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Making Waves

Water Dwellers in 1970s Amsterdam

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change
the culture
not the
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Radical
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MAKING WAVES: Water dwellers in 1970S Amsterdam

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In the 1970s many houseboats were docked throughout Amsterdam and its fringes. Especially among low-income groups, houseboats offered a solution to the housing shortage. Most water dwellers also occupied part of the quay through informal gardening. They experimented with other forms of living through spatial experiments, in relation to each other, to greenery, weeds, water, and to other species. Strategies to expel houseboat-owners employed by municipalities throughout the Netherlands included shutting down gas, electricity, and water supply; destroying cared for gardens and self-made sheds on the quays; rising the harbour dues disproportionately; and demanding ships to be painted a certain colour. Houseboats were criticized for being unsightly and unkept, ruining the aesthetic qualities of city, village, and landscape. Their variety in design was often not wanted, nor their experimental forms of urban gardening, keeping small livestock, recycling, crafts, and self-building. Nowadays, these socio-ecological spatial experiments of houseboat-owners and urban nomads range from being cleaned up and criminalized through policy, to being long formalized and regulated. Living on water was also co-opted by developers and municipalities, while becoming inaccessible for low-income groups. This paper aims to bring to the fore some of the forgotten spatial experiments of water dwellers, mostly from the 1970s, when the awareness of the Limits to Growth spread across Europe. By examining under-explored administrative records in several ar-

chives in Amsterdam, the paper uncovers some of the spatial, ecological, and political struggles of the houseboat-owners, and their expressive self-build architectures, quay landscapes and floating gardens. It foregrounds the often-forgotten role that civic society played in bringing sustainability thinking into political agendas, urban policies and design.



Houseboat at the Brouwersgracht-Prinsengracht, May 1980
(Stadsarchief Amsterdam / Roel Ino).

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