

We represent the current occupants of the monumental villa Ivicke, located in Wassenaar, The Netherlands. The residence was occupied on July 4, 2018 without permissions from the owner.

In light of Ivicke's nomination for Europa Nostra's 7 most endangered programme, we would like to share our perspective.

The Past

The state of this very prominently-located building has been visibly and steadily deteriorating over the course of the past twenty years. The premises are owned by a well-known, speculative, real-estate trader, Mr Van de Putte. His reputation and methods have given him the nickname 'De Krottenkoning' or the Slum King.

He most likely intends to either sell the ground as a plot for (private) redevelopment, or to provoke a buyout by a public institution such as the municipality. The old monumental monastery in Sluis serves as an example of the former, on which the local authority had given up all hope of conservation after being owned by Van de Putte for 25 years¹. An example of the latter is the "Pit of Van de Putte" where the city of Leiden, after failing to appropriate it², bought a decrepit office building for almost 18 million euros³.

Whichever strategy he employs, a handsome profit goes his way, which out-weighs the costs of the economic sanctions the municipality imposes on the him. This owner categorically refuses to pay these sanctions and they certainly do not motivate him to take action. In the city of Noordwijk, fines for neglected property have reached over half a million euros in total⁴, and there is still no reaction on the side of the owner.

It is obvious to us that the public institutions lack the power to stand up to these kind of real-estate mafia types. The laws simply favour ownership over all other interests. Legal means having been insufficient in these situations, we decided to make productive use of a legal loophole, taking part of the future of this building into our eager hands.

With the intention of combining residential and cultural functions, and of providing work-spaces for various craft and a retreat from hectic city life, the heavily neglected premises have been brought back to life. If we can lengthen the lifespan of this place by a few years through taking care of the biggest maintenance issues while organising social and cultural events, we consider that a small victory for us. But naturally we would rather like to see the place saved.

Upon our re-appropriation we were greeted by broken glass and butterfly wings. Behind the boarded up windows and doors we found each of them having had at least a couple of their glass panes smashed. The elements have had free reign in the building through (non-boarded) broken windows on all three floors. Severe leakage problems had turned the walls of some rooms green with algae or black with mould. There were various large holes in the floors, as all the electric wiring and copper piping had been stripped out of the building.

There had once been brass railings, as evidenced by a small section of brass remaining which ran at least from the ground to the first floor. There is clear evidence of improper removal of the brass. Someone familiar with monument restoration pointed out that the ornamental ceilings have been removed, possible for resale as there is a market for them. The garden had also been greatly overgrown.

¹ <https://www.omroepzeeland.nl/nieuws/112708/Gemeente-geeft-het-op-dit-rijksmonument-is-niet-meer-te-redden>

² <https://sleutelstad.nl/2008/08/19/weer-geen-onteigening-gat-van-van-der-putte/>

³ <https://www.omroepwest.nl/nieuws/11038/Leiden-koopt-gat-van-Van-der-Putte>

⁴ <https://noordwijk.nieuws.nl/nieuws/20170115/boetes-ronnie-putte-overschrijden-inmiddels-half-miljoen/>

Present

We have made the building usable once again by re-installing electrical work and plumbing, closing the holes in the floors and returning functionality to the doors and windows. A combination of work on the windows, small roof repairs, the unclogging of the (reachable) gutters, and using heaters has greatly reduced the moisture problems.

The ground floor and basement have been designated as public areas and work-spaces. On various occasions we have opened our doors to filmmakers who used the space as a stage for projects. We have also organised events such as evenings with food and folk music, providing a stage for young and unknown artists. We also collaborate with non-profit groups to support various causes. Most recently, we hosted a fundraising festival with lectures, workshops, music and performance.

There are work-places where people can learn, and work on, various crafts, including, for example, woodworking, metal working and electronics.

In the first couple of months we talked to many of our neighbours who expressed their happiness about us having squatted the building. Recently we have insulated the venue space to minimise potential noise disturbance to the neighbours during shows and performances.

As inhabitants of Ivicke, we have noticed the mental health benefits of living in a quiet place surrounded by trees. We are concerned with the rapidly growing number of people suffering from mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Some may feel ashamed to reach out, others cannot afford the rising costs of mental health care. In light of this we decided to create an alternative in the form of a support group and guided individual sessions, based on principles of clinical- and health-and-medical psychology, involving nature therapy. Ivicke is becoming an asylum for people in need of support. A retreat from the distress and demands experienced by the civic lifestyle and a place for long-term development and self-growth. Ivicke's long-preserved nature may thus serve as safe space for people in need, who will be accompanied by our psychology graduate in the house.

We would also like to open our extensive garden to disadvantaged children, such as the refugee children living in the nearby asylum seekers centre of Katwijk. We are intending to organise playing events, during which they may roam around freely, participate in activities and, most importantly, engage with nature and its healing effects.

As the building is surrounded by a large green area of approximately 3.5 hectares, we have created and cultivated a garden in which we grow organic vegetables, herbs and fruits with the intention of increasing our self-sufficiency.

If we were certain of a prospective long-term residency, we could intensify the usage of the fertile forest ground and transform parts of it into a self-sustaining food forest based on permaculture principles, including planting fruit and nut trees.

Future

As squatters, we are uncertain of the future in relation to our residency and to the building's existence. All we can do is set short-term goals for the preservation of the building and dream about an ideal long-term co-existence with our current home. We hope that the participation in this competition may partly facilitate some of these future visions.

Regarding the short-term needs for conservation, we require materials (including a scaffold) to fix the roof and gutter. So far, our personal investments, as well as the organisation of events has helped to raise sufficient money for the purchase of necessary material for the conservation thus far. We hope to intensify this self-sustaining dynamic. For instance these funds have enabled us to fix the roof in many places, nevertheless several leaks cannot be safely reached without appropriate materials such as scaffolds. Also one of the gutters needs quite urgent repair or replacement. Extra funds would enable us to execute more extensive and qualitative repairs and restorations. We are confident that after these essential renovations we can autonomously manage the upkeep of the building and grounds.

The terrain also includes a Swedish playhouse that is one of the few remaining of its kind, which carries a special protection status. In coordination with the responsible public authorities, we may also offer to take necessary steps for its preservation and potential restoration.

To plant apple trees while not knowing whether we will still be there to harvest their first fruits (six to ten years after planting) seems absurd, as we do not have sufficient power over the length of our residency. Our willingness to participate in the restoration process will hinge upon our ability to retain residency in and autonomous management over Ivicke's future. We imagine ourselves as active collaborators as long as our project is not endangered. We hope however that sufficient support from the public and authorities may lead to the ideal scenario of an official appropriation from the owner, where we may buy the building for a symbolic price.

For now, we envision a future – however long it may be – in which Ivicke may fulfil an important cultural and social function. The premises may be used as cultural venue providing a stage for performative art or film setting and a workspace/atelier for painters, sculptors and carpenters. Moreover, we wish to maintain this space as much needed home in the midst of the housing crisis, as retreat from the hectic life outside and as meeting point for activists.

We hope for fruitful conversations about, and an active involvement in, the future of this beautiful building.

With kind regards,

The Ivicke Squatters
Wassenaar, The Netherlands
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