started to stock organic beers. And we always had lots of soft drinks and teas for people more interested in non-alcoholic options.

The film night showed some great films like Darwin's Nightmare and End of Suburbia but it never really took off. In order to see if it was the day not working, the night was moved from Tuesday to Sunday and then back again, but it did not really help. Only when the night was tied to other meetings did it get more people coming along.



The infoshop came quite fast and had about fifty books on various themes such as anarchism, animal rights, peace movements and environmental action. We had lots of magazines and a zine library with over a hundred titles. Every Wednesday we were open from one until six. Someone always came but it was never busy. But that was ok, it was really cool to have an infoshop in existence and people did make use of it. If nothing else we shifted a load of flyers.

The free shop ended up being our main link to the local community, even if in that meant we were the place where they could dump their unwanted stuff (although that is what the free shop is supposed to be for I guess!). Some people stayed for a chat and a drink and that was nice.

The nature of a free shop means that it is always a battle to keep tidy, and as it got bigger this became more of a task. In my view we didn't throw enough crap away. Then the good stuff gets lost in between the broken toys and dresses for old ladies. I used to enjoy the banter with the Turkish ladies who used to come in regularly, it normally went something like this:

Can we take this chair?

-No, that's part of club, the freeshop is in the back.

Can we take this mirror?

-No that's actually part of the building.

Can we take the fridge?

-No! We use that for the bar. The freeshop is through there!

We also hosted meetings from various groups and one-off events such as the zine evening (flyer previous page).

There were also the music appreciation nights - when all the music played came from one particular artist, such as Venetian Snares (flyer overleaf) or Bodycount. I think this is a great idea and should be done more - possibly one of the nicest memories I have of the Voltage is of a moment of no verbal communication when six or so people were sitting on the sofas, on a Monday night, all silently enjoying the music of Venetian Snares.



But did we achieve our aims of activating the people of Rotterdam and making links to the local community? Well, in a small way, yes we did. As regarding a space for the local scene, we certainly did that and I still miss it. Further, you can never really judge the full effects of a project, it's like a stone dropped in water - the ripples radiate outwards, whether you want them to or not.

And any analysis has to bear in mind that we were living in accelerated time. We did so much in a year that it was tempting to feel like we had been there for ages, but for a lot of our neighbours, they had only just started to realise that the weirdo squatters were actually pretty friendly people and had a freeshop, or free internet, or whatever. Unfortunately, the eviction ruptured most of those budding social relationships.

WHAT WE COULD HAVE DONE BETTER

There were some people who wanted to use our space. We hosted a few birthday parties and one guy taught capoeira on Sundays. But in truth the people from the collective had to do most things themselves. The local community was not really interested in our project, but the main reason for that is that there is no local community to speak of ... the housing corporations have already broken that down a long time ago with the policy of selling off social housing for profit, forcing people to take homes in other areas. Most people are probably aware of this from their local contexts, but in Rotterdam it's pretty bad, the corporations set up in the 1950s to house people had by the 1980s been privatized and therefore started to tear down whole working class neighbourhoods to build yuppy flats - one terrible example of this would be the Nieuwe Crooswijk project.

The thing is, if we had been there for a longer time, five or ten years, of course more people would have used the space and of course more local people would have taken a look. It takes a long period for people to get involved. This is the problem of many activist projects, they just don't last long enough to make the links. Even within the Dutch activist scene, it took months before we started communicating with other social centres and projects such as OCCII in Amsterdam and the Piraten Bar in Den Haag.

One group of Turkish migrants who had set up a foundation were interested to use the space at the beginning and we spent a lot of time listening to their needs and requirements, but eventually nothing came of it, which was a real shame. Whilst their concerns about the kitchen being vegan and the general cleanliness of the place were totally legitimate, it was a frustrating process to welcome people to meetings to debate how to share the kitchen who in the end never joined us on communal cleaning days. However, some migrant musicians did come down and play acoustic music, which was great.

There were many alternative anticapitalist squatter types living in Rotterdam

who never came to the Groene Voltage. Friends of mine never came. Even a friend who lived on the same block. I used to find that strange. This punk guy living a few doors away used to walk past once or twice a week and not even look at the flyers in the window. I'm still a bit baffled why that happened, because I would certainly visit a project like this if I could. I would love to have an existing infoshop in Rotterdam, now the one at the Poortgebouw has closed (and hopefully there is one somewhere which I haven't heard about).

But people are into different things. You can only make the project and do it nice and hope people come. Maybe he was a fashion punk? In trying to build a scene in Rotterdam we were battling the mentality of a city where everyone is busy with their own thing. That's why a man can die on the prisonboat in Rotterdam harbour and only twenty people go to the noise demo. Despite there having been previous social centres such as Hang and Storm, and eetcafes such as De Paardenvaal and Hexxen, it seems that there is no real culture or awareness of alternative projects. Further, people are in fact not that interested in a radical left political project. Also there is a certain history at work which I probably stayed blissfully unaware of - for example with my friend who lived on the same block, he'd been living in a big squat where lots of people fell out with each other over graffiti issues, so he was most likely leery of going somewhere where his former squatmates might be.

This was also true for the infoshop - although it was used, it could definitely have been used more! But then it was good to visit the infoshop Bollox at the Binnenpret in Amsterdam and hear that in their first year not many people came either. Perhaps Wednesdays was not a good day to be open, maybe a weekend day would have been better. In any case, having a regular time is important. The internet cafe took a lot longer to set up than expected, both because KPN took months to set up the internet connection and the recycled computers kept on breaking despite getting lots of free source love. And whilst having internet was nice for us and for some kids, most people have internet at home so having free web access wasn't really as radical as it was ten years ago.

We should probably have done a bar night with no activities so as to raise more money for the project. It would have been comparatively easy to run. Perhaps we

underestimated how important it is simply to have a social space where people can gather and meet (I certainly missed it when it was gone!). Perhaps we wanted to organise too much for the people, rather than concentrating on providing a hospitable relaxed space where they could organise stuff themselves.

Certainly we had real problems keeping the place clean and tidy. It seems like it would have been easy enough (it wasn't even a very big place) but somehow it was difficult. Plans were drawn up, agreements made but still the place stayed a mess. And of course if one person cleaned up for a few hours only to be faced again with a mess the next day, then that person lost energy to clean again. In the last months of the project, the constant mess in the kitchen led to a problem with mice, which then (left unchecked) became a problem with rats.

We had monthly cleaning days but these never really seemed to ensure that the place stayed clean, which is of course necessary in a shared space. I guess people didn't care enough to make it so and were not really aware of their own messiness. I reckon over time solutions would have developed organically, although equally I can say that personally I wish I had been more vocal over certain issues, rather than waiting for solutions to appear as if by magic.

People living above the project really helped in my view, since they were close by to deal with daily matters like post or things left outside the door. It really helps to have someone maintaining the place and I would recommend it for any project. Although we did not catch the people breaking our windows, perhaps more than that would have happened if there had not been people nearby.

Quite soon after the place had been squatted, the owners (PWS) received a letter threatening them that unless they evicted the squatters, action would be taken. On Stormfront, a Nazi website, people discussed burning the squat down. Then one plate glass window had a brick thrown at it. Who can say if these things are connected? There are a lot of drunken idiots out there. We fixed the window and asked a local graffiti crew to paint something. They did not do what we asked, but it did look nice at least. We had three big plate glass windows in the front, all something like three metres by two metres. Then another one got smashed, which meant more boards.

Having less light in the front room made it probably less welcoming to newcomers which was a shame. But whilst dealing with the problems took effort, it also made us stronger in that we realised we were not going to let things like that stop the centre organising events.

Propaganda is important when organising a project. Not everyone reads indymedia or checks radar.squat.net. We made monthly events listings and lots of flyers, but we probably should have tried more to get flyers into the universities, art schools, music venues, places where people might pick up a flyer and be interested. Sometimes the flyer just sat on the bar in the social centre until the date of the event had gone past. People are certainly not going to come if they don't know the project exists! We did flyer the local neighbourhood but with a few exceptions people didn't really emerge from their TV dens - but then why would they, we were proposing radical politics and vegan cake - these are admittedly fairly isolated hobbies. But I don't think we would have been better off watering down our message to attract people. Certainly, in the long term we would have made efforts to engage people (with bicycle repair, rights advice and whatever else locals themselves wanted to do with the space), but to a certain extent, people already know what they think and we did certainly meet those who were willing to engage with us.

Still on propaganda, we were debating the merits of making a nice colour poster for too long, the printing costs were a problem but we should have just done it. Having said that, it's good we did not make a 3,000 copy run and then get evicted the next month!

Yes, money was a problem. There were too many stupid discussions over the electricity bills, the bank account and foundation we set up. I guess its always like this. But it's a shame because our overheads really were pretty low. But it was the first time for some people to deal with such a financial setup.

Last but not least, alcohol. Sometimes a friend, sometimes an enemy. We never really had problems with drunk patrons luckily, but we certainly did have problems within the collective. Sadly this is a problem which plagues the activist scene everywhere.

THE COLLECTIVE

The collective was composed of roughly seven people. Some people joined and were welcomed, others left. Some popped up every so often and there were a few regulars. Around the collective there were a few more people, perhaps ten, who were extremely supportive and helped out in various ways, often unseen and unthanked. Without their help, a lot less would have happened. These extra people in the background are pretty essential to any grassroots project.

The people involved were linked by interest rather than strong friendship, although some were friends. The beast of informal, non-useful hierarchy did raise its head often, and I can't say we dealt with the hidden forms very well. There was never a "leader" but some people had louder voices and could have listened more. Certainly there was towards the end of the project a clique developing which probably made newcomers feel a bit like they were walking into someone's lounge rather than a social centre.

As with every grassroots volunteer project I have been involved with, money was scarce and people's time commitment fluctuated. This is to be expected, but I think we could have dealt with things better. One person left the collective in a less than positive way, which was a shame, although it was complicated.

We had weekly meetings in which the format we developed was to have an emotional round first to see how everyone was doing, then the agenda points, then a space for any extra short points, then an evaluation round. Depending on how many people were there, we held up hands to speak and had a facilitator to guide the meeting and someone else took notes.

This system worked fairly well with tight facilitation but the problem as I see it now was that we spent much too long debating broken commitments. Simply put, people sometimes did not do what they said they were going to do. They might well have had good reasons (excuses) for not doing these things, the fact

remains that a project built on trust and goodwill can either spiral ever upwards in a triumphant explosion of energy or enter the vicious downward spiral into recriminations when the washing up is not done or bills are not paid. If the project had lasted a few years, things I'm sure would have settled down in some way - the collective would have hardened if it was to survive (although I doubt the people involved would have stayed exactly the same) and in many ways things would have got simpler - everything would have had a space in the kitchen, people would have got used to following the rules we made for cleaning up after an event and maybe even we would have bitten the bullet and found or bought a dishwasher!

There is a sense then that the problems would have sorted themselves out but also we were kind of reinventing the wheel since for most people it was the first social project they had been involved with and thus they were (quite naturally) unaware of just how much work it takes.



BOUWEN AAN DE STAD



'PWS renoveert aan Schieweg'

'Strakke appartementen
voor starters'

6

Op de hoek van de Schieweg en de Vlaggenmanstraat renoveert PWS een beeldbepalend pand. Leegstand, kraak en graffiti waren omwonenden een doorn in het oog. Over ruim een half jaar zijn hier acht tweekamerappartementen te huur, prima geschikt voor jongeren en starters. De winkelruimte op de begane grond blijft bestaan.

Ingrijpende renovatie

Daar gaat een ingrijpende renovatie aan vooraf. Het gebouw wordt gestript, opnieuw ingedeeld en geïsoleerd. Vloeren, muren en plafonds worden vernieuwd, net als keukens en badkamers. Binnen zijn de appartementen straks dus als nieuw.

Beeldbepalende gevel

Het tijdloze ontwerp van de gevel komt na de renovatie weer goed tot zijn recht. De uitstraling ervan is – ook nu nog – strak en modern. De stalen kozijnen en balkons worden vervangen of gerepareerd, de gevel wordt gereinigd en gevoegd en alles wordt geschilderd.

Prima plek

De hoek Schieweg-Vlaggenmanstraat ligt uiterst centraal, precies tussen Hofplein en Ring Rotterdam. Geens rustige straat, maar de goede geluidsisolatie neemt dat bezwaar weg. Wie graag grootstedelijk woont, zal dit een prima plek vinden.

Het appartementengebouw staat in een lichte hoek ten opzichte van de straat. Daardoor is het uitzicht uit alle ramen ruim.

Binnenkort vindt u meer informatie over dit project op www.pwsrotterdam.nl

THE NEXT STEPS

It was nice to have some time to prepare to leave, which does not by any means always happen with squatted projects. Thus we put a post on indymedia.nl announcing the eviction and had a final party.

We squatted a new place which would have been perfect for our needs - it was an old neighbourhood centre with a gym hall, lots of rooms and loads of potential. Unfortunately it was marked for demolition and the plans were indeed going ahead. We were evicted fast (almost illegally, then legally) and very soon afterwards it was knocked down (to make way for more yuppy flats).

Then some people from the collective squatted a place in the centre and started to do public events. We were in negotiations as to what that meant as regards the Braaksmaak cafe and other projects when this new place was evicted. By now the old Groene Voltage had been evicted and naturally energy was at quite a low ebb. Other evictions also meant people were busy finding a new place to live for themselves.

Six months later, the collective had died and people moved on to other projects in Rotterdam and beyond.



CONCLUSION

A squatted social centre can be many things and when I look back now (2011) on how much we did in just one year, I am quite amazed. It is a shame that the eviction came, but hopefully everyone in the collective learnt some lessons and can bring that knowledge to future projects.

There was certainly a gap in Rotterdam at that time for a social centre and whilst there have been other squatted projects since, a new social centre hasn't emerged (even if art galleries, gig venues, vokus and such like all have). So were we simply providing a space for ourselves and our little clique? No, I don't think we were. The very existence of the Groene Voltage, on a busy road, was a public intervention. We hosted some events which really did serve to hook up active people and get them talking. And if that only happened once in a while, and if events weren't always well-attended, we were still slowly creating a scene, it wasn't going to happen over night.

What with the move towards the kraakverbod and a public debate over the need for a society to nurture its young artists, a high profile squat must have made some waves. The Groene Voltage was admittedly on the fringe of this debate since artists are more welcome to society than anarchist squatters but it was nevertheless a part of it. We largely came from the political wing of squatting rather than the cultural movement and were proud of that, we didn't want to sell art and make a career, we were squatting and doing a social centre as a contribution to radical social change. But of course all these things are just labels – some of us were artists and we had art in the windows often (and when the windows were smashed, graffiti on the boards).

We got a lot of encouraging feedback from people who visited our events and hopefully we inspired a few people. Following on from conversations with various people, I did hope that perhaps a legalised space for music and cultural activities in Rotterdam would emerge along the lines of centres like Vrankrijk or OCCII in Amsterdam or the Autonomes Zentra in many German cities, but this was always going to be a major project.

And since 2008, quite a few venues have closed (eg Waterfront and Nighttown/Watt). To be legalised and thus have some long term security would be great but for sure such a space is only likely to come out of the squat scene (as OCCII, Vrankrijk, Waterfront and Nighttown all did) .

We have to create these things ourselves because no-one else will do it for us. And actually, who would want it any other way?



To the next one.